

THREATS

TO PEACE IN IRELAND



Political radicals with criminal connections could re-engage in terrorism in Northern Ireland

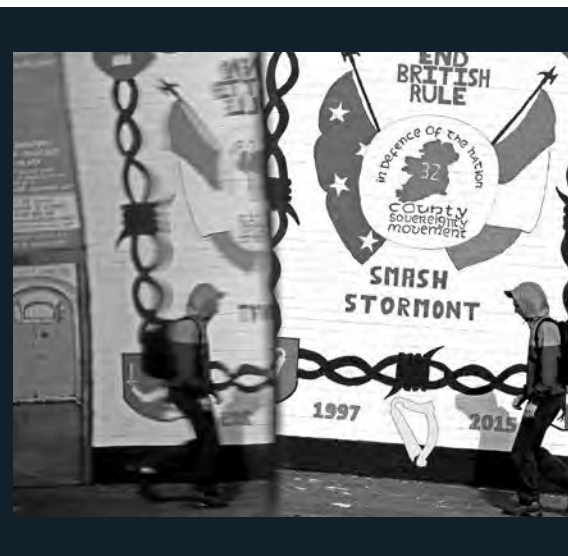
BY CAPT. CHARLES A. UPSHAW

Almost since the beginning of its history, Ireland has suffered seemingly endless conflict. In the latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries, this manifested itself in the Home Rule movement; later, more violently, in the Easter Uprising of 1916; and subsequently in the Irish War of Independence. It was the violent suppression of the Easter Uprising that fanned the flames of republicanism from sporadic violence to open rebellion.

The British, who were more focused on fighting World War I, postponed further devolution and Home Rule, leading to further tensions. Discontent was exacerbated by the fact that tens of thousands of Irishmen died in the trenches fighting in the British Army. Soon after the conclusion of the war, Home Rule was achieved, albeit after the violent and bloody War of Independence between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and British and Loyalist forces. In 1922, the British government signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty that established the Irish Free State while also stipulating the six remaining predominantly Protestant counties of Northern Ireland could choose to remain in the United Kingdom.

The treaty was narrowly approved by the

Irish Parliament, but stark differences of opinion regarding this document created the conditions for continued internal conflict within the newly formed Republic of Ireland. The signatories of the Anglo-Irish Treaty were then viewed by more radical republicans as “sell-outs” who had abandoned the goal of a truly free and independent Ireland. This led to the Irish Civil War between pro- and anti-treaty forces — consisting of the newly formed armed forces of the Irish Free State — and the IRA. It was ultimately won by the Irish Free State, but the desire for the reunification of the entire island has never ceased, especially among the defeated radical republicans, who have always viewed violence as a legitimate means of achieving this goal. Ultimately, John Morrison notes in his book *The Origins and Rise of Dissident Irish Republicanism: The Role and Impact of Organizational Splits*, political divisions were cemented with the creation of the Fine Gael (pro-treaty) and Fianna Fail (anti-treaty) political parties. These two political parties continue to shape the political landscape of Ireland today. Though these historic divisions remain, the desire for reunification remains a prevalent concern for many across the island.



Militant murals in Belfast serve as a reminder of historical sectarian violence as parties began talks in September 2015 to save the power-sharing government. REUTERS

As before, both camps see different means to best achieve that end — either political participation in the institutions of Northern Ireland or violent struggle. This stark contrast is clearly articulated by Feargal Cochrane’s book *Northern Ireland: The Reluctant Peace*:

“One strand has sought ‘constructive engagement’ with Britain and attempted to use the political system to achieve change. ... The other strand of Irish nationalist opinion has adopted a more radical strategy — ignore the formal system, rigged by the powerful to maintain their interests come what may; break the rules; fight dirty if necessary; and build networks from the ground up — networks that will eventually become more powerful and relevant than the former political system.”

This description of the two camps within the republican movement of the 1920s is equally fitting when understanding the various factions that constitute Northern Ireland’s political landscape today. Those who have disavowed violence to achieve change — Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA (PIRA), now participating in the government — and those who have not, have pursued violence in the past as a means to an end.

The violence and bloodshed that followed the formation of the Irish Free State did not cease with its victory against the more radical republican factions. It merely set the conditions for the continuation of the conflict later in the 20th century — namely the “Troubles” of the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, until that time, the Northern Irish government acted primarily to serve the interests of the Protestant majority and its desire to preserve union with the U.K. In that effort however, discrimination against the Catholic minority undercut the very “British values” they claimed to be defending. This, Cochrane writes, enabled republicans to question the legitimacy of the union that loyalists so passionately defended. When the government failed to respond to these grievances, the opportunity for a peaceful resolution passed, and violence persisted until the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998.

Groups associated with the current conflict are divided along ethnic and political lines — republican and loyalist. Republicans are predominantly Catholic, and loyalists are predominantly Protestant. Within these two camps are additional divisions based on commitments to the Good Friday Agreement, in which involved parties disavowed violence in pursuit of political goals. The republican groups who still use violence can be described as “violent dissident republicans” (VDR). The primary VDR groups are the Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA); Óglaigh na hÉireann (ONH), or Volunteers of Ireland; the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA); and Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD). On the loyalist side are the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defense Association (UDA). In addition to extrajudicial killings, many of these groups are involved in money laundering, smuggling and extortion to fund military capabilities over the long term. Essentially, this is how they have been able to maintain and build capability following the large-scale disarmaments after the Good Friday Agreement.

It is important to note that Catholic paramilitary groups previously associated with the PIRA were reportedly tied to the primary republican political party, Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein leadership has repeatedly denied the relationship, but few in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland or the U.K. accept the denial. The Protestant paramilitary group UVF is associated with the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), and the UDA and the Ulster Freedom Fighters are associated with the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP). In contrast to Sinn Fein, the Protestant political parties have openly confirmed their association with these paramilitary groups, former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell recalled in his book *Making Peace* on his role in the peace process. On the surface, it appears that Catholic VDRs are more inclined to use violence to achieve their means than their Protestant counterparts. It is important to note, however, that while the intent and actions of Protestant paramilitary groups have been more peaceful in comparison, they still maintain the capability to carry out operations. Furthermore, while the Good Friday Agreement stands, along with continued union with the U.K., the incentive for Protestant groups to conduct attacks is significantly lower.

Though on the surface the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 has seemingly brought sustained peace to Northern Ireland, the statements and actions of many groups — especially offshoot IRA groups — seem to paint a different picture. In essence, they do not view any of the peace agreements nor institutions founded as a result, as legitimate; therefore, they remain targets. They view them as illegitimate republican efforts to achieve unification through peaceful participation in the government institutions — namely the Northern Irish government, which shares power between Protestant and Catholic parties, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). As John Horgan and John Morrison say in their 2011 article in the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*:

“All of the dissident groups (including the non-violent dissident groups) reject both the Good Friday and St. Andrews agreements. They also reject the acceptance of the PSNI as a legitimate policing force for the six counties of Northern Ireland. Their stated beliefs are that any political settlement short of British withdrawal from Northern Ireland and an independent united Ireland fall too far short of their Irish Republican goals and therefore cannot be used as a justification for the permanent cessation of violence.”

In addition, the 100th anniversary of the Easter Rebellion has increased pressure for VDRs to remain relevant. Since the Good Friday Agreement, the improvement in the daily lives of Irish citizens on both sides of the border is undeniable. Tourism, foreign direct investment and overall confidence in Northern Irish institutions are up, Morrison says. This creates a sort of “peace dividend” for the political parties who govern Northern Ireland by enabling them to demonstrate the real value of cooperation and dialogue as opposed to the violence and chaos that preceded it. This dividend threatens the legitimacy of VDRs because it questions the fundamental value of continued armed struggle. Citizens can ask themselves: Is it worth it to keep fighting? Radical VDR associated groups such Republican Sinn Fein, a



The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was formed in 2001 as a successor to the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The PSNI is one of the new power-sharing institutions established as part of the peace process. AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Mourners attend the funeral of murdered prison officer Adrian Ismay in March 2016 in Belfast. He died of injuries after a booby-trap planted by the “New IRA” exploded under his van. GETTY IMAGES

political organization associated with the CIRA, clearly believe in continued armed struggle as shown in their April 2016 statement commemorating the 1916 Easter Rebellion:

“For Republicans, 1916 remains unfinished business until the last vestiges of British Rule have been removed and the historic Irish Nation is restored to its rightful place among the nations of the earth. ... We pledge our resolve to continue the struggle against British Rule. The Volunteers of the Continuity Irish Republican Army will continue to strike at will at the British forces of occupation. That is the most fitting tribute we can make to the men and women of 1916.”

Based on this statement, the intent of the CIRA and associated organizations is clear — they will continue to use political violence. Furthermore, the “British forces of occupation” described in this statement include the Northern Irish government, which is also composed of republicans who have disavowed violence. VDRs seemingly disregard the fact that successive Northern Irish governments have been elected and supported by a majority of Northern Ireland’s Catholic citizens — an inconvenient fact when trying to justify continued armed struggle as the mantle of true republicanism. Since the Good Friday Agreement, the stark divide between republican elements who joined the peace process and those who do not accept it is ever more evident.

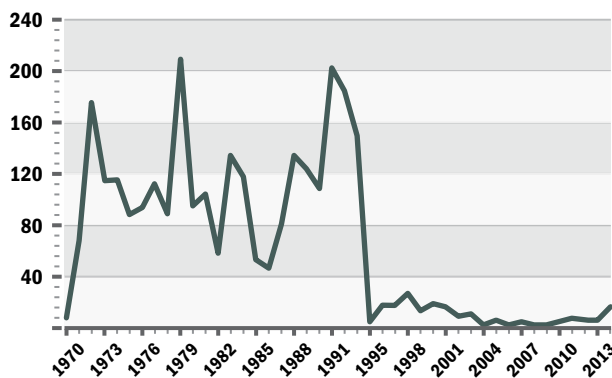
Armed struggle versus peaceful participation in Northern Ireland’s institutions are two strikingly different means to an end that can be demonstrated to the voting public. Furthermore, the pressure of anniversaries along with the continued relatively successful power-sharing agreement between opposing parties increases the pressure of VDR groups to either lay down their arms or increase activity and resume kinetic operations.

When analyzing levels of terrorist-related activity post-Good Friday Agreement, there are two opposing assessments.

The first is that the agreement brought overall peace — and more specifically a significant drop in terrorism. Alternatively, other studies show significant increases in activity among VDR groups. The first viewpoint is

clearly evident in data collected by the Global Terrorism Database, which shows a significant drop in activity as peace negotiations commenced in the mid-1990s. This is consistent with the widely held view that the peace process has an overall net-positive effect on lowering the violence. Following this drop in activity, data collected indicate that residual terrorist activity still exists, albeit conducted primarily by splinter groups not associated with the PIRA or Sinn Fein. Who conducted the attacks is not what is in contention — what is, however, is the overall level of activity, which is drastically higher in other studies.

Irish Republican Terrorism 1970-2014

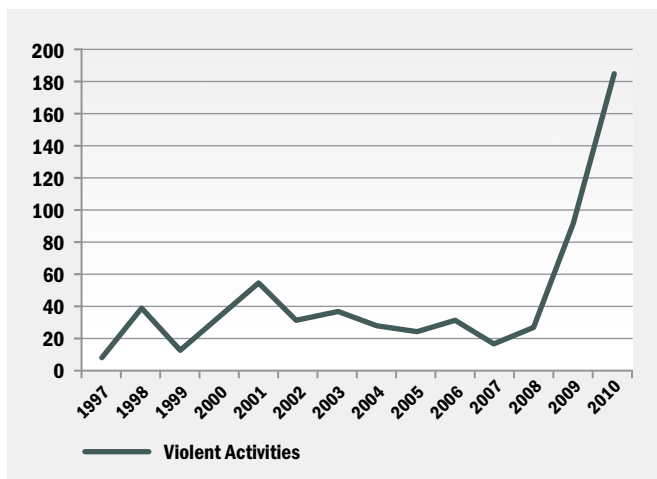


Source: Global Terrorism Database, 2016

Contradictory to these trends, data collected through the Violent Dissident Republican Project by Dr. John Morrison and Dr. John Horgan identify sharp increases in violence toward the end of 2009-2010. According to Dr. Horgan, data collected by the Global Terrorism Database, along with information generally cited by the U.K. and Northern Irish governments, are not complete and do not truly reflect the level of VDR activity. In addition, the scope of activity reflected by most government figures is more than 400 percent lower than what was found through other research. Detail Data, a Belfast-based research organization, has released figures indicating that between 2006 and 2016, VDRs were responsible for over 1,700 violent acts and over 4,000 reports of local citizens being forced to flee their homes.

These analyses also contradict statements made by U.K. Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Theresa Villiers. Following a government review of paramilitary activity, she told the House of Commons in 2015 that while the IRA and VDRs were still organized militarily, they posed no real threat to the peace process and were probably not able to reconstitute the capability they once held. According to an October 2015 article in *The New York Times*, these conclusions were drawn from assessments by MI5, the U.K.'s domestic intelligence service, along with Northern Ireland's top police official, Chief Constable George Hamilton.

Violent Dissident Republican Activities 1997-2010



Source: Violent Dissident Republican Project, Dr. John Morrison and Dr. John Horgan

The types of activity analyzed in the VDR Project research include:

- Shootings and punishment attacks
- Defused bomb incidents
- Hoax incidents
- Detonated bomb incidents
- Petrol bomb incidents
- Assaults
- Violent riots
- Arson incidents
- Violent robberies

Furthermore, based on statements by leaders within Northern Ireland's government, calls for dialogue and discussion with VDR groups elevate their status above criminals. For example, Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland Martin McGuinness, a former PIRA member, told U-TV News in April 2016:

"I don't know how many times in the past I have offered to meet with them, and none of them have so far had the courage to come into a room to meet with me. ... I'm up for that conversation; people who are involved in these groups have to have some semblance of recognition that the very limited activities that they're involved in are totally futile."

Based on these statements, the government clearly views these groups as terrorists regardless of their involvement in criminal activity. In addition, it demonstrates the government's view that their activities do in fact threaten national security, perhaps existentially, if they are successful in hindering the peace process and the successful shared governing arrangement of Northern Ireland. The threat of continued VDR violence brings the two mainstream camps together — republican and loyalist. This in turn reinforces the perception among VDRs that Sinn Fein and mainstream republicans have sold out on "true republicanism" and become agents of the "British occupation." This is compounded by the fact that Sinn Fein has accepted the PSNI as a legitimate state institution. This is key to understanding because, based on the analysis conducted under the VDR Project, activity by radical groups is essentially tied to action taken by mainstream republicans.

The more committed mainstream republican parties are to the peace process and Northern Irish institutions, VDRs become more committedly opposed to them and inclined to assert claims as the legitimate heirs to the Easter Uprising. The less represented by mainstream republican leaders they feel, the more easily they are able to separate themselves and demonstrate how different they actually are — both in terms of rhetoric and action. This creates a situation where mainstream republicans could be outflanked by these more radical groups, similar to when political parties in any country are outflanked by more conservative or liberal challengers, forcing more moderate candidates to react or risk losing their base of support. Were this effect to happen within Northern Ireland's republican political movements, it could not only endanger the current power-sharing agreement, it could also legitimize the actions of more radical VDR groups. Already, many VDRs and like-minded individuals view Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams with disdain equal to that directed at former British conservative Prime Minister David Cameron. This level of ill-will toward the two standard bearers of the Irish republican movement is significant and could be capitalized on to expand the support base of VDR groups.

Though more mainstream republican groups laid down arms and participated in the Good Friday Agreement, large-scale organized crime has seemingly continued, both within them and the VDRs. This serves as a key financier of

operations both north and south of the border. According to *Forbes* magazine, in 2014 the IRA was rated one of the top 10 richest terrorist organizations, with an annual income of \$50 million per year. This puts it in the same league as Boko Haram, al-Shabaab and ISIS in terms of criminal activity and networks. Morrison assesses some VDR groups as having in excess of \$500,000 in their operating budget with an annual income of over \$2 million. Recent activities have reportedly included smuggling, fuel laundering, drug dealing, tobacco and alcohol smuggling, and armed robbery, in addition to continued international financial support from sympathetic diaspora communities in the United States and elsewhere. According to the U.S. State Department, advanced weaponry has been also acquired through criminal networks in the Balkans — a potentially dangerous development if any VDR plans a significant buildup of military capability intending to conduct a spectacular attack. Though criminal activity by VDRs is conducted under the mantle of republicanism, it is often not the case, Morrison points out. Rivalries between paramilitary groups and gangs have led to violence, fueling further divisions and continued violence. Furthermore, involvement in widespread criminal activity has enabled rival VDRs to disparage each other to declare themselves as “true” republicans such as when a CIRA member told Morrison: “The only difference between the Continuity IRA and the Real IRA: With the Real IRA, all the top men, all they were doing all their life was smuggling diesel and cigarettes.”

This situation also exacerbates the competition between mainstream republicans and VDRs. Sinn Fein has taken this opportunity to highlight the difference between itself and VDRs. Former PIRA leader and current Northern Ireland Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness said in a 2013 speech to a Sinn Fein party assembly: “Whatever else about those groups responsible, it is obvious that they have now been swamped by ruthless criminal elements with an island-wide network.” Furthermore, Ireland has seen the rise of additional criminal vigilante groups such as Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD), a Derry-based group that claims to fight illegal drug dealers in predominantly republican areas. In their fight against the drug dealers, they have employed similar tactics to those used in the paramilitary violence of the Troubles, such as kneecappings, banishment, assassination and attacks on the homes of suspected drug dealers with weapons such as pipe bombs. These actions make RAAD the most consistently violent of any VDR group, which Morrison says enable it to undermine and claim the authority vested in the PSNI as the protectors of the population.

Through the centenary of the Easter Uprising, there has been a concerted effort to unite VDRs under an overarching republican movement nonaligned to the mainstream groups adhering to the Good Friday Agreement. The intent is to focus the divided groups on a single effort to sustain the armed campaign against mainstream republicans and the U.K. In 2012, the groups formed a single “Army Council” that claims to speak for the united front. In its statement, the intentions of the group are clear:

“Following extensive consultations, Irish republicans and a number of organisations involved in armed actions against the armed forces of the British crown have come together within a unified structure, under a single leadership, subservient to the constitution of the Irish Republican Army. The leadership of the Irish Republican Army remains committed to the full realisation of the ideals and principles enshrined in the Proclamation of 1916. In recent years the establishment of a free and independent Ireland has suffered setbacks due to the failure among the leadership of Irish nationalism and fractures within republicanism. The root cause of conflict in our country is the subversion of the nation’s inalienable right to self-determination and this has yet to be addressed. Instead the Irish people have been sold a phony peace, rubber-stamped by a token legislature in Stormont. Non-conformist republicans are being subjected to harassment, arrest and violence by the forces of the British crown; others have been interned on the direction of an English overlord. It is Britain, not the IRA, which has chosen provocation and conflict. The IRA’s mandate for armed struggle derives from Britain’s denial of the fundamental right of the Irish people to national self-determination and sovereignty — so long as Britain persists in its denial of national and democratic rights in Ireland the IRA will have to continue to assert those rights. The necessity of armed struggle in pursuit of Irish freedom can be avoided through the removal of the British military presence in our country, the dismantling of their armed militias and the declaration of an internationally observed timescale that details the dismantling of British political interference in our country.”

This is significant because it indicates a concerted effort to unite various splintered groups into a single command capable of carrying out violence in the name of republicanism. This not only would enable VDRs to share resources, but it could also minimize rivalries and the inter-VDR violence that has plagued many groups in recent years.

The situation in Northern Ireland remains complex with the potential to erupt into violence once again. The more successful the power-sharing arrangement between mainstream republicans and loyalists is, the incentive for VDRs to act to destabilize the situation rises, as their legitimacy depends on action. Furthermore, the convergence between VDRs and criminal networks allows these groups to gain access to more deadly weapons and equipment, enabling them to build capability to conduct large-scale attacks. Though, since the Omagh bombing of 1998, this has not materialized, the capability and intent remain and must be taken seriously.

Furthermore, smaller VDRs have unified their command structures into a single “Army Council,” with the intent of pooling resources — a dangerous development if action matches the rhetoric. Though differing assessments of overall activity make it difficult to determine the true level of terrorist threat in Northern Ireland, based on statements from VDRs, along with their residual paramilitary capability and capacity to acquire weapons and material, it is more likely that terrorism will rise in the future. □



People of mixed ethnic backgrounds attend a tribute in July 2016 honoring a French priest murdered by terrorists associated with the Islamic State. One way to counter extremist messaging is to de-emphasize religious conflict in the media. REUTERS