

Changing Political Context and Violence in Northern Ireland

Violence in Northern Ireland has been a common occurrence for centuries until a little over 20 years ago with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. That agreement brought unstable peace to a region that had been experiencing political violence and terrorism between Catholic groups and Protestant groups for years. In recent months, the reemergence of the nationalist group, the New Irish Republican Army (IRA), and of violence is facing severe backlash from populations that 25 years ago would have supported it. Therefore, the New IRA's utilization of common guerilla tactics from the Troubles – such as bombings, rioting, and attacking police forces – is not working. The group has not considered the political, social, and economic changes the citizens of Northern Ireland, specifically Derry, have experienced since the formalization of the Good Friday Agreement. Consequently, the New IRA is failing to receive support from Catholic populations because they no longer share a group identity of marginalization and the cost – benefit analysis of supporting such activity has shifted. This failure to gain the support of a population they claim to represent will hurt recruitment efforts in the long term.

On September 10th, police forces found an improvised explosive device that the New IRA placed in the predominately Catholic neighborhood of Creggan Heights. During the search for the bomb, a crowd of an estimated 60 to 100 young people attack police by throwing Molotov cocktails and various other objects at them. In the aftermath of the violence, residents of the neighborhood voiced their disapproval stating that the attack had no justification and that the New IRA is, “not listening to the community” it is claiming to fight for. This is a shift from the historical norm. During the Troubles, this neighborhood, colloquial known as the bogside, was a stronghold of the IRA being called Free Derry and the host to many IRA funerals. The response to this attack proves the success that the Irish peace process has had in the last 20 years and it

proves that Northern Irish society has undergone an evolution. It is a lack of understanding of this shift that has caused the New IRA to be unable to gain civilian support.

Groups of marginalized individuals will demonstrate support for terrorists (or groups inclined to political violence) after the results of a cost – benefit analysis suggests that the benefits of supporting a group outweighs the costs. Collier and Hoeffler describe in their article that a population will offer support to terrorist groups when the benefits of doing so are greater than the opportunity costs (2004). Therefore, similar to Martha Crenshaw's idea of terrorism, support for terrorism is rational and also can be fluid. In the case of Northern Ireland, the cost – benefit analysis of supporting nationalist violence has shifted since the end of the Troubles. This is because of increased representation and civil rights for Irish-Catholics in Northern Ireland. The New IRA has failed to realize this and adjust its tactics accordingly. Moreover, this demonstrates that Catholic populations are not as disenfranchised or discriminated against as they once were. For example, the Northern Irish police force, the PSNI, has developed a quota system to ensure that the ratio of Protestant officers to Catholic officers is reflective of the country's population. Furthermore, their devolved government is structured so that a Unionist (the predominately Protestant party) and a Republican (the predominately Catholic party) share joint control. Therefore, no longer is the IRA the most beneficial option for Irish-Catholics to be politically involved. Furthermore, this proves that residents of the Creggan Heights are no longer experiencing the same group relative deprivation that they did throughout the 20th century. This is beneficial in understanding why, contrary to history, the people of the bogside are voicing their displeasure with the activities of the New IRA. In his article, Piazza argues that minority groups experiencing marginalization, especially economic discrimination, are more likely to give their support to terrorist groups. The biases experienced by these groups enforces the "us versus

them” mentality and feelings of relative deprivation that are crucial to such support (Piazza, 2011). When you combine Collier and Hoeffler’s (2004) and Piazza’s (2011) theories on the likeliness of support for terrorism it becomes clear the New IRA was going to be unable to gain support for their actions before they even began. More so, the recent increase violence caused by the group could hurt future recruitment endeavors.

The New IRA’s misunderstanding of how social, political, and economic factors have evolved that has translated into a lack of support for the organization that will ultimately hurt their recruitment efforts as well. As Horgan explained in his essay, external and internal factors – pull and push respectively – can motive an individual to join a violent, political group. Furthermore, he states that recruitment is a process of communication between recruits and members of an organization (Horgan 2008). In Northern Ireland, the message being sent by increases of violence from the New IRA is negatively impacting the pull factors of the group. Ideology is meant to be viewed as “pure” in the eyes of interested members, therefore, the New IRA is diluting their cause by planting bombs in innocent neighborhoods and attack a police force that is no longer viewed as the enemy (Horgan 2008). As previously mentioned, the internal push factor of marginalization is not as strong as it once was. Therefore, the New IRA should be investigating a new identifying characteristic to rally behind, but they are not. Furthermore, another crucial piece to recruitment is the utilization of social networks (Horgan 2008). During the Troubles, families and religious community would glorify members of the IRA as heroes which encourage young people to become involved in nationalist activities. Furthermore, once within these circles, in search of social desirability these individuals would begin to join politically violent groups (the IRA) (della Porta 1988). Examining the response to the Creggan Height bomb attempt and riot, it becomes clear that members of violent nationalist

groups are no longer being praised. Social desirability is a quality that transcend history, so still in search of it, individuals will no longer seek out involvement in such organizations.

When the factors that increase the likeliness of civilian support for terrorism, it becomes clear that New IRA is failing. They have misunderstood or are unwilling to accept that Northern Irish society has dramatically changed over the past two decades and that Catholic populations are not as marginalized as they once were. These evolutions have resulted in a shift in the manner that the citizens of Northern Ireland, specifically those who historically have supported nationalist violence, to re-calculate their own cost – benefit analysis of support the IRA. Furthermore, regardless of their long-term goals, the organization’s inability to garner civilian support will hurt their ability to recruit. If the violence of the New IRA is admonished by the majority of Catholics, as it was in Creggan Heights, social networks will no longer encourage individuals to join the movement. In summation, the recent bomb attempt in Creggan Heights and the subsequent riot has done more harm to the organization than good. If the New IRA wants to be successful in the future, they will find it best to reevaluate the current social climate and find a strategy that tilts civilians’ cost – benefit analyses to their favor.

Links to Information on the Creggan Bomb Attempt and Background Information on Northern Ireland:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-49645178> - Creggan Bomb Attempt

<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21333.pdf> - A reference that explains current climate of Northern Ireland.