

WALLS AS A NONVIOLENT STRATEGY IN ARMED CONFLICT

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and Oliver Kaplan



The entrance to the Puente Nayero Humanitarian Space in Buenaventura, Colombia. This wooden gate, which spans the main entrance, is left open during the day and locked at night. Photo: Lisa Taylor.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Walls are used in conflict zones in multiple ways, including for counterinsurgency, peacekeeping, and nonviolent community protection.
- Walls are most often erected in urban conflict settings.
- Walls can entail tradeoffs between providing greater security and impeding social and commercial interaction.
- Access is monitored and enforced in different ways, including through armed force and social cohesion.
- Urban planning can be leveraged to support communities in conflict/post-conflict zones.

INTRODUCTION

This brief examines the use of walls by nonviolent community activists to protect themselves during armed conflicts.¹ Thinking of walls in conflicts may summon images of the West Bank, but the use of walls extends far beyond the Middle East. Whether constructed and enforced by state institutions, international organizations, or civilian groups, walls are more than physical barriers. Their social significance reinforces their physical presence and they can therefore be powerful symbols that demarcate physical, political, social, and humanitarian boundaries. While they can keep populations safe, they can also reinforce divisions between them.

We examine the logics behind new cases of humanitarian walls that nonviolent civilian communities create and maintain by for their own protection within conflict zones (in Buenaventura, Colombia). We contrast how these walls differ in their functions and effectiveness with those used by states and militaries as strategic tools for counterinsurgency (in Iraq) or post-conflict reconciliation (in Northern Ireland). Walls as a nonviolent strategy are still new and little studied, but with sufficient social backing and in the right settings they offer a promising approach for nonviolent activists.

“With this [gate], we want to show that this street wants peace; with the gate, we avoid having unauthorized people entering the sector, making this space of life, of peace, more real.”

— Orlando Castillo, community leader, Puente Nayero Humanitarian Space, Buenaventura, Colombia.

UNDERSTANDING WALLS IN CONFLICT

We develop a theory to explain how nonviolent protective humanitarian walls—local partitions—come into being and how and when they are effective at reducing violence. Walls have been a key defensive tool for millennia, from the fortifications of Hadrian’s Wall during Rome’s occupation of the British Isles to the imposing Great Wall of China. More recently, states have come to rely on walls to demarcate borders and monitor flows of immigrants, as well as to protect their populations or interests from perceived threats beyond their borders. National-level partitions support inter-ethnic power-sharing agreements and can help manage immigration, as was implemented in Bosnia following the Dayton accords, or with the UN-administered Green Line buffer zone that divides Greek and Turkish Cyprus.² These partitions have been proposed for other conflict zones and regions with separatist movements, including Kosovo, Iraq and Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Partitions where walls might be used have also been incorporated into military planning exercises to respond to mass atrocities.³ Whether large-scale partitions halt civil wars or prevent their recurrence remains controversial.⁴

The existing analyses of national partitions as a solution to ethnic wars have little to say about the creative uses of walls by local actors. Indeed, during the Rwandan genocide, a skeleton group of unarmed UN peacekeepers successfully used walled structures and complexes to safeguard threatened populations.⁵ Some businesses have even incorporated walls as part of a “fortress strategy” to continue operating in conflict zones.⁶

Humanitarian walls are a form of social control that acts as a physical barrier, a collective statement of preferences against violence, and a focal point that can garner attention from wider audiences.

With these contrasting results and examples, local nonviolent walls merit further analysis. The appearance of nonviolent organizational strategies during conflict presents a first puzzle of how such strategies are ever effective at protecting civilians given the threats posed by

armed combatants. Recent explorations of different types of “peace zones” have sought to account for how and whether they affect violence.⁷ Still, an even deeper puzzle is whether walls can provide additional protection to these nonviolent actors, especially since most walls can be over-run with enough force.

Walls are a physical manifestation of nonviolent protection and control of territory, but they fall along a spectrum of approaches. In rural areas, walls are typically not feasible since they would be required to encircle vast perimeters of dispersed villages and settlements. It is therefore more common to see civilians collectively agree on imagined boundaries, as is the case with communities such as the Peasant Worker Association of the Carare River (ATCC) in Colombia, which allows members of armed groups to enter populated areas as long as they are not armed.⁸ Other communities, such as the San José de Apartadó peace community in Colombia, more aggressively bar access to all armed actors, albeit not with physical barriers.⁹ Protective walls are more commonly employed in urban settings, particularly in the context of densely populated, self-segregated communities, such as the Puente Nayero community in Buenaventura. Puente Nayero goes a step beyond these other communities by controlling access to the community with walls while also using conciliatory, peaceful statements to avoid antagonizing armed actors.

Civilian nonviolent walls rely on a diverse range of enforcement mechanisms. They provide protection through physical separation of warring parties or victims and victimizers, screening and control, signaling cohesion and collective preferences, deterrence, and influencing the psychological defaults of armed actors about using violence.¹⁰ Nonviolent walls differ from walls erected by states in their means of enforcement and administration. Walls with military or police checkpoints or armed paramilitary or militia guards enforce separation and defend the structures through the threat or use of violent coercion. With these armed defensive strategies, there is the risk that the “material measures ... communities use to

mobilize for defense also pose offensive threats to other communities.”¹¹ Nonviolent walls, by contrast, represent an attractive protective measure because they avoid heightening such security dilemmas between adversaries of victims and victimizers. Still, by limiting armed actors’ access to territory, they may see these walls as an affront to their authority, so considering walls also requires a careful assessment of the conflict situation and how belligerents might respond to them.

Civilian walls also represent an autonomous decision by a community, rather than an imposition by a foreign actor or state authority. They are different from walls constructed in contexts of occupation, as in Iraq, or inter-ethnic conflict (such as that between the Rohingya Muslim population and Rakhine Buddhists in Myanmar).¹² In these cases, a group of people may be walled in, arguably for their own protection, but without their consultation or consent. Civilian walls also differ from refugee camps, where displaced people seek safety and protection, as such camps can lack the communal ties and intention that unite walled civilian communities. Humanitarian walls are built to *avoid* forced displacement.

However, even protective walls can have drawbacks. While they may shield the people inside (or outside), they

can also be isolationist, cutting off one population from access to the resources or populations on the other side. The wall (security barrier) that separates Israel from the Gaza Strip was built to ensure security but has also imposed hardships on Palestinians seeking employment and services within Israel.¹³ In other cases, by contrast, such as gated communities like Alphaville in São Paulo, isolation may be intentional on the part of the residents, who are willing to trade freedom of movement for security.¹⁴ Ironically, construction of these “residential fortresses” can actually deepen social divisions and lead to increased prevalence of crime, as was the case in some of South Africa’s gated communities.¹⁵ Next, we examine the nature of different types of walls and their effects.

WALLS AROUND THE WORLD

Walls constructed by civilians share both similarities and differences with protective barriers constructed by state and military actors. Here, we examine the military-enforced walls constructed by U.S. forces in Baghdad, the state-civil society hybrid “peace walls” that divide Protestant and Catholic communities in Belfast, and then the civilian-led humanitarian space in Buenaventura, Colombia.

Table: Comparing Walls in Conflict Zones

Wall Location	Purpose	Built/ Administered By	State Involvement?	Use of Force or Nonviolent?	Effectiveness
Baghdad, Iraq	Protect minority communities and strategic zones, now including Iraqi government structures	U.S. military/ Iraqi government	Administered by state and security forces (military)	Heavily militarized	Protecting military interests, but divisive and increasing disconnect between civilians and government
Belfast Peace Walls, Northern Ireland (UK)	Separate Catholics and Protestants to reduce violence in mixed neighborhoods	State/Community	State involved in building and jurisdiction, but not day-to-day oversight. Some walls are not state-affiliated	Nonviolent; walls are both physical and symbolic barriers	Widespread acceptance of walls and falling rates of violence. Some opposition, but majority of residents feel safer with walls
Puente Nayero Humanitarian Space, Buenaventura, Colombia	Keep armed actors out of humanitarian space neighborhood	Civilians with NGO support	No, although community has requested police presence	Nonviolent measures used to enforce barriers	Armed actors still able to enter, but violence prevented within the space to date

BAGHDAD'S COUNTERINSURGENT WALLS

In the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, walls sprang up throughout the capital. The U.S. military built walls to protect international personnel, military forces, and aid workers who lived and worked inside the Green Zone governing complex, which some soldiers referred to as the "ultimate gated community."¹⁶ Other walls were also constructed by the U.S. military in specific Baghdad neighborhoods to protect vulnerable populations and as a counterinsurgency tactic in strategic sectors. In nearly a dozen neighborhoods, including the Sunni communities of Adhamiyah and Amriya and the sprawling Shia district of Sadr City, U.S. forces constructed walls that essentially segregated entire neighborhoods, spatially reinforcing sectarian differences.¹⁷ Although U.S. forces were targeted by insurgents while installing the walls, there is some evidence that the walls and the larger segregation strategy helped to reduce violence in the short-term.¹⁸ However, many residents protested the walls at the time of their construction, and in some cases succeeded in convincing U.S. and Iraqi officials to scale down or delay their construction plans. According to one resident, the walls made locals feel "as if we were in Palestine," and others likened them to a prison.¹⁹

BELFAST'S NEIGHBORHOOD PEACE WALLS

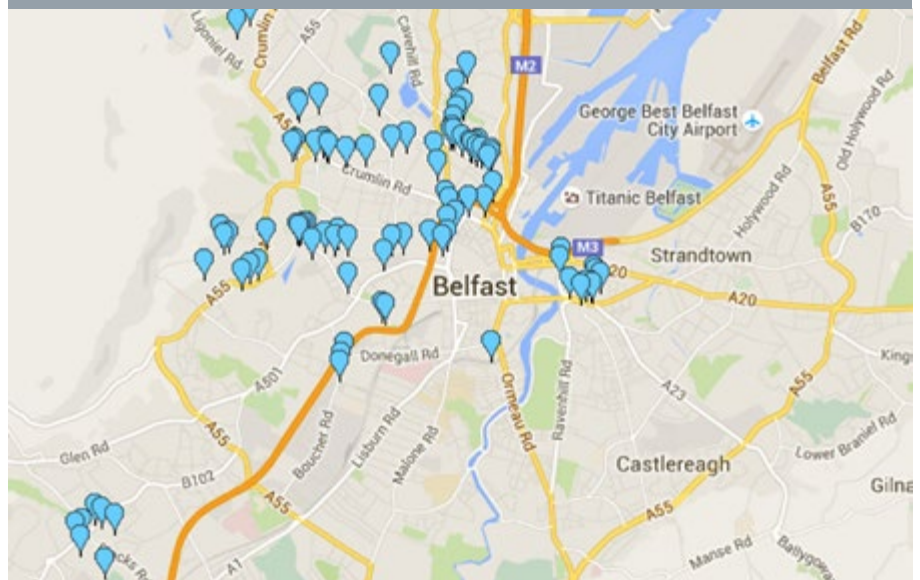
In the midst of the "Troubles" that roiled Northern Ireland for four decades, residents on both sides of the conflict found solace in the walls that were installed to separate Nationalist Catholic and Unionist Protestant neighborhoods. The so-called "peace walls" or "peace lines"—some as flimsy as a short fence, others stretching 30 feet into the air—snake 21 miles through what were once the most violent sectors of Belfast. The first walls were built by civilians but were replaced with official barbed-wire barriers when the British Army was deployed to Northern Ireland in 1969. As the Troubles went on, the military added barriers at flashpoints around the city.

Today, Northern Ireland's Department of Justice officially administers 53 walls throughout the city, though some counts suggest there are as many as 99 peace walls in the city, with many covered in murals, some political, some purely artistic. Reports indicate the number of walls actually increased in the years after the Good Friday Agreement that brought an official end to the conflict in 1998. Although many of these newer "interfaces" started as civilian constructions, some are now administered by state institutions including the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (19 walls) and the Department for Regional Development, while seven remain under private ownership.²⁰ Most residents say they would like to see the walls come down "some day," although that day is unlikely be anytime soon. In 2012, 69 percent of Belfast residents living near one of the walls told researchers they would fear for their safety if the barriers were not there.²¹

BUENAVENTURA'S WALLED HUMANITARIAN SPACE

Buenaventura, Colombia's main Pacific port, is one of the country's most violent urban centers. This predominantly Afro-Colombian city is a key exit point for illegal drug shipments as well as a hub for economic expansion and large-scale development projects and has seen a sharp rise in violence over the last decade. Though the FARC guerrilla group is no longer present in the city, battles among armed neo-paramilitary groups and criminal bands (known as

Map: Peace Walls in Belfast, Northern Ireland



Locations of peace walls from the Belfast Interface Project.²² From 1969 through the early 2000s, walls were built to separate Protestant Unionist neighborhoods from Catholic Nationalist neighborhoods.

BACRIM) have established *fronteras invisibles* (invisible borders) between strategic neighborhoods, which the gangs enforce with violence and coercion.²³

Amid this surging violence, the 302 families of the Puente Nayero community—comprising more than 1,000 people—created the country’s first urban humanitarian space.²⁴ The space, officially founded on April 13, 2014, was previously home to one of the city’s infamous *casas de pique* (chop-up houses), where armed actors would brutally dismember their victims, and residents recall the silence and fear that used to pervade the gang-controlled streets when night fell.²⁵ Between November 2013 and March 2014, five people were murdered in the neighborhood, including seafood vendor Marisol Rodríguez, who was tortured and publicly drowned by paramilitaries after protesting the disappearance of her husband and son.²⁶ Previously displaced from the Naya region of Valle del Cauca, the strong leaders of the community mobilized to establish the space after observing (unwalled) humanitarian zones in other parts of the country.

Since its inauguration, residents have adhered to nonviolent principles and sought to bar members of armed groups from entering the space.²⁷ They did this by installing a front gate at the main entrance of the community and a fence closing off a side entrance between the community and an adjoining neighborhood.²⁸ Although police are stationed at the entrance from time to time, they do not provide regular presence (the community wants more presence—unlike in some humanitarian spaces, this community does not oppose armed police presence). The gates are left open during the day for residents to transit and are closed at night to control access by individuals and prevent motorcycles and other vehicles from entering.

The efforts of Puente Nayero’s residents have benefitted from international accompaniment from international NGOs, including Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) Peace Presence, Witness for Peace, and Peace Brigades International, as well as the Inter-Church Justice and Peace Commission, a Colombian NGO. These groups help provide the community with international visibility and physical protection through monitoring along with a deterrent effect based on the negative consequences that come from harming a foreigner.²⁹ With little police

presence, these volunteers have conducted regular “rounds” to patrol the perimeter of the humanitarian space to monitor and encourage additional police presence. Before the gates went up, accompaniers were helpful for visibly signaling the strength of the community process to BACRIM. The Inter-American Human Rights Commission also lent its support to the community when it issued precautionary measures for the residents of the space in September 2014.³⁰

Since the humanitarian space was established and its gates installed, Puente Nayero has seen a large drop in violence, with no reported killings (though there have been several murders within a few blocks of the entrance).³¹ Although it is a challenge to separate the effect of the gates from that of the sporadic police presence, the base level of social cohesion, the nonviolent community management, or the accompaniers, violence remained low even during periods when accompaniers were not present. The community’s walls have made it more difficult for armed actors to enter the community undetected but have not been able to halt access by all armed actors. This is due in part to the neighborhood’s physical layout, since some houses are built out into the bay on stilts, and gangs can use this sea access beneath the community to enter the humanitarian space or individual houses by boat. Some families living in the space also have relatives among the armed actors who have entered the space. Finally, the humanitarian space is not without controversy, as one police colonel stated that the community “was delegitimizing their authority.”³²

CONCLUSION

Walls have primarily been seen as tools for state actors. They are now also a tactic that communities and policymakers can consider adding to their *nonviolent* repertoire. Existing examples, such as the Puente Nayero neighborhood in Colombia, show that walls may improve community self-protection and reduce violence. The humanitarian walls are a form of social control that acts as a physical barrier, a collective statement of preferences against violence, and a focal point that can garner attention from wider audiences. Humanitarian walls that are built by communities require consensus and social cohesion to manage them and screen the passage of individuals. They also require resources to build and maintain. Yet, as a defensive measure, walls may avoid the potential security dilemmas that militarized

the passage of individuals. They also require resources to build and maintain. Yet, as a defensive measure, walls may avoid the potential security dilemmas that militarized strategies may entail by not antagonizing adversaries. The effectiveness of walls may depend, however, on the preferences and reputational concerns of the violent actors they are being used to impede, with fewer prospects for success against especially powerful and hostile actors.

Community walls can also entail tradeoffs. The limitations on free movement that walls can impose have the potential to harm commerce and limit social relations with other communities. There is also the question of who manages the walls and whether the process of determining which individuals are considered harmful to the community and enforcing their exclusion is just. Further, since communities cannot live in complete isolation from the cities that surround them, the necessity of being able to exit a walled community presents additional challenges. Communities considering the use of humanitarian walls must therefore consider how walled communities may endure, especially if they face drawn-out sieges by armed actors and rely on vital infrastructure, food, or resources from outside the community to sustain the population.

The improvised use of humanitarian walls in Colombia

suggests broader implications for the nexus between urban planning and security. Some architects and urban planners have approached post-conflict reconstruction projects as opportunities to create shared public spaces that foster understanding and coexistence.³³ However, shared spaces may not always be practical if communities are facing direct threats from armed actors. In these cases, and in post-conflict reconstruction projects, urban planners linked with at-risk communities may alternatively modify physical spaces to make them easier to secure should the threat of violence arise. Planners should consider incorporating modular physical spaces in their designs that facilitate social interaction but can be closed off and controlled if the need arises.

Should there be more humanitarian walls? Despite the tradeoffs, high levels of violence in urban areas of developing countries suggest walls are an option worth considering. Humanitarian walls could represent a helpful solution for Central American countries, such as El Salvador and Honduras, which are plagued by similar forms of urban drug gang violence to that of Buenaventura, Colombia. A main limitation to date of using walls as a community-based nonviolent tactic has been the diffusion of the idea of walls among communities that might benefit from them. The insights from the case of Puente Nayero and other walls are a helpful starting point for these discussions.

ENDNOTES

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- space. The 2014 Human Rights Watch report, *The Crisis in Buenaventura*, provides more extensive information about the scope of violence in Buenaventura and neo-paramilitary control of specific neighborhoods. It was one of the first major international reports to focus on the unique forms of terror created by the *casas de pique*. Its release elicited swift responses from the highest levels of the Colombian government, with President Juan Manuel Santos announcing the deployment of Marine battalions to Buenaventura. This militarization motivated some BACRIM structures to destroy the evidence of some *casas de pique* (including in Puente Nayero) before they could be discovered by officials.
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- 31 "In November 2013 we started to see a lot of killings within the neighborhood, the appearance of dismembered bodies and chop houses. So, the community decided to do something because we couldn't keep living like that. We sought out the [Inter-Church Justice and Peace] Commission [a Colombian NGO], and we managed to organize ourselves. It's been a joy, the people here live in absolute calm. There hasn't been a single displacement, no homicides, everything is calm, at last," said Nhora Castillo, one of the leaders of the humanitarian space. "Buenaventura: un año después de enterrar la violencia." 2015. *Pacifista (VICE)*, February 20. <http://pacifista.co/buenaventura-un-ano-despues-de-enterrar-la-violencia/>; Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz. 2015. "New killings in Buenaventura." July 21. <http://justiciaypazcolombia.com/New-killings-in-Buenaventura-city>.
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ABOUT THIS SERIES

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