



From Dublin to Ramallah: Analysing Three-Level Inputs in Ireland's Recognition of Palestinian Statehood in 2024

Raden Bagus Rusydannu Risysya Bhirawa* | Dian Mutmainah

INSTITUTION/ AFFILIATION

Department of International Relations,
Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia

CORRESPONDENCE

*Raden Bagus Rusydannu Risysya Bhirawa,
Universitas Brawijaya, Jl. Veteran No.10-11,
Ketawanggede, Kec. Lowokwaru, Kota
Malang, Jawa Timur 65145
Email: mcdannu@student.ub.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Ireland's long-standing position as one of EU's most vocal members of Palestinian rights and statehood took a huge leap when it decided to recognize the state of Palestine on May 2024. However, Ireland is far from being considered an enemy of Israel, as both countries share diplomatic and economic ties for decades. Despite economic threats from Israel and limited support in Europe, Ireland firmly stood by its decision along with Norway and Spain. To understand this decision, Charles W. Kegley & Shannon L. Blanton has laid out a useful framework to analyse inputs contributing to a transnational actor's foreign policy, which are: global conditions, its internal characteristics, and actor leadership. Using this framework, this article argues that leadership, particularly by Simon Harris and his party, Fine Gael was the key driver, grounded in past policy, diplomatic coordination, and the context of the 2024 early elections. This study concludes that several inputs contribute to this decision, namely; a global uproar against Israel's military aggression in Gaza post October 7th, an ever-strong pro-Palestine tide in the Irish public, its small-state characteristics, and Simon Harris' recent ascension to power.

KEYWORDS

Ireland; Foreign Policy; Palestinian Statehood; Palestine-Israel



INTRODUCTION

Along with Norway and Spain, Ireland decided to take a significant diplomatic step to recognize the Palestinian statehood on May 22nd 2024 ([Armstrong, 2024](#)). This crucial moment was conveyed to the public in a joint press conference between the three countries, further marking a notable point in the Palestinian effort to gain international recognition. The move also added the three countries to be amongst the few European countries that recognize the state of Palestine. The recognition was later made official on May 28th 2024 with the established diplomatic relations between Dublin and Ramallah, the appointment of an Irish ambassador to Palestine, and the opening of an Irish embassy in Ramallah ([Department of the Taoiseach, 2024](#)).

This joint and coordinated recognition reflects broader international efforts to support the peace process in the region. Further, Ireland's decision came amidst the ongoing conflict, with calls for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, the release of Israeli hostages, and access to humanitarian ([Department of the Taoiseach, 2024](#)). The Irish government also spoke deeply about the humanitarian situation and the urgent need for peace and security. Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris emphasized that this step aims to maintain hope and support a two-state solution as the only solution for Israel and Palestine to live side by side peacefully ([Department of the Taoiseach, 2024](#)). He continued that Ireland initially wanted to wait until the peace process has been completed between the two, but the urgency of the humanitarian crisis that has arisen as a result of Israel's military aggression in the Gaza strip currently requires immediate action ([Department of the Taoiseach, 2024](#)).

The declaration was met with nothing short of a gratitude and approval from both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas ([O'Connor, 2024](#))—the two bodies governing the Palestinian territories of the west bank and Gaza strip sequentially. Both consider this as a diplomatic victory for the Palestinian cause, signalling solidarity from European countries and strengthening Palestinian hopes for self-determination and independence ([O'Connor, 2024](#)). Israel, however, unquestionably opposed the recognition. It expeditiously withdrew its ambassadors from the three European countries, which caused a diplomatic tension ([Reuters, 2024](#)).

However, Ireland's decision cannot be fully understood merely as a response to humanitarian concerns. A deeper analysis is required to examine the underlying drivers behind this move, particularly in the context of EU foreign policy fragmentation and Ireland's domestic political dynamics. Ireland's approach throughout the decades have been careful to both parties. Ireland prioritizes the Middle East Peace Process and continues to support a two-state solution to achieve peace between Israel and Palestine ([Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.](#)). Ireland has consistently been one of the most vocal supporters of Palestinian rights and statehood in the European Union ([Doyle, 2008](#)). In 1980, Ireland became the first EU member to call for the creation of a Palestinian state ([Fraye & Al-Kassab, 2024](#)). Over the years, Irish politicians and public figures have frequently criticized Israeli policies in the

occupied territories, particularly settlement expansion, the blockade of Gaza, and human rights violations against Palestinians ([Frayer & Al-Kassab, 2024](#)). In November 2012, Ireland voted in favour of Palestine becoming an Observer State at the UN and provided €10.7 million in financial assistance in 2013 alone to support the development of a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. Using its platform in the UN, Ireland advocates for a just and lasting peace based on a two-state solution, even expressing disappointment after the UN Security Council failed to pass a resolution demanding full Palestinian membership ([Bir, 2024](#)). The Irish government has called for an “immediate humanitarian ceasefire” and refused to cut funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) despite accusations from Israel ([UNRWA, 2024](#)).

Despite its support to the Palestinian cause, Ireland is no enemy of Israel. Ireland has been maintaining diplomatic relations with Israel, which was established in 1975, marking the start of a complex relationship ([Eliash, 2007](#)). Ireland's vocal support for Palestine has sometimes strained its relations with Israel, particularly when Irish leaders take actions perceived as biased by Israel ([Eliash, 2007](#)). Despite these fluctuations, Ireland remains committed to its diplomatic relations with Israel, emphasizing international law and human rights in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The two countries collaborate on trade, technology, and tourism, benefiting economically from their partnership.

In 2023, Ireland had a trade deficit with Israel, with net exports to Israel at approximately US\$ 562 million and net imports from Israel at US\$ 3.9 billion. Specifically, Ireland imported over US\$ 3.72 billion worth of electronic equipment from Israel ([Trading Economics, n.d.](#)). As Dublin emerges as Europe's tech hub with digital economy accounts 13% of Ireland's 2023 GDP ([International Trade Administration, 2024](#)), this trade connection holds significance. Furthermore, October 7th, 2023, Ireland exported dual-use products worth €70.4 million to Israel ([Gallagher, 2024](#)), a significant increase from €10.7 million in 2022. These data signify that not only to a considerable degree, Ireland needs Israel more than the opposite, but Ireland's recent dual-use exports to Israel also raises questions of whether it seriously pushes for a ceasefire in Gaza, or whether it supports Palestine at all.

Questions in regards to Ireland's recognition also extends to its long-standing foreign policy inclination with EU. The process, which is referred as “Europeanisation”, is the integration of European priorities into national policies ([Slattery, 2023](#)). One significant feature of European politics, which provided a Europeanisation to take place is the existence of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in the EU ([Slattery, 2023](#)). Most, if not all EU countries are influenced by Europeanisation, which is evident in the adoption of EU policies into their domestic agendas ([Slattery, 2023](#)). A particularly Europeanised issue is the Israel-Palestine conflict, a long-standing priority for the EU, with the common goal of achieving a two-state solution ([Dyduch & Müller, 2021](#)), and Ireland shares EU's objectives.

In response to this recognition, President of European Council Charles Michel asserted that EU support must be more harmonized, well-coordinated and unified ([RFL, 2024](#)). For

Ireland, this means that acting independently to recognize Palestine could be seen as breaking this desired unity, potentially leading to diplomatic friction within the EU. The stance was further emphasized by Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, which posted on X that the recognition of Palestine and support for a two-state solution should come with a unified approach amongst EU members ([Vasques, 2024](#)). His statement implies that the EU aims to maintain a cohesive and collective policy on the Israel-Palestine conflict. If Ireland were to unilaterally recognize Palestine, it might contradict the collective stance Borrell is advocating for, thereby undermining the EU's efforts to maintain a consistent and unified foreign policy. In addition, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has repeatedly iterated her strong pro-Israel stance. When speaking to the youth organization of her German centre-right political group, she emphasized Israel's right to defend itself against Hamas, comparing Israel's situation to Ukraine's defence against Russia ([Burchard, 2023](#)). Her remarks, which did not acknowledge Palestinian statehood, highlight her firm support for Israel, despite criticisms of Israel's settlement policies and accusations of apartheid by Human Rights Watch ([Burchard, 2023](#)).

Decades of Ireland's diplomatic and economic ties to Israel and its non-recognition of the state of Palestine does not strip itself the image of being Palestine's most vocal advocate in Europe. Thus, Ireland's recognition of Palestine marks a significant moment in its foreign policy, reflecting a bold move that went against substantial pressures and divergences within the EU. This makes the case to research how strong of a combined factor behind this decision. Departing from this, the article aims to explore the inputs that led Ireland to recognize the state of Palestine. The decision to recognize Palestine is particularly important given the complex and often contentious nature of this issue within the EU context, where member states strive for a unified foreign policy stance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

James Rosenau (1970) defines foreign policy as the attitudes and activities undertaken by a state to address or exploit its international environment. His theory of adaptive behaviour assumes that states, when faced with uncertainty and complexity in the international system, adjust their behaviours to navigate these challenges effectively ([Rosenau, 1970](#)). This contrasts with traditional approaches that view states as rational actors pursuing fixed objectives, emphasizing instead the dynamic and flexible nature of foreign policy decision-making. William D. Coplin and J. Martin Rochester, in their book on Foreign Policy Decision-Making Process, highlights that foreign policy actions result from three main considerations: domestic politics, the state's economic and military capabilities, and the international context ([Coplin & Rochester, 1971](#)). These factors help explain why leaders make certain foreign policy decisions.

Charles W. Kegley and Shannon Blanton's theory in *World Politics: Trend and Transformation* (2010) provides a comprehensive framework to comprehend a foreign policy decision by examining the interaction of individual, state, and international system factors,



which will be discussed further in this section. Incorporating Kegley's theory enables a holistic approach to understanding foreign policy, offering diverse insights and contributing to a deeper understanding of international relations. After all, a comprehensive understanding of foreign policy decision-making requires recognizing the interplay of various factors.

The first input influencing an actor's foreign policy is the global conditions. The current global environment sets the backdrop for how a nation makes international decisions. The ever-changing world affects the decision-making of transnational actors, such as states and international organizations ([Kegley & Blanton, 2010](#)). These global conditions create situations that necessitate decision-making and limit the policy choices available. For example, when the world faces new challenges or crises, leaders and policymakers must respond and adapt. Kegley and Blanton further explain that policymakers must continually adjust their strategies and approaches to address changing global environments ([Kegley & Blanton, 2010](#)). Essentially, the decisions made by transnational actors are direct responses to evolving global conditions, highlighting the dynamic nature of international relations and the need for flexible and responsive foreign policies.

The second input is the internal characteristics of a country. Internal characteristics play a crucial role alongside the global environment in shaping the international decision-making process ([Kegley & Blanton, 2010](#)). Each actor, whether a nation-state, international organization, or non-state entity, has unique attributes that influence its foreign policy choices. These actors consist of individuals who collectively determine the governance structure and decision-making procedures of the organization. Factors such as internal opinion distribution and the size of the organization and its relative power on the international stage impact its capacity to respond to global circumstances ([Kegley & Blanton, 2010](#)). Decision-makers must navigate not only external challenges posed by the global environment but also the internal dynamics and constraints within their institutions. Foreign policy decision-making is shaped by the complex interaction between global conditions and the internal characteristics of transnational actors. Understanding how these factors interact is essential for understanding the intricacies of international relations and formulating effective foreign policies to address the ever-changing global landscape ([Kegley & Blanton, 2010](#)).

The final input is actor leadership. Leaders' personal attributes significantly influence international decisions as external factors shape their perceptions ([Kegley & Blanton, 2010](#)). Decisions to act in certain ways are the culmination of various antecedents, with the leader's perception of being the final link in this chain. Thus, changes in global conditions and the internal characteristics of actors can alter the costs and benefits associated with foreign policy choices, prompting the need for decision-making. However, these factors are ultimately filtered through the perceptions of leaders, as constructivist theorists argue that leaders' ideas serve as filters for interpreting reality, guiding their decision-making ([Kegley & Blanton, 2010](#)).

The complexity of international decision-making arises from the interplay of global conditions, internal characteristics of actors, and leaders' perceptions. While external factors and organizational dynamics influence decisions, it is ultimately leaders' interpretations and judgments that determine actions. The three factors; global conditions, internal characteristics, and actor leadership; form a framework to analyse foreign policy decision-making. Each decision results from preceding causal events, highlighting the inseparability of decision-making from its antecedent conditions. Policy outcomes are thus shaped by the combined impact of these input factors.

While most foreign policy studies tend to focus on a single level of analysis; whether structural, domestic, or individual, Charles W. Kegley and Shannon L. Blanton's three-level framework offers a more comprehensive analytical approach. This theory addresses a key gap in existing literature, which often falls into deterministic explanations or oversimplifies decision-making processes by neglecting the interplay between levels. By integrating global conditions, internal characteristics, and leadership agency, the framework allows scholars to not only identify what foreign policy decisions are made, but also why and how they emerge from interconnected inputs. In the case of Ireland's recognition of Palestinian statehood, this framework proves particularly relevant, as it captures the complexity of how global humanitarian crises, domestic political pressures, and the strategic calculations of national leadership converged to shape a critical foreign policy stance.

METHODS

This study utilizes a qualitative explanatory research approach to explore the reasons behind Ireland's foreign policy decision to recognize Palestinian statehood in 2024. Qualitative research aims to understand the meanings individuals or groups attribute to social and humanitarian issues ([Bakry, 2016](#)), while explanatory research seeks to clarify why specific phenomenon occurs ([Mas' oed, 1990](#)). Although the recognition was done alongside Norway and Spain, the study solely examines Ireland; the salient global condition to Ireland and Israel-Palestine, its internal factors and characteristics, and its leadership. Primary data sources include official state documents, statements by national leaders, and other first-hand materials, complemented by secondary data gathered from prior research, online sources, and relevant articles.

This research utilizes deductive reasoning, a logical process in which a conclusion is drawn from a general premise or theory and applied to a specific case. It moves from broad, established principles to a particular outcome, ensuring that if the premises are true, the conclusion must also be true ([Mas' oed, 1990](#)). The deductive analysis approach, guided by Kegley and Blanton's foreign policy decision-making theory, will be applied to analyse against Ireland's decision to recognize Palestine as a specific case. In summary, this research attempts to comprehensively analyse Ireland's foreign policy stance, integrating qualitative insights

with deductive reasoning to elucidate the different factors influencing its decision-making process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Departing from the research background and theoretical framework, it is safe to hypothesize that Ireland's decision to recognize the state of Palestine in 2024 did not occur in a vacuum. It was influenced by the three-level inputs explained in the previous section, which are the global conditions that created a favourable environment for this decision, the internal characteristics which creates the space for the policy to be passed, and the leadership in place who thinks the decision is the most rational one, amongst others. In this section, the article will delve deeper into each variable which link and culminate into one of Ireland's biggest foreign policy decision in years.

Global Conditions; Israel's Military Aggression in Gaza

The global conditions encompass geopolitical shifts, the changing dynamics of global power, and evolving international norms. Among these, Israel's military aggression in Gaza after the October 7th attack by Hamas played a crucial role in galvanizing international condemnation and support for Palestinian statehood. On October 7th 2023, Israel experienced one of its worst security failures. Hamas launched an unprecedented and highly coordinated attack on Israel, marking one of the most significant escalations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in recent history ([Federman & Adwan, 2023](#)). The event began with a barrage of rockets fired from Gaza into southern and central Israel, targeting areas in the parameter of Gaza-Israel border, causing widespread panic and casualties ([Federman & Adwan, 2023](#)). The initial rocket attacks were followed by an incursion of Hamas fighters who breached Israel's border through tunnels, overland routes, and even paragliders ([Robinson, 2023](#)).

This multi-pronged attack led to intense firefights in several Israeli communal settlements or Kibbutzim along the border, resulting in significant loss of life and injuries among Israeli civilians and security forces ([Robinson, 2023](#)). The Hamas fighters targeted military outposts and critical infrastructure, aiming to inflict maximum damage and disrupt normal life in Israel ([Robinson, 2023](#)). The surprise nature of the attack and its intensity overwhelmed local defences and emergency response teams, exacerbating the chaos and destruction. After the attack, Hamas's Qassam Brigades initially reported holding 200-250 captives. The Israeli army estimated 240 captives, including soldiers, civilians, and foreigners. Hamas senior member Mousa Abu Marzouk stated captives with dual citizenship are considered Israelis and will not be released until a ceasefire is agreed upon ([Al Jazeera, 2023](#)).

The attack immediately led to Israel launching rapid, extensive, months-long military campaign to Gaza, being done both through air and ground invasion ([Ak, 2024](#)), the first in years since Israel pulled out its ground military from Gaza in 2005. The campaign aimed to neutralise threats posed by Hamas and re-establish security. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF)

commenced a comprehensive campaign involving airstrikes, artillery bombardments, and ground operations targeting Hamas positions, weapons caches, and infrastructure within Gaza ([Ak, 2024](#)). The airstrikes were particularly intense, with Israeli jets conducting hundreds of sorties aimed at destroying Hamas's military capabilities ([Ak, 2024](#)). Key targets included rocket launch sites, command centres, and tunnels used by militants for smuggling weapons and infiltrating Israel.

Following these severe escalations of hostilities and a complete siege by Israel, Gaza is facing a humanitarian catastrophe, with over 2.2 million people lacking essential supplies like food, water, and medicine. The blockade and recurring violence have led to a critical nutritional crisis and severe mental health needs, especially among vulnerable groups ([Ak, 2024](#)). Destruction of communication lines has hindered remote support, prompting UNRWA to urgently call for a humanitarian corridor and global aid. The ongoing conflict, causing widespread death and displacement, disproportionately affects children, who suffer the most in wars.

As of April 2024, the ongoing conflict in Gaza has severely compromised the health system, limiting access to healthcare and lifesaving supplies. In northern Gaza, only five hospitals are partially functional, while six hospitals in the south remain operational, all with an average bed occupancy rate over 2.5 times capacity ([UNRWA, 2024](#)). Since October 7, the Education Cluster has reported extensive damage to nearly 86% of schools, with 72% requiring full reconstruction or major rehabilitation ([UNRWA, 2024](#)). About 30% of these damaged schools are UNRWA schools, with some being used for military purposes by Israeli Security Forces (ISF). April has seen the highest volume of humanitarian and commercial supplies entering Gaza since October 21, 2023, with 5,132 trucks entering between April 1-27. However, this is still below the pre-conflict level of 500 trucks per day. As of April 28, the total number of UNRWA staff killed is 182 ([UNRWA, 2024](#)).

The war has also displaced up to 1.7 million people (over 75% of the population) in Gaza, with many families forced to relocate multiple times for safety ([UNRWA, 2024](#)). Intense bombardments in Khan Younis and the Middle Area have driven many displaced individuals further south. Around 1 million people are in or near emergency or informal shelters, and approximately 160,000 internally displaced persons are in UNRWA shelters in Northern Gaza and Gaza City ([UNRWA, 2024](#)). However, UNRWA's ability to provide support and updated data is severely restricted due to ongoing hostilities and evacuation orders. The Gaza Ministry of Health reports that at least 34,356 Palestinians have been killed since October 7, with about 70% being women and children, and 77,368 Palestinians injured ([UNRWA, 2024](#)).

The war has significantly disrupted regional alliances and affected the stance of Arab nations on peace deals with Israel. The Abraham Accord, which facilitated diplomatic normalisation and cooperation between Israel, Bahrain, UAE, Morocco, and Sudan, has been strained, with Bahrain recalling its ambassadors and suspending economic ties ([Safdar, 2024](#)). The UAE remains silent, while Saudi Arabia has frozen normalization talks with Israel to

balance its relationship with Iran. The war has prompted global powers like the US, the UK, Russia, and China to take sides, with the US and its allies supporting Israel, while Russia and China see strategic advantages in the conflict (Safdar, 2024). These complex dynamics illustrate the shift towards a multipolar world and the impact of regional conflicts on global diplomacy (Safdar, 2024). The regional rearrangement caused by the Israel-Hamas war, including strained relations and shifting alliances among Arab states and major powers, highlights the persistent centrality of the Palestinian issue in Middle Eastern and world politics (Safdar, 2024).

The globalized (Haugbolle & Olsen, 2023) and even Europeanised (Slattery, 2023) nature of Israeli-Palestinian conflict has also drawn world's public to attend many protests across the globe, including in many European cities. Thirty-two people were arrested as Dutch police broke up a Gaza war protest at the University of Amsterdam (Kassam & Rankin, 2024). Protests extended to Utrecht University, Belgium's Ghent University, and even the Eurovision contest in Malmö, Sweden, where Greta Thunberg joined pro-Palestinian demonstrators (Kassam & Rankin, 2024). In Spain, hundreds of students at various universities protested, leading to a review of agreements with Israeli institutions (Kassam & Rankin, 2024). At this stage, Spain and Ireland were pushing forward with recognizing Palestinian statehood, with potential support from Slovenia and Malta. Ireland's Prime Minister Simon Harris confirmed ongoing discussions with Spain's Pedro Sánchez. Both countries plan to vote in favour of Palestinian membership at the UN. This growing movement coincides with EU leaders facing pressure to respond to Israel's operations in Rafah, with at least 67 MEPs urging EU sanctions against Israel (Kassam & Rankin, 2024).

The situation created two interconnected global conditions that contributed to Ireland's decision. First, In Kegley & Blanton's theory of global conditions that shape foreign policy, humanitarian crises push countries to make decisions that reflect shared values, namely justice and humanitarian assistance. For Ireland, which has a history of advocacy for marginalized groups, this plight is in line with its foreign policy priorities, prompting deeper consideration of actions that could support Palestinian sovereignty in defence of human rights. Second, the shifting geopolitical landscape, with middle eastern and world major powers countries re-evaluating their ties with Israel and Palestine and a heightened global focus on Gaza's humanitarian crisis, has created a more favourable environment for advancing Palestinian statehood. This has prompted countries like Ireland to push forward with recognizing Palestine, aligning with broader efforts to stabilize the region and address humanitarian concerns. The unprecedented events unfolding in Gaza has constructed a new necessity for those care, or want to look care about the cause, to act on something.

Internal Characteristics; History, Domestic Pressures and Small-states Politics

Two key features on Kegley & Blanton's framework regarding transnational actors' internal characteristics are domestic opinion distribution and the size of the organization and its



relative power on the international stage. First, we could not ignore that Ireland's historical context of colonialism and conflict fosters a deep empathy toward the struggles of other nations seeking independence and human rights (Doyle, 2008b; Ryan, 2023). This postcolonial lens continues to shape Irish foreign policy, with Ireland often positioning itself as a moral outlier within the EU on issues like Palestine, balancing its military neutrality with a history of peacebuilding and support for self-determination (Ryan, 2023). Ireland has consistently advocated for a two-state solution and has been critical of Israeli policies in the occupied territories, laying the groundwork for public support for Palestinian statehood (Doyle, 2008b). The escalation of violence on October 7th, have intensified public support and pressure on the government to recognize Palestinian statehood. The attack, often attributed to Israeli military actions, has heightened awareness and concern among the Irish public about the humanitarian situation in Palestine (Klawans, 2024).

A recent 2024 poll from Irish Thinks shows that Nearly 80% of Irish people believe Israel is committing genocide in Gaza (Klawans, 2024). Public support for the Palestinian cause in Ireland is further evidenced by the numerous protests and demonstrations organized by various activist groups, calling for the recognition of Palestinian statehood and condemning Israeli actions. Civil society organizations and NGOs in Ireland have been actively campaigning for Palestinian rights, lobbying the government, and raising public awareness. This activism has created a robust grassroots movement that continues to pressure the government to take a definitive stance on the issue.

A unique aspect of this activism is the involvement of university students across world universities, which eventually took over Irish campuses, where students have organized camps and protests in solidarity with Palestine. Tens of students at University College Dublin (UCD) established an encampment at the Belfield campus in protest of the university's stance on Palestine, organized by the UCD Students' Union and the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) group (Burns, 2024). Their demands include ending academic ties with Israel, transparency regarding any connections with Israeli entities, divestment from investments in Israel, scholarships and pathways for Palestinian students and academics, and the removal of Israeli goods from campus (Burns, 2024). The protestors were inspired by a similar protest happening earlier at Trinity College Dublin, where the students concluded a five-day encampment after the university committed to divesting from Israeli companies involved in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and on the UN blacklist, and to strive towards divestment from other Israeli firms (Carroll, 2024).

UCD has stated it has no investments or bilateral partnerships with Israeli institutions but participates in EU research projects that include Israeli partners (Burns, 2024). Meanwhile, the protest at Trinity, which significantly impacted campus operations and caused an estimated €350,000 in lost revenue ended with the administration pledged support for Gaza scholars and set up a taskforce to review student exchanges with Israel, amid broader international condemnation of Israeli actions in Gaza and discussions of EU member states,

including Ireland, recognizing the state of Palestine ([Carroll, 2024](#)). The mounting public pressure from not only students, but Irish civil society, has also pushed Ireland's sovereign wealth fund to divest from six Israeli companies due to pressure from opposition politicians who oppose Israeli settlements in the West Bank ([Lucente, 2024](#)). The decision, while small in financial terms, marks a significant deterioration in Ireland-Israel relations. This move follows similar actions by Norway's sovereign wealth fund and comes amid growing international scrutiny of Israeli business activities in the occupied territories ([Lucente, 2024](#)).

Ireland's historical significance and domestic pressures alone, however, could only go so far. As small states tend to be more proactive in policy areas where they have a distinct economic or political interest, they often lack the capacity to project multiple policy goals onto the European level ([Thorhallsson & Wivel, 2006](#)), Ireland's position required a coalition building in exercising a unilateral controversial move ([Slattery, 2023](#)). This was specifically stressed by Ireland's Minister of State at the DFA which described it as a small-country with limited international influence ([Slattery, 2023](#)). He added that Ireland employs its strength in numbers ([Slattery, 2023](#)), which is a well-established technique for small states to increase their policy reach and chances of success ([Jakobsen, 2009](#)). Thus, the decision by Norway and Spain to recognize Palestine alongside Ireland provided significant advantages. Norway and Spain's bigger influence in the European politics relative to Ireland shields itself with justifications in recognizing the state of Palestine.

Norway's established neutral position as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provide itself a credible stance in the recognition of Palestine within the European context. Norway's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process began in the early 1990s, under the leadership of then-Foreign Minister Johan Jørgen Holst to facilitate dialogue between Israel and the PLO ([Waage, 2005](#)). Norway offered a neutral space for secret meetings between Israeli and Palestinian representatives, which took place in Oslo, hence the name "Oslo Accords". The Oslo process was initiated discreetly and unofficially in the mid-1990s, held under conditions of strict confidentiality to create a safe environment where both parties could negotiate without external pressures or public scrutiny ([Waage, 2005](#)). Spain, on the other hand, is considerably one of EU's most influential members and has maintained diplomatic relations with Israel since 1986, helping Ireland to employ the strength of numbers.

This united front can attract additional support from other states and organizations that might be hesitant to act independently. By collaborating with Norway and Spain, Ireland can distribute these risks across the coalition, reducing the individual impact on any single country. It is also making it clear that the recognition is part of a broader, collective stance rather than an isolated act by one nation. Sharing the diplomatic burden is a major benefit of coalition building, particularly for small states. Ireland has utilized coalition building as a key tactic, particularly in its efforts to promote Palestinian recognition. At the UN Security Council, for instance, Ireland has actively worked to build and support coalitions that oppose measures backed by EU and international allies, thereby advocating for Palestinian



recognition more effectively ([Doyle, 2004a](#)). This collaborative approach allows Ireland to share the burden of any potential fallout and enhances its ability to push for its foreign policy objectives within larger, multilateral frameworks and this joint recognition might be one of Ireland's most successful coalition-building effort within the EU in regards to its stance on Palestine-Israel.

Actor Leadership; The Rise of Simon Harris

There is a generally accepted support amongst Ireland's main political parties such as Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Sinn Féin on the Palestinian cause (Haydar, 2023). However, one could argue that some extends their support further than the others, with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael historically have taken a more centrist approach full of both side-ism ([Haydar, 2023](#)). Sinn Féin, on the other hand, has historically been more vocal about the cause. This comes to no surprise with Sinn Féin's links to the IRA and their more militant approach to politics on Irish unity and international affairs ([Doyle, 2008b](#)). Sinn Féin has also consistently in support of the PLO and a Palestinian statehood ([Doyle, 2008b](#)). To analyse Ireland's leadership that believed the decision to recognize Palestinian statehood to be the most rational foreign policy decision is to dig into the dynamics between these political parties.

March 15th 2024 saw Leo Varadkar's resignation from his positions of Ireland's Taoiseach or Prime Minister and Fine Gael party leader ([Moore, 2024](#)). The resignation was effectively a shock, as none of his Fine Gael colleagues saw the decision coming ([Soussi, 2024](#)). Following his resignation, Simon Harris emerged as the new leader of the party and was subsequently elected by the Irish parliament to be the next Taoiseach. Harris's ascent to leadership signalled a potential shift in the political landscape of Ireland, with new policies and priorities on the horizon. Having served as Ireland's Minister of Health in 2016 and Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science in 2020, Harris was known for his pragmatic approach and dedication to public service ([Picheta & Kennedy, 2024](#)). His leadership style was expected to differ from Varadkar's, with a focus on addressing both domestic and international issues more decisively.

As the new party leader, Harris faced the challenge of revitalizing Fine Gael's standing amid declining poll numbers and increasing competition from Sinn Féin. For the past three years, Fine Gael has recorded a decline in estimated public support, with figures showing only 19.7% in March 2024, a significant drop from its peak of 34% in June 2020 ([Doherty, 2024](#)). Fianna Fáil is also concerned, with support at 18.7% in March 2024, down more than 7% from its peak of 26.4% in January 2020 ([Doherty, 2024](#)). Meanwhile, Sinn Féin experienced a drastic surge from 22% in January 2020 to a peak of 36% for a few months throughout 2022, before gradually declining to 27% in March 2024 ([POLITICO, 2024](#)). Despite Sinn Féin's decline, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil should not be complacent, as support for independent candidates has sharply increased over the past three years, reaching 16.6% in March 2024 ([Doherty, 2024](#)).



Considering Irish general election will be held no later than March 2025, it is safe to assume that this is one of Harris' main concerns as the new Fine Gael leader.

During the same period, the Irish public's sympathy for the Palestinian cause has also grown. A poll by Ireland Thinks for the Irish Anti-Apartheid Campaign for Palestine (IAACP) shows 71% of Irish people believe Palestinians live under Israeli apartheid (Amnesty International Ireland, 2024). Support spans political parties, with 85% of Green Party, 71% of Fianna Fáil, and 56% of Fine Gael supporters agreeing ([Amnesty International Ireland, 2024](#)). Opposition support includes 100% of Solidarity PBP, 90% of Labour, 86% of Social Democrats, 80% of Sinn Féin, and 41% of Aontú ([Amnesty International Ireland, 2024](#)). IAACP Chair Senator Frances Black emphasized the strong public sentiment as elections near, noting 61% support restricting trade with illegal Israeli settlements ([Amnesty International Ireland, 2024](#)).

As the key decision-maker in Irish foreign policy, Simon Harris played a pivotal role in the recognition of Palestine. Taking into account the global conditions and domestic pressures, Harris acted as the final arbitrator in this significant policy decision. His leadership involved considering the international context, including the humanitarian situation in Gaza, as well as the domestic political climate, shaped by his leadership position in Fine Gael and his opposition Sinn Féin's advocacy for Palestine. Harris's decisive action reflected a calculated effort to address global, local, organizational, as well as personal concerns, carefully positioning Ireland as a leader in supporting Palestinian statehood within the European context.

Kegley and Blanton (2010) argue that while national interests ideally guide foreign policy decisions, personal motivations and organizational interests often confluence these choices. Leaders tend to seek recognition for their own importance and attribute significant power to other leaders. This behaviour is shaped by their perceptions and assumptions about their counterparts' personalities, consciously or unconsciously, which in turn impacts their own actions ([Kegley & Blanton, 2010](#)). Additionally, leaders respond differently based on the positions they hold, with their actions being guided by legal and traditional expectations on how they should perform their roles. Transnational actor leaders act as filters for interpreting reality, guiding their decision-making ([Kegley & Blanton, 2010](#)), making Ireland's decision to recognize Palestine under Harris leadership could be interpreted as him perceiving the decision to be both a morally imperative action and a strategic manoeuvre that promises to bolster his political standing and support for Fine Gael. The growing sympathy for the Palestinian cause among the Irish public, evidenced by a recent Ireland Thinks poll showing that 71% of people believe Palestinians live under Israeli apartheid, highlights a strong moral consensus ([Amnesty International Ireland, 2024](#)). This sentiment transcends political affiliations, with significant support from various parties, including Fine Gael.

In his inaugural speech after being elected, Harris condemned Israel for its devastating military actions in Gaza, promising "not to remain silent" on the conflict, positioning himself as one of the West's most vocal critics of Israel.

In Gaza, we are witnessing a humanitarian catastrophe. And we are seeing innocent children, women, and men being starved and slaughtered. We have not been silent on the unforgivable terrorist actions of Hamas on October the seventh. Nor can we be silent on the disproportionate reaction of the Israeli government ([Picheta & Kennedy, 2024](#)).

The global context further underscores the moral justification for recognizing Palestine. The ongoing conflict and humanitarian crises in Gaza demand international responses rooted in justice and human rights. Harris's firm stance aligns Ireland with a growing international movement that advocates for Palestinian rights and condemns systemic oppression. By taking this stand, Ireland reaffirms its commitment to global human rights, reflecting its historical support for oppressed peoples. However, this does not only align with global calls for justice, but also presents a viable path for Harris to revitalize Fine Gael's political fortunes, ensuring his leadership remains robust in Ireland's rapidly evolving political landscape.

This case demonstrates that leadership, as an input in foreign policy decision-making, is not merely about personal belief or moral stance it is about the ability to read and manoeuvre within shifting political landscapes. Simon Harris's leadership did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it was embedded within a highly contingent moment of domestic political vulnerability and international humanitarian urgency. What makes his leadership decisive is his capacity to convert diffuse public sentiment into state-level action, timing it in a way that maximized political capital both domestically and internationally.

Rather than reacting passively to external pressures, Harris demonstrated active agenda-setting capacity. He aligned Ireland's foreign policy with the growing public support for Palestine, while simultaneously distinguishing himself from previous leadership by breaking with the tradition of waiting for EU consensus. By doing so, he transformed foreign policy into a tool for domestic political consolidation. His leadership, therefore, was not only reactive but constitutive, actively shaping the direction, pace, and meaning of Ireland's foreign policy in a contested international issue. This illustrates that in small-state contexts, leadership can serve as a lever to amplify national identity, gain moral authority, and reposition the state diplomatically.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this research reveals that Ireland's decision to recognize Palestinian statehood was influenced by the preceding, multi-level causal events. The global condition saw a geopolitical shift, reflected by a bigger and more pressuring voice on the Palestine question, majorly caused Israel's military aggression to Gaza. In turn, Ireland's historical context of colonization received this reality with an even bigger push amongst the Irish public to absolve itself of being complicit in Israel's colonization of Palestine. The push is made by many urgent requests, amongst them is recognizing Palestine's statehood and sovereignty. This attempt



has been unsuccessful for many years due to its unpopularity within European countries, which is where Norway and Spain's joint recognition come into play and made the difference.

This study shows that leadership, particularly by Simon Harris and his party, Fine Gael was the key driver, grounded in past policy, diplomatic coordination, and the context of the 2024 early elections. First, it is unlikely that Ireland's decision was purely based on concern for the violence in Palestine, as the conflict has been worsening for decades without prompting similar action. Waiting for the 'right moment' has not been effective, so the timing of this recognition raises questions. Second, if Ireland truly intended to join a collective effort, it could have done so in 2014 when Sweden recognized Palestine, proving that EU members can act independently. The delayed action suggests a new political calculation rather than long-standing commitment. Third, the early general election in November 2024 offers key domestic context. As Fine Gael's leader, Simon Harris faced pressure to strengthen his party's position amid ongoing competition with Sinn Féin. Recognizing Palestine was likely a strategic move to gain support from progressive and pro-Palestinian voters. This decision, made shortly after Sinn Féin's decline in local and European elections, allows Harris to present himself as a decisive and morally-driven leader on foreign policy, strengthening his position ahead of the election

Simon Harris strategically used the recognition of Palestinian statehood to project diplomatic leadership and divert attention from domestic issues ahead of the 2025 general election. As the final decision-maker, his move was aimed at strengthening Fine Gael's public appeal amid political competition. While the decision may appear straightforward, it was in fact shaped by a complex interplay of multiple factors and political timing. This study affirms that a multilevel approach is effective in uncovering the complex dynamics of foreign policy decision-making in small states and can be applied in similar studies in the future.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Raden Bagus Rusydannu Risysya Bhirawa is a graduate of International Relations at Universitas Brawijaya with professional experience in public diplomacy and international affairs. His interests include global governance, Middle East politics, and intercultural dialogue.

Dian Mutmainah is a lecturer in International Relations at Universitas Brawijaya with academic expertise in diplomacy, international relations theory, and research methodology. She earned her bachelor's degree from Gadjah Mada University and her Master's in International Relations and Diplomacy from Leiden University. With a focus on global-local dynamics and resistance in international politics, her scholarly work includes notable publications on U.S.–Iran relations and the impacts of globalization on local communities in Indonesia.

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