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The Fragility of the Good Friday Peace

The persistence of terrorism in Northern Ireland

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The Fragility of the Good Friday Peace: The Persistence of Terrorism in Northern Ireland

By Aaron Edwards

The murder of a journalist, a recent car bombing in Northern Ireland, and a series of parcel bombs sent to key transport hubs in London and to the University of Glasgow have raised the specter of a renewed terror campaign by militant Irish Republicans. Commentators have been quick to tie the attacks to the United Kingdom's planned exit from the European Union. However, this assertion obscures more than it reveals. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement peace deal in 1998, militant Ulster loyalists have been responsible for slightly more security-related deaths than republicans. The continuing presence of violent groups on both sides of the ethno-national divide, therefore, points to broader imperfections in the peace process. Moreover, the challenge posed by these groupings is significantly different than it was 25 years ago when the paramilitary ceasefires were announced. There has been a blurring of the concepts of terrorism and criminality that challenges orthodox perspectives on the security landscape in Northern Ireland.

The author wishes to dedicate this article to the memory of Lyra McKee, an extraordinary journalist and a dear friend whose reporting did so much to shed light on the challenges still facing Northern Ireland.

The murder of the journalist Lyra McKee in Northern Ireland on the night before Good Friday illustrates the fragility of peace in a region in which terrorist violence has remained persistent. Dissident Republicans^a were blamed for shooting her during rioting after police searches in Derry/Londonderry's Creggan area on the night of April 18, 2019.¹ It was the latest in a series of incidents that have raised the specter of a surge in terrorist violence in Northern Ireland.

On January 19, 2019, a bomb exploded outside the courthouse in

a Editor's note: In the Northern Ireland context, Republican refers to a political movement seeking to create an independent and united Ireland.

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Derry/Londonderry. It was a busy Saturday night in the city center, and a number of civilians, including young children, narrowly escaped injury. A group calling itself the IRA (Irish Republican Army, or *Óglaigh na hÉireann* in Gaelic) later claimed in a statement that it had carried out the attack in Northern Ireland's second-largest city. The van used in the attack had been hijacked a short time prior to the explosion.² A statement issued to *The Derry Journal* newspaper by this 'New IRA' was redolent of old IRA rhetoric, suggesting, in typically verbose language, that it would "continue to strike at crown forces and personnel and their imperial establishment." The group warned those "who collaborate with the British that they are to desist immediately as no more warnings will be given." Interestingly, the group claimed that "all this talk of Brexit, hard borders, soft borders, has no bearing on our actions and the IRA won't be going anywhere. Our fight goes on."³

On March 5, 2019, a series of parcel bombs were discovered at the Compass Centre near Heathrow Airport, Waterloo railway station, and City Aviation House at London City Airport. The next day another suspect package was received at the University of Glasgow, where bomb-disposal officers carried out a controlled explosion.⁴ The New IRA again claimed responsibility for sending these devices.⁵

Police in Northern Ireland have stated they believe the New IRA were also likely responsible for the murder of the investigative journalist Lyra McKee during rioting in the Creggan estate late on the evening of April 18, 2019. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) stated that a gunman fired shots toward police officers and that they were treating the attack as a "terrorist incident."⁶ The BBC reported, "Mobile phone footage taken by a bystander during Thursday night's rioting appears to show a masked gunman crouching down on the street and opening fire with a handgun," mortally wounding McKee who was standing near a police vehicle. According to the BBC, police had entered the Creggan estate in an intelligence-led operation to search for weapons and ammunition out of concern "they could be used in the days ahead to attack officers."⁷ A riot had ensued in which more than 50 gasoline bombs were thrown.⁸

While disturbing, this latest spike in terrorist activity must be seen in its broader context. Dissident republican activity has been ongoing ever since the dominant Provisional IRA split in 1986 over whether it should take its seats in Dáil Éireann (the lower house of the Irish Parliament).⁹ Several of its members left to form Republican Sinn Féin, a group that sprouted an armed group in the form of the Continuity IRA when the Provisionals later called a ceasefire in 1994. While negotiating terms of entry into the peace process, the Provisionals broke their ceasefire in February 1996 with a huge bomb attack on London's financial district. After reinstating their truce in July 1997, the Provisionals then split again, prompting the formation of the Real IRA, which killed 29 people and two unborn children in a car bomb attack in the small Northern Irish town of



A burning car on April 18, 2019, in Creggan, Londonderry, Northern Ireland, after gasoline bombs were thrown at police. (Niall Carson/Press Association via AP Images)

Omagh a year later.¹⁰ Despite the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, which brought an end to major hostilities between the mainstream loyalist and republican factions, both the Continuity IRA and Real IRA continued to reject the peace process and remain unbowed in their objective of ending British rule in Ireland by violent means.¹¹

In 2012, the Real IRA merged with a loose confederation of smaller splinter groups, including the so-called Republican Action Against Drugs vigilante grouping, to form the New IRA.¹² The New IRA is regarded as the deadliest of all of the militant republican organizations operating in Northern Ireland today. Responsible for over 40 attacks since its formation, it also sprouted a political party in 2016 known as Saoradh. According to the outgoing chief constable of the PSNI, George Hamilton, there is “significant overlap between the leadership of both the New IRA and Saoradh ... They are not quite one and the same. There are a number of people who are very senior in the New IRA who are also senior in the leadership of Saoradh.”¹³ In January 2019, *The Times* reported that the United Kingdom’s security service MI5 had more than 700 officers stationed in Belfast to tackle the threat posed by dissident republican terrorism, with the chief threat seen as coming from approximately 40 members of the New IRA.¹⁴ And MI5’s numbers were reportedly being boosted further ahead of this Easter (Sunday, April 21) because of concern the group might carry out attacks to mark the IRA’s Easter Rising.¹⁵

In light of the heightened media attention surrounding the activities of armed groups like the New IRA, this article provides an analysis of the Northern Ireland security situation. It examines the recent activity of militant Irish Republican groups, arguing that their violence is best understood not as a by-product of the uncertainty generated by Brexit but as a symptom of the imperfections in the peace process. Moreover, it makes the case that the persistent threat of terrorism in Northern Ireland must be assessed as a phe-

nomenon that emanates from *both* Irish republicans *and* Ulster loyalists.

New IRA, Old Terrorism

Militant Irish republicans have been using explosives to draw attention to their radical agenda ever since dynamite was first used by members of the Fenian Brotherhood in London in the late 19th century.¹⁶ The car bomb was first used by the IRA in the early 1970s, with the group’s then Chief of Staff Sean MacStiofáin calling it a weapon of the “utmost ferocity and ruthlessness.”¹⁷ Like other terrorist groups around the world, the bomb offered the Provisionals “a dramatic, yet fairly easy and often risk-free, means of drawing attention” to their cause.¹⁸ The location of the January 2019 attack in Derry city center had echoes of the Provisional IRA’s first major commercial bombing blitz in the city almost half a century earlier. Under the direction of the Officer Commanding of the Derry IRA, Martin McGuinness,¹⁹ the campaign succeeded in causing massive disruption to the local economy, until the group realized that those most affected by the violence were the city’s dominant nationalist community. Throughout the period 1968-1994, during what is euphemistically known as “The Troubles,” McGuinness remained the towering IRA figure in the city.²⁰ Highly revered by supporters,²¹ he was characterized as a hawk until his attitude softened in the 1990s and he eventually led negotiations between the IRA and the British Government aimed at ending the armed conflict.²²

Martin McGuinness would later serve as the deputy to First Minister Ian Paisley, the then Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader, in the Northern Ireland Executive reconstituted in May 2007. His new role was indicative of the peaceful transition made by Irish Republicans from war to peace. In 2009, he led condemnation of the Real IRA’s murder of two off-duty soldiers and a police officer by referring to those who carried out the attacks as “traitors to the island of Ireland.”²³ McGuinness eventually resigned from

his post in January 2017, citing the arrogance of senior DUP leaders in their handling of allegations of high-level corruption.²⁴ This move effectively pulled down the power-sharing system. However, McGuinness's death in March 2017 also inadvertently removed a key opponent of the continuation of physical force republicanism.²⁵ The subsequent concentration of a tiny rump of New IRA members in Derry and the northwest of Northern Ireland in recent years,²⁶ highlights the difficulty of consigning this militant tradition to atrophy. According to academic Jonathan Tonge, "Irish republicanism has taken many forms and no single organisation can claim monopoly." Rather, it is the "product of a fusion of ideology, historical interpretation and contemporary circumstances"²⁷ that will remain a threat as long as there is a British presence in Ireland. In order to fully understand why such militancy continues, it is necessary to see it both as the product of history and of the imperfections inherent in the ongoing peace process.

Northern Ireland's Imperfect Peace

It was the outbreak of intercommunal violence between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists in the late 1960s that saw the emergence of more sustained terrorist campaigns. During The Troubles, almost 4,000 people were killed and 10 times as many injured. In a relatively small population of 1.5 million people, republican paramilitaries were responsible for the largest number of deaths. They killed 2,057 people in contrast to the 1,027 killed by loyalists and 363 by British Security Forces.²⁸ For much of this period, the Security Forces regarded the IRA as the major threat to national security.²⁹ Loyalists were perceived differently, as a secondary concern.³⁰ The two principal loyalist groupings are the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), formed in 1971, and the older Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), formed in 1965, prior to the outbreak of The Troubles. The vast majority of loyalist killings (74.1 percent) between 1966 and their ceasefires in 1994 were of Catholic civilians.³¹ While the IRA eventually disarmed in 2005, as a result of gaining political concessions from the British, it would take a further four years for loyalist paramilitaries to end their respective armed campaigns.³² Meanwhile, disenchantment with the emerging political dispensation manifested itself in violent ways, most notably when the UDA and UVF orchestrated large-scale civil disturbances in 2005 and 2011.³³

More significantly, a loyalist demonstration against the removal of the Union Flag from Belfast City Hall in early December 2012 sparked months of leaderless protests, mostly organized on an ad hoc and opportunistic basis via social networks.³⁴ The total cost of the policing operation to contain the protests was £21.9 million.³⁵ Arguably, these protests had multiple drivers, ranging from alienation, frustration, and anger to a disconnection with the local political institutions.³⁶ Unsurprisingly, loyalist paramilitaries moved quickly to harness this discontent by recruiting young people into their ranks and thereby deepened their coercive control over local communities.³⁷

The failure to tackle the scourge of loyalist paramilitarism has undoubtedly ensured it remains a clear and present danger to community safety long after the leaderless protests subsided. Indeed, the steady rate of politically motivated killings in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years supports this assertion.³⁸ Since the signing of the 1998 agreement, there have been over 156 deaths linked to the security situation.³⁹ In terms of attribution, militant republicans

account for less than half of these murders,⁴⁰ while militant loyalists have been responsible for 78 deaths.⁴¹ Admittedly, from the peak of political killings in 1998, when 71 people lost their lives, there has been a recognizable decline in attacks, with only two security-related deaths, 37 shooting incidents, and 15 bombings recorded by police in the 12 months prior to March 2019.⁴²

In terms of the overall picture today, the threat level for Irish terrorism in Northern Ireland is currently set at "severe," meaning an attack is highly likely, while it remains at the more downgraded "moderate" level in Great Britain.⁴³ The responsibility for setting threat levels sits with the Joint Terrorism Analysis Center (JTAC), a cross-government and interagency grouping housed in MI5's Thames House headquarters in central London. Additionally, between January 1, 2014, and December 31, 2018, 833 people were arrested in Northern Ireland under the United Kingdom's Terrorism Act (2000), with 551 of these released unconditionally.⁴⁴ A report completed by the PSNI and MI5, concluded that dissident Republicans "pose a severe threat to NI's [Northern Ireland's] security and stability."⁴⁵ Amidst the overall decrease in activity, the government has said that maintaining "vigilance in the face of this continuing threat remains essential."⁴⁶

Counterterrorism Responses

Throughout The Troubles and the peace process, it was the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and its successor, the PSNI, backed by the British Army and MI5, that spearheaded counterterrorism operations. Since 2007, MI5 have taken the lead in combating all Northern Ireland-Related Terrorism (NIRT).⁴⁷ According to the security agency, the "majority of current national security resources and attention is focused on dissident republicans as these groups pose the greatest threat," with loyalist paramilitary groups thought to "pose further public order challenges for the PSNI."⁴⁸ At the end of March 2016, NIRT accounted for around 18 percent of MI5's total operational and investigative resources, with some 64 percent directed at International Counter Terrorism (ICT) efforts.⁴⁹ One year later, the allocation of MI5 resources directed toward NIRT had risen to 22 percent, with ICT-related tasking remaining constant.⁵⁰

Much of the successful containment of NIRT has been achieved through the use of covert human intelligence sources or "agents."⁵¹ MI5 regards agents as the "most significant information gathering assets" at its disposal.⁵² In the period 2009-2013, the PSNI spent £414,228.75 on agents.⁵³ While a sizable amount, it contrasts sharply with the much larger figure the RUC was spending 30 years earlier at the height of The Troubles. Historically, agents have been employed against republicans (and to a lesser extent loyalists). Given the fact that the United Kingdom's domestic agent-running agency, MI5, has been in the lead on NIRT, it may be safely assumed that the recent ceasefire declared by *Óglaigh na hÉireann* (known colloquially as "ONH"), a dissident Republican group formed in 2005,⁵⁴ was achieved with the aid of human intelligence, even if it is impossible to say whether its use was decisive.^b In January 2018,

b The three principal forms of intelligence gathering traditionally utilized in Northern Ireland have been surveillance, interrogation, and the use of agents and informers. See Bradley Bamford, "The Role and Effectiveness of Intelligence in Northern Ireland," *Intelligence and National Security* 20:4 (2005): pp. 581-607.

its leadership announced that it was suspending all “armed actions against the British state,” claiming they remained “unbowed and unbroken.”⁵⁵ The group had sporadic successes, including carrying out a car bomb attack on a Catholic police officer in 2010 and another on Palace Barracks, the British Army’s base in Belfast, which, perhaps as symbolically, is also home to MI5 in the region.⁵⁶ In all, ONH, the New IRA, and the Continuity IRA have carried out between 15 and 40 such attacks each year since 2000.⁵⁷ A key question arising from this discussion, therefore, must be: Why do these groups continue to do what they do?

From Terrorism to Dark Networks

As indicated above, the end of major armed hostilities in Northern Ireland in the late 1990s did not lead to the complete termination of terrorism or criminality.⁵⁸ While political parties close to both republican and loyalist paramilitary groupings signed up to the emerging peace process, their respective armed wings appeared to undergo a metamorphosis into criminally motivated organizations as the political context increasingly rendered their original utility obsolete.⁵⁹ Additionally, loyalism has been much more fragmented since the UVF and UDA called a halt to their armed campaigns in 2009. As indicated above, this led to the development of a radical echo chamber on social networking sites where younger loyalists became increasingly radicalized, with some 700 arrested for riotous behavior around the ‘flag protests’ in 2012-2014.⁶⁰ This has challenged loyalist political parties, like the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), enjoying close links to the UVF, which have attempted to harness discontent. PUP leader Billy Hutchinson has repeatedly stressed the need to politically educate young loyalists, though there is little evidence of a softening of attitudes amongst those born in the years since the ending of major hostilities.⁶¹

How are such changes to be understood? Perhaps the most useful conceptual lens available to help explain these changes can be found in the literature on the crime-terror nexus.⁶² Simply put, this is where terrorism and criminality intersect and often become blurred.⁶³ Scholars have observed how “collectives” or “cartels” frequently “come together in post-conflict or transitional environments in order to survive, not only thrive in and promote chaotic and unstable situations, but become dominant actors in shadow economies.”⁶⁴ With the decline in the state-sponsorship of terrorism in the post-Cold War era, terrorists increasingly turned to forging alliances with criminals. The crime-terror nexus and—more recently—the work on dark networks demonstrate that there is much more synchronization between terrorists and criminals than was previously acknowledged.⁶⁵ The pioneering scholarly work of Victor Asal and others has added considerable nuance to analysts’ understanding of how and why these militant groups do what they do. In a major quantitative-based study of 395 terrorist groups worldwide, Asal et al contend that terrorist activity should be analyzed in the context of both organizational attributes and environmental factors.⁶⁶ They have defined dark networks as organizations that are “both covert and illegal and are driven by two key imperatives: the need to exist and the need to act.”⁶⁷

Such convergences have taken many forms, with the changing context prompting the emergence of a variety of new threats, including leaderless protests and the fragmentation of centralized paramilitary control. The idea of “leaderless resistance” has manifested itself in both right-wing extremism and also Islamist forms of terrorism for decades.⁶⁸ Central to the concept is the strategic

decision by militants to encourage and foment individual acts outside an organized set of structures. In the case of the flag protests, senior figures within the East Belfast UVF grouping used the cover of leaderless protests to continue their criminal activities while the PSNI tied up its resources in dealing with civil unrest.⁶⁹ The extent of these criminal activities were again exposed following the murder of a loyalist, Ian Ogle, in the east of the city on January 27, 2019.⁷⁰ By continuing their criminal activities, the East Belfast UVF have pitted themselves against their centralised leadership in West Belfast.⁷¹ Based on the Shankill Road, the UVF “peace leadership” has openly supported the peace process and the rule of law since disarming in 2009.⁷² Locally based groupings like the East Belfast UVF, however, have morphed into what the Chief Constable of the PSNI calls “mid-level crime gangs.”⁷³

Furthermore, the alteration of organizational attributes and environmental factors locally can also be traced to a shift in major geopolitical reconfigurations, like Brexit or a bump in right-wing populism, triggering other reactions that have not yet bordered the horizon. Only by recognizing that these groups are no longer the same entities that once fought major terror campaigns can counterterrorism practitioners hope to fully appreciate and respond to the challenge these dark networks pose.^c

Conclusion

The murder of a journalist on the night before Good Friday in 2019 was a reminder of the fragility of peace in Northern Ireland. On the surface, the persistence of terrorism in Northern Ireland is indicative of centuries-old grievances that have remained remarkably unchanged. At its heart is a competition between the British state and its militant Republican adversaries who violently oppose the continuing presence of British governing institutions in Ireland. Yet, it is also ground contested by loyalist paramilitaries who wish to maintain the status quo. However, delving deeper into the phenomenon, it is possible to see dramatic changes in all of these groups. Violence may remain an ever-present danger, though there continues to be a large gap between those wedded to physical force and those supportive of the democratic process. For as long as this remains the case, these groups will lack a favorable political climate in which resorting to armed actions could be justified in any way.

The continuing uncertainty surrounding Brexit has the potential to further destabilize the security situation.⁷⁴ In an assessment of the likely impact of a No Deal Brexit, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in the U.K. Parliament warned of the potential for community tensions to be heightened, particularly as rival militant groups “seek to exploit gaps in law enforcement and any eventual divergence between Northern Ireland and Ireland, which may lead to increases in smuggling and associated criminality.”⁷⁵ Although it remains to be seen whether this will come to pass, there can be no doubt that the continued absence of a deal—as well as functioning power-sharing government in Belfast—provides the context within which instability continues to thrive. **CTC**

c Scholars such as Richard English and Geir Ulfstein make the case that terrorism is often most effectively dealt with through patient police work and pursuing such illegal activity via criminal prosecution. If this is indeed the case, then perhaps it is worth considering how law enforcement agencies might be reconfigured to deal with the threat posed by ‘dark networks.’ Richard English, “Countering Twenty-First Century Terrorism,” *Political Insight* 6:3 (2015): p. 23; Geir Ulfstein, “Terrorism and the Use of Force,” *Security Dialogue* 34:2 (2003): p. 165.

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