

A Paradoxical Peace in Northern Ireland

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The conflict in Northern Ireland was considered intractable. After it partitioned from the rest of Ireland in 1921, the region's tensions were exacerbated by political, social, and economic inequalities that mixed with deeply rooted elements of ethno-national identity and religious affiliation. Over forty years ago, the situation escalated into violence from both state and non-state actors, which further inflamed long-standing grievances, existential fears, and collective victimhood. Accusations of terrorism, occupation, racism, and oppression were heard on all sides.

Today, it is called a success story— an example of conflict management in action. As someone involved in a different intractable conflict (one between Israelis and Palestinians), I recently turned to Northern Ireland to understand its process of transition, with the hope of gaining case knowledge and practitioner skills that might be applicable to the Middle Eastern context. To support this endeavor, my master's thesis examines the factors that drove Northern Ireland toward peace.

For three months, I was based in Belfast at a cross-border NGO called Cooperation Ireland and interned with the Irish Peace Centres (IPC), a project that aims to increase the effectiveness, coordination, and relevance of civil society peacebuilding efforts. The staff of Cooperation Ireland and IPC welcomed my involvement in practitioner trainings and program activities, as well as my input into strategy discussions. They also granted me much flexibility and assistance in conducting independent research.¹

Peace without Reconciliation?

Like many outsiders to Northern Ireland, I considered the current status of the political environment to be “post-conflict,” but once I arrived, I understood that the conflict is still very present on the ground, though primarily nonviolent. The most significant indicators of this I encountered were the sectarianism and conflicting political aspirations that continue to divide society. These manifestations of the conflict lead local residents to refer to their situation with more nuanced language, such as “post-agreement.” Another important aspect of the local language was

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the particular usage of the words “Catholic” and “Protestant.” While foreigners often use these terms to identify the sides in conflict, the communities refer to themselves with labels of political ideology more than religion: the Nationalist and Republican communities (who are mostly Catholic) identify as Irish, while the Unionist and Loyalist communities (who are mostly Protestant) identify as British.

Societal Divisions

Although hundreds of local institutions have worked successfully to break down social and economic walls between communities, the reality is that tensions and divisions are still tangible. In fact, more separation barriers have been built than torn down in Belfast since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Although the vast majority of politicians prefer to tear them down,² they feel that the time is not yet ripe for their removal, citing insufficient political and community infrastructure to manage tense interface areas.³ As explained by Duncan Morrow of Northern Ireland’s Community Relations Council, “the walls went up because people didn’t feel safe, and the tragedy is that once they are up, people hardly imagine feeling safe without them.”⁴ Accordingly, 60 percent of interface residents in 2008 did not feel secure enough to remove the barriers, though 81 percent felt that the walls should eventually come down.⁵ Divisions also permeate education, with 94 percent of children attending separate schools, and the resource-strapped, integrated schools turning away 500 students each year.⁶ The result is that most social integration begins only in adulthood and usually correlates with education level via universities, civil service, and the private sector, which are bound by anti-discrimination regulations. However, the extent to which these academic and professional encounters translate into broader social cohesion is unclear.

Beyond separation, it is sectarianism that suggests a lack of reconciliation. This sectarianism is manifested in nationalistic and paramilitary symbols, such as flags, banners, and murals that mark territory, honor fallen comrades, and arouse exclusivist sentiments. Sectarian affiliations are also visible in politics, as most elected parties define themselves by Unionist/Loyalist or Nationalist/Republican interests, though the new Alliance Party deviates from this norm and has gained small but unprecedented ground in local elections. In addition, Northern Ireland’s population of two million sees four thousand parades every year, over half of which are organized by the Protestant Orange Order and have led to counter-demonstrations, as I witnessed in the July 2010 riots. Mechanisms to mitigate confrontation exist, such as the Parades Commission, which is tasked with regulating contentious parades. However, the mechanisms are not fail-safe, and



One of many paramilitary murals I passed on my daily walk to the office.

political discontent on both sides has instigated calls for the Commission's dissolution.

Same Goals, Different Strategy

The observations above point to an intriguing paradox that characterizes the peace in Northern Ireland: the sides have not resolved their political differences, and yet the violence is over. For the most part, Nationalists/Republicans still want to end British sovereignty and join the Republic of Ireland, while Unionists/Loyalists still seek a stronger, permanent position in the United Kingdom. Their political aspirations are still in conflict. Moreover, the collective accounts of history, injustices, and rights are still wholly contradictory and have not been reconciled. In my view, this makes their commitments to peace and cooperation all the more impressive. Warring groups that deeply distrusted each other have committed themselves to nonviolence and continue to honor that commitment.

Is it possible that Northern Ireland is a case of peace *without* reconciliation? With so much collaboration among former adversaries, it is hard to believe that reconciliation is entirely absent. On the leadership level, the most polarized political parties (Sinn Féin and the Democratic Ulster Party), who at one time refused to sit in the same room, now co-govern a power-sharing executive and maintain solid support in the legislature. Throughout Belfast, ex-paramilitary leaders have become "community activists" who jointly solve neighborhood problems and disperse street violence before they escalate. Several ex-combatants described to me their new roles in preventing youth from following in their footsteps by de-romanticizing the violent struggle of the past and by providing alternative ways to serve their causes, from playing flute in a marching band to assisting poverty reduction projects. The violent incidents that remain are condemned by all major factions and organized only by fringe groups of anti-agreement dissidents on the Republican side⁷ and residual, protectionist allegiances on the Loyalist side. Political violence is treated as a shared challenge, typically accompanied by meetings with community activists and jointly assigned to the newly integrated police force.

David Bloomfield argues that Northern Ireland's transition represents two kinds of reconciliation: a top-down, political reconciliation followed by grassroots, interpersonal relationship-building.⁸ Indeed, grassroots reconciliation efforts have blossomed in the post-agreement phase, with various governments and EU bodies channeling over a billion Euros into peacebuilding programs alone. Surveys show that inter-community relations and attitudes have improved over the past decade. For example, in 2011, two-thirds of the public expressed a "willingness" to transform their local schools into integrated ones.⁹ While conflicting political aspirations remain, their vehemence may be lessening. Yet, given the remaining societal divisions and the sectarian sentiments regularly inflamed, not all peacebuilding work has been effective.¹⁰

Regardless of the situation today, the official negotiations in 1997 and 1998, which culminated in the Good Friday Agreement, were not preceded by significant, grassroots reconciliation. Instead, peace was made on the political level by political

and paramilitary leaders, each with their constituents' approval. Unlike dreaded compromises that may be expected from peace deals, the agreement did not require the sides to abandon their historic causes or to alter their conflicting visions of the State. As mentioned earlier, each side's political aspirations remained the same when they agreed on peace, but their strategies for achieving them changed. In other words, the reconciliation that occurred during the peace process in Northern Ireland may be more aptly identified as a reconciliation of strategies, where the parties replaced their armed campaigns with political ones as their primary means.

With consistent years of peaceful politics and improved relations, the deep commitment from all major groups to a nonviolent pursuit of their goals remains strong. Despite many frustrations with the current political system, the public and its leaders do not wish to return to the pre-peace years. In 2005 and 2007, the IRA and Loyalist paramilitaries announced their transitions from military to civilian, political organizations¹¹ and have since handed over the vast majority of their weapons.¹² In 2010, 83 percent of the public reported that local "politicians should be working with others in different communities so that there is compromise and reconciliation."¹³ The people of Northern Ireland have bought into the path of non-violence and are continuing to cement it.

How Did They Get There?

Inspired by the idea that such reconciliation could transpire and persist, I began searching for the factors that produced this phenomenon and the elements that have preserved it. I attended conflict management forums like the Parades Commission and community dialogues on pressing issues, such as truth recovery and amnesty. I conducted thirty interviews with people intimately involved in the conflict and peace process, including primary parties (e.g. former paramilitary leaders, and members, and security personnel); secondary parties (e.g. Catholic and Protestant clergy, and government negotiators); and third parties (e.g. media personnel, and peacebuilding practitioners).¹⁴

The interviewees, particularly ex-combatants, exhibited extraordinary openness as they described their journeys from conflict to peace. Unfortunately, several of them described a common experience with outside researchers who "take and leave" and never follow-up after their interviews. Despite this occurrence, people were willing to share their time and life stories with yet another researcher. I tried to be as transparent as possible about my objectives in collecting data, going beyond academia and seeking lessons that could be applied to the Middle East.

In the interviews, my questions focused on key factors that pushed the major factions away from violence. Why did they shift their strategies to nonviolent politics? I was less interested in factors that brought them to the negotiating table (since repeated rounds of talks are not a new phenomenon in the Middle East), and more interested in factors that instigated their commitment to peaceful strategies. The research project is

ongoing, and it is important to note that certain groups have not yet been interviewed, particularly the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and official British negotiators. Accordingly, the reflections below touch on my initial impressions and are by no means a definitive analysis of the research.

Preliminary Findings: Early Impressions

The shift away from violence in Northern Ireland did not reflect an ideological transformation to the principle of nonviolence, but resulted from strategic calculations. Both Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries, as well as the British government, reassessed their strategies and adopted the view that force was no longer the best option for advancing their objectives; a political path needed to be paved.

Based on the raw data collected from interviews, observations, and informal conversations, six prevalent themes emerged as driving factors in each side's internal process of strategic change. Below are some preliminary findings that merit further research.

1. *Prison Experience.* I was surprised to hear a common phenomenon that occurred in prison among paramilitaries on both sides. For a variety of reasons, former members and leaders of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and Red Hand Commando (RHC) reported that their reassessment of the conflict and their reformulation of strategies occurred in prison. Upon their release, these men were able to retain credibility in their communities while advocating for positive change.
2. *Existing Alternative Strategy.* Before the ceasefires and official negotiations of the 1990s, both Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries had an existing alternative to violence in the form of electoral politics; they had functioning parties to represent them (Sinn Fein for the IRA, Progressive Unionist Party for the UVF/RHC, and the Ulster Democratic Party for the UDA). Considering a different strategy (rather than a different objective) enabled communities to abandon their violent struggle without abandoning their cause or betraying their comrades.
3. *Patron States.* Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland played an integral role in nurturing the peace process by positioning themselves as secondary parties with a common agenda. Their sustained, coordinated, and intimate involvement through private backchannels and public gestures helped build groups' confidence in the capacity of each patron to deliver results and fostered flexibility in the process. They did this by providing legitimacy to local actors and reassurances at pivotal junctions.
4. *Perceived Stalemate.* In the late 1980s and 1990s, there was a growing realization among Republican and Loyalist movements, as well as the British government, that neither the paramilitaries nor state security forces could win

by force. The army and police could not quell Republicanism, the IRA/INLA could not expel the British, and the UVF/UDA/RHC could not deter the IRA/INLA. This perceived stalemate nurtured a ripeness to seek alternative strategies and to consider political accommodation as a way out of the status quo.

5. *Credible Third Party*. The U.S. granted unprecedented legitimacy to the parties and to the peace process. George Mitchell's tactics at the negotiating table enabled inclusive, face-saving, and reliable talks for all willing parties. In addition, Gerry Adams' controversial visa to the U.S. elevated the Republican cause internationally and provided proof to the IRA of the benefits and viability of diplomacy.
6. *Civil Society*. Trusted local clergy as well as peacebuilding NGOs provided an important space for Track 1.5 diplomacy. They facilitated backchannels and face-to-face meetings that fostered information-sharing, re-framing of issues, and relationship-building within mid-level and senior leadership. Civil society organizations also supported ex-prisoner reintegration into their communities and garnered public support for the referendum.

These themes provide guidance for deeper examination of their influence on the peace process. The challenge is to verify the extent of their impact on driving change in the region. Beyond Northern Ireland, the potential application of these factors to other conflicts is intriguing and requires a careful assessment of comparability and relevance.

Individual Transformation: Facilitating Ex-Combatants

In addition to the research above, I was privileged to participate in several skill-building programs for conflict practitioners during the summer. One highlight was a sequence of facilitation trainings in the remote Wicklow Mountains at the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, known for its Track II and Track 1.5 diplomatic dialogues that have supported local and international peace processes. I joined a group of ex-combatants and civilian survivors for two retreats at Glencree. The organizers aimed to create a network of trusted facilitators, all trained in the same methodology of conflict transformation, called Journey through Conflict (JtC). JtC was developed over ten years of practice by Alistair Little (a former paramilitary combatant and prisoner) and Wilhelm Verwoerd (a South African peace practitioner and academic from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission).¹⁵ It is an interpersonal process designed to help participants understand the human cost of violence and the choices that lead to it. The model uses the following three elements: "Life Histories, Deep Dialogue, and Nature-based Activities" (including team survival work).

At Glencree, the trainings reflected Alistair and Wilhelm's view that a conflict practitioner should first experience the process as a participant before facilitating it for others. Accordingly, our group embarked on the first phase of JtC with sessions of structured "storytelling." As the only participant foreign to this context, I was unsure

how my American background and Israeli affiliation would be received; however, the process was able to validate all of our personal histories. I was deeply humbled by the experiences in the room, as people described their courageous transition to positive relations after horrific encounters with violence.

Their stories sparked my optimism about the universal capacity of combatants and survivors to change the nature of their relations. Incidentally, several officials I interviewed in my research mentioned the role that optimism played in the Northern Irish peace process during the early 1990s. They reported that exposure to the positive changes of South Africa and the Oslo Accords gave negotiators and some paramilitary leaders added confidence in their ability to change their own status quo. Apparently, this provided an additional source of motivation.

Sectarian Solidarity with Palestinians and Israelis

Finally, it is worth mentioning the unyielding affiliation of communities in Northern Ireland with Israelis and Palestinians, which I had not anticipated. In general, Nationalists/Republicans tend to identify intensely with Palestinians, and Unionists/Loyalists with Israelis. It was even possible to determine the sectarian nature of the neighborhoods I entered based solely on the Israeli or Palestinian flags that hung from their windows. Such poignant solidarity raises a question about the effect that groups in Northern Ireland could have on their designated counterparts in the Middle East, from the grassroots level to the negotiating table. Is there a role to be played by Northern Irish ex-combatants who express solidarity with Israelis or Palestinians, yet who also exemplify a successful transition to peace?

The case of Northern Ireland reveals that opposing narratives and political goals do not need to negate the drastic, systemic changes required to make peace. The conflict still exists, but the fighting is over, as the parties use politics rather than violence to achieve their long-standing goals. This reconciliation of strategies may be less ambitious than what is often pursued by conflict resolution practitioners, but its success can provide a useful lens for viewing other conflicts. Of course, the long-term durability of implementing peace in Northern Ireland is not yet known, and the peace that was made certainly required additional reinforcement. Nonetheless, neither inter-communal tensions nor residual violence, have reversed the past thirteen years of progress since the Good Friday Agreement. It is a remarkable story of individual and communal change, and I am grateful to have been exposed to it and to have met those playing an active role in preserving the peace. I hope that my future work will accurately represent their achievements and contribute to channels for optimism in the Middle East.

Endnotes

- 1 Special thanks is due to Senator Mark Daly, Peter Sheridan, and Laura Stewart of Cooperation Ireland for their generosity in supporting my internship and research. I am also grateful to the entire staff of the Irish Peace Centres and Cooperation Ireland for their

- hospitality, warmth, and encouragement.
- 2 Macauley, Tony. "Cracks in the Peace Walls," Irish Peace Centres Newsletter, Issue 4 (March 2011).
 - 3 The word "interface" is widely used in Northern Ireland and refers to the de facto fault lines between adjacent Loyalist and Republican neighborhoods.
 - 4 Jefferson, Louise. *Belfast: Walls & Barriers - Symbols of Separation*. Published by Louise Jefferson in association with The Irish World (2010).
 - 5 Macauley, Tony. "A Discussion Paper Proposing a Five Phase Process for the Removal of 'Peace Walls' in Northern Ireland," Macauley Associates Network (July 2008). http://www.macauleyassociates.co.uk/pdfs/peace_wall.pdf.
 - 6 Small, Brian. Meeting with the author. Belfast, Northern Ireland (July 2010).
 - 7 These are small off-shoots of the Provisional IRA who call themselves "Real IRA" and "Continuity IRA."
 - 8 Bloomfield, David. "On Good Terms: Clarifying Reconciliation," *Berghof Report* 14 (Oct 2006). <http://www.berghof-conflictresearch.org/documents/publications/br14e.pdf>.
 - 9 Ipsos MORI. "Attitudinal Survey on Integrated Education: Report commissioned by the Integrated Education Fund" (March 2011). <http://www.ief.org.uk/archive/Publications/Attitudinal%20Survey%20Final%20Report.PDF>.
 - 10 Paffenholz, Thania. "Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment," Lynne Rienner Publishers (2010).
 - 11 IRA Endgame Statement (2005); UVF, RHC, and UDA Endgame Statements (2007).
 - 12 *Final Report of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning* (4 July 2011) <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/decommission/iicd040711.pdf>.
 - 13 *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* (2010) http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2010/Political_Attitudes/COMPREC.html.
 - 14 Sincere gratitude is extended to Reverend Gary Mason of the East Belfast Mission for his kind and generous assistance with interviews.
 - 15 Alistair Little's personal journey in the UVF was depicted by Liam Neeson in the film, *Five Minutes of Heaven*, based on Little's autobiographical book, *Give a Boy a Gun* (Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2009). Wilhelm Verwoerd's transition to human rights activism as the Afrikaner grandson of an apartheid prime minister is detailed in his autobiography, *My Winds of Change* (Ravan Press, 1997).