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"From Terrorists to Peacekeepers": The IRA's Disengagement and the Role of Community Networks

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Utilising interviews with former IRA members, Loyalists and community workers, the article looks at how militants in Northern Ireland have helped to prevent terrorism and political violence (TPV) by adopting roles in the community. Utilising mobile phones, a network of former combatants emerged around interface areas in the late 1990s to contain trigger causes of terrorism, providing a unique role that the state could not. The structure of the network encouraged *militant groups to follow the IRA's example to disengage* – thus creating a domino effect – and the co-operation between senior militants has limited the opportunities for other groups to mobilise a campaign of terrorism.

Keywords   Disengagement, terrorism, Northern Ireland, IRA

Introduction

Throughout the late 1990s up until now, [Provisional] Irish Republican Army (IRA) volunteers have played a crucial role in reducing the opportunities of violence re-emerging that could disrupt the peace process in Northern Ireland. As the IRA gradual disengaged, networks of former combatants developed, particularly in interface areas where the Republican and Loyalist communities met. When the police could not contain and de-escalate violence at flashpoints, IRA volunteers working in a community role would be encouraged by police officers to enter these areas and use their influence to bring an end to the violence. Furthermore, almost ten years since the IRA formally disbanded, senior figures of the (former) IRA continue to meet with Loyalist paramilitary leaders to act as an early warning system to prevent violence from erupting. Given Horgan's observation that involvement in terrorism can end through role-change, it seems reasonable to claim that the IRA's disengagement has been successfully completed through a transition in roles from "terrorists to peacekeepers"[1].

Much research has been written on the disengagement of militants into political structures or reintegrated back into civilian life, but little has been written with regard to disengagement into a social network involved in community activism, let alone into a de-facto policing and counter-terrorism capacity. While the last point may be controversial, the role of former combatants in the networks that the article will analyse does, perhaps without the intent, serve to prevent terrorism and political violence (TPV). The article will explain how this form of disengagement manifested, how it has functioned to prevent violence and create a domino effect among other militant groups, and whether it should be encouraged in the context of countering TPV. Drawing on a series of interviews conducted in Belfast, the article focuses on a specific type of community activism that emerged in the context of the Northern Irish peace process: the mobile phones network in Belfast interface areas. The mobile phones network is the name given to network of community workers and former combatants that sprung up around interface areas, brought together in part by the growing use of mobile phone technology in the late 1990s. Since then, this network has expanded to include ex-prisoner groups and conflict transformation groups, including both Republican and Loyalists. Although there have been excellent studies that have analysed terrorism activity as networks[2], this approach has been more sparingly applied to the disengagement process, despite the dismantlement of groups leaving behind a residue of social networks which still remain politically active.

While the article situates itself within the terrorism literature, it is informed by insights from conflict studies. Mainstream research on disarmament, de-mobilisation and re-integration (DDR) has generally taken a similar perspective to terrorist disengagement insofar as the end-goal has been to integrate disengaging combatants into state structures and/or to transform them into obedient, passive citizens of the state[3]. However, DDR research on Northern Ireland has demonstrated how former combatants can play an active role in conflict transformation through community activism[4]. The literature on preventing terrorism has recognised the salience of community-based approaches[5] but they remain silent on the role that disengaged combatants can play in community activism to help prevent terrorism. The literature on terrorism prevention recognises that a 'radical milieu' may exist - which is a community that tends to be supportive or sympathetic to a campaign of TPV – and preventative strategies are aimed at this section of the community[6]. Recognising the difficulties that a state has in engaging with the 'radical milieu', prevention strategies have sought to empower community leaders to counter the narratives that underpin support for a

TPV campaign. Yet, as the DDR literature shows, it is often disengaged combatants who have the most credibility within this 'radical milieu'. The 'radical milieu' in Northern Ireland - which is sometimes most prevalent in interface areas between Republican and Loyalist communities - is a site of contestation between armed Republicans, (militarily) disengaged Republicans and Loyalist paramilitaries. Therefore, the involvement of former combatants in the community can weaken the opportunities for armed Republicans and Loyalist paramilitaries to engage in violence, thus helping to prevent terrorism.

Disengagement and Preventing Terrorism

At first glance, conflating the type of conflict that occurs at interface areas with terrorism may seem problematic. However, as will be explored below, the act of stone throwing and youth violence can quickly escalate to terrorism and the low-level violence itself be framed as a form of TPV; a crucial part of the mobile phone network's work has been to reframe this violence for what it is. In this context, the article uses the term '(former) militant/combatants/paramilitaries' instead of '(former) terrorist' to refer to members of the IRA, UDA, Real IRA and so on because the latter term obfuscates their other identities, but the article maintains that there are acts of terrorism, which is a tactic among other forms of political violence used by various actors[7]. Therefore, interface violence can be seen as part of terrorism prevention because of the escalatory dynamics at play – it can cause or provide opportunities for terrorism to be used – and also because the act of stone-throwing (as an example) can be framed as part of a political conflict, allowing it to be constructed as part of a terrorism campaign against one's community. As a result, a broader conceptualisation of what constitutes terrorism suggests that disengagement from terrorism should also be analysed more broadly, specifically at a community level.

The term disengagement refers to an individual or a militant group moving away from the use of TPV. The growing interest in and formulation of disengagement strategies for counter terrorism has emerged in part because of recognition that force and detention alone are not sufficient, and in fact, these approaches can often backfire[8]. A symbiosis between academic research and government counter-terrorism strategies have produced three components of disengagement that seeks to plug the gap in our knowledge of how terrorism campaigns end. The first component of disengagement analyses (state) attempts to facilitate individuals to leave a militant group, and they can also seek to bring along elements of the group, or the majority or entirety of a militant group[9]. A second component of disengagement

addresses how to ensure that, once disengagement has occurred, that the militants remain disengaged from terrorism – this component is concerned with how different types of disengagement can reduce the risk of recidivism (or re-offending)[10]. A third component of disengagement recognises the potential role that disengaged militants can have in preventing others from engaging in terrorism[11] and/or encouraging others to disengage (the domino effect[12]). While much has now been written about the first two aspects of disengagement, little has been written on how the disengagement of militants can help to actively prevent violence.

Schmid observed that, with a few exceptions, 'there are, strangely enough, few really good works on the prevention of terrorism'[13]. The nascent research on the topic identifies a number of salient factors for preventing the occurrence of terrorism, which include some of the following. The American Bipartisan Policy Centre identify three factors: countering the grievances, real or perceived, which violent extremists aim to exploit; countering the narratives and ideology by empowering community leaders to speak in order to stop violent extremist ideas from resonating; and countering mobilisation efforts by violent extremists, for example, by disrupting recruitment opportunities[14]. In Schmid's 'twelve rules for preventing and countering terrorism', a number of factors stand out: a) establish an early detection and early warning intelligence system against terrorism; b) show solidarity with victims of terrorism; c) maintain the moral high-ground with terrorists by strengthening the rule of law and good governance; d) reduce opportunities for terrorists to strike; e) and address the underlying causes of conflict[15]. The Northern Ireland case challenges some of these factors insofar as victims have been marginalised in the disengagement process[16] and that attempts to provide justice for victims is pushing paramilitary groups toward violence[17]. Furthermore, as will be shown below, the rule of law and good governance has, to an extent, been transferred to former combatants where the state has been less effective. Therefore, many of the assumptions on what can help to prevent terrorism are often inverted in Northern Ireland or the agent implementing these strategies is not the state. While some of these points will be explored at the end of the article, the main focus in terms of prevention is on reducing opportunities for mobilisation and addressing the causes of conflict (which manifests in TPV).

There are different types of causes of violence. Root causes, otherwise known as preconditions, are the factors that set the stage for terrorism in the long-term. Root causes can inform the grievances that (are used to) motivate a terrorism campaign (e.g. structural inequality; constitutional grievances; repression; societal insecurity) or they can be deeper

structural causes that facilitate, enable and shape terrorism (e.g. urbanisation, new technology and the internet). Trigger causes are specific events that immediately precede the occurrence of terrorism[18], thus providing opportunities for militant groups. Trigger causes can be shaped directly by structural factors, which can then inform grievances: in this case, violence can emerge regularly and the more removed the structures are, the more difficulty the state can have in either removing these structures or preventing the trigger causes that emerge from them. Of course, since the state is limited in the extent it can (or should) address these different causes to prevent terrorism, the assumption would be that former combatants would have even less of an impact. However, there has been little examination of the role of the 'terrorist' in preventing terrorism. Of course, group disengagement is itself a means of preventing terrorism: in this process of disengagement it has been shown how counter-narratives against violence can emerge[19]. Counter-narratives by disengaged militants can resonate with constituencies who are potentially drawn to terrorism because they have credibility and legitimacy that the state may lack. Furthermore, while underexplored, disengagement can have a domino effect on other groups, thus encouraging them to also disengage[20]. Finally, group disengagement can lead to political negotiations which can help to address the grievances, thus undercutting support for violence. However, there has been little substantive analysis of the active role that former militants can play in preventing TPV.

The aim of the article is to expand on these points by providing an in-depth analysis of how one type of disengagement – into community activism - has helped to prevent terrorism in Northern Ireland. As terrorism prevention is broad, the article focuses on two aspects: a) countering the trigger causes of violence and subsequent opportunities which these present; and b) countering mobilisation. In the case of the latter, the article builds upon Ashour's suggestion that disengagement can have a domino effect and demonstrates how it can prompt other groups to disengage – thus countering mobilisation.

The IRA's Disengagement and the Continuation of Violence

Once a militant group ceases to use violence and declares its intent to end the campaign, as the IRA did in 1994, the challenge of disengagement emerges. There are three aspects of disengagement: disarmament; de-mobilisation; and re-integration. The rationale behind DDR programmes is to reduce the likelihood of a return to violence, known as recidivism reduction, but there is a growing recognition that they can also help in conflict transformation efforts beyond simply being 'good citizens'. Disengagement can manifest in a

number of routes: into military structures (e.g. the Palestine Liberation Organisation[21]); political structures (e.g. Sinn Fein); civilian life (e.g. Colombian former combatants[22]) or, as is the focus of this article, through community activism. The disarmament of the IRA, known as decommissioning, was a contentious process, especially because it was against the group's constitution[23]. But in 2005, a third party confirmed that the IRA had put their arsenal beyond use, thus paving the way for Sinn Fein to enter government at Stormont. Decommissioning occurred in 2005 for many of the same reasons that led to disengagement in 1994. The arguments for disengagement made by the IRA leadership presented decommissioning as a tactic to be traded in for concessions in political negotiations[24]. Disarmament was portrayed in internal dialogue as not necessarily limiting the option of a return to violence if negotiations failed, as the process of re-arming is easy because 'you can't decommission what is in people's heads'[25]. The option of a return to violence provided some members with comfort to help them make the progression[26]. Other external factors, mainly the September 11th attacks, helped the leadership to convince members that the time had come to make the trade of disarmament. While the group had been integrating its members into community activism for some years, the dual pressure of disarmament and community activism put to rest the option of returning to violence in their mind[27]. Thus, while disarmament may have played a small role in leaving violence behind and it limited the potential resources for dissident Republicans, its real impact on recidivism reduction was in moving them toward further disengagement and it paved the way for other militant groups to consider disengagement.

In terms of demobilisation, which refers to the dismantlement of command structures, the IRA formally completed demobilisation in 2005. However, as noted by Shirlow et al, most research on the IRA underplays the extent that, organisationally, it still functions in one form or another. One Loyalist perceived that there still exists a command structure and that the army council continue to meet[28], and while this has been largely merged into Sinn Fein[29], it also manifests itself in ex-prisoner groups and informal social networks, with volunteers engaging in community activism as part of continuing to serve the Republican movement. Informal demobilisation is a common feature, with Loyalist groups still maintaining their organisational structure and even bringing in new recruits[30]. However, contrary to many of the assumptions on the need for demobilisation to reduce the risk of recidivism made in the literature, the IRA's continuation as an informal social network has in fact helped to reduce violence and the risk of violence[31]. It has provided them with activists who can be mobilised

in conflict transformation and the existence of a hierarchy allows local leaders of the militant groups to meet up and discuss flare ups in violence to then return to their community and pass on the outcomes of the meeting. This challenges the literature's assumption on ending terrorism campaigns[32] that prioritises a liberal approach of establishing the state's monopoly on violence. Instead, this approach may have to compromise in the short-term by not pushing for demobilisation, and that informal networks at the community level can provide a more socially palatable means to build a grass-roots approach. Of course, the success of all disengagement programmes is contingent on sufficient support for disengagement among the militant group[33], but also among the 'radical milieu' which the group draws upon. The fact that this was not always the case meant that there was a continuing threat of TPV throughout the disengagement process, and it is this violence which disengagement into community activism has helped to prevent.

While the IRA's disengagement has brought most members along with it, potential sources of violence continued from three sources: 1) a number of groups, such as the INLA, continued to exist; 2) Loyalist groups were on a ceasefire but their reluctance to decommission its weaponry posed a risk of recidivism, which could then provoke Republicans; and 3) a number of key figures left the IRA to set up a range of dissident Republican groups – the Real IRA, Continuity IRA, Oghlaigh Na Heireann, and the New IRA - who remain committed to engaging in TPV and who seek to recruit the younger generation. Even now, there are claims that Sinn Fein is still wary of defections among their own ranks to the dissident groups[34], which is set to the background of a broader fear that there can be a return to violence in Northern Ireland[35]. While the dissident groups, such as the Real IRA, recognise that there is currently a lack of support for an armed struggle, their strategy has focused on continuing a limited campaign until opportunities arise[36]. As will be discussed below, interface areas have been a key resource in terms of maintaining the limited campaign and providing the opportunities for dissident groups. Given the potential for discontented members, dissident groups and Loyalist paramilitaries to threaten the peace process which the IRA committed itself to, there have been a number of ways in which disengagement has sought to prevent violence. In the early days of disengagement during the 1990s and early 2000s, the IRA was able to repress dissident groups and prevent them from engaging in terrorism[37], although one Real IRA member stated how this tool had now diminished[38]. Yet its progression into a political route has diminished the extent it can resort

to such tactics[39], which places greater emphasis on the role of community activism in preventing violence.

A community route, cultivated through years of grassroots activism and European Union funding, presented an alternative option for IRA members who could not or would not be integrated into political routes. While disengagement is often undertaken under the auspices of the state, the fact former combatants contest the state's legitimacy can act as a barrier to groups wishing to disengage. Thus, the European Union was in a better position to provide funding which (former) IRA members could legitimately apply for[40], under its PEACE I, II and III projects aimed at initiatives working toward conflict transformation. Furthermore, former prisoners re-entered a society where they had limited options to rebuild their careers and faced marginalisation because of their time in prison[41]. The lack of services and job prospects for former IRA prisoners – 25,000 since the 1970s - meant there was a need for the group to provide support for its members, and this has the effect of increasing loyalty between members and dependency on the informal social network[42]. Furthermore, it incentivises remaining disengaged, and provides legitimacy and credibility within the community which dissident Republicans struggle to compete with. Finally, the limited legitimacy the police force have in Republican communities creates a demand for the IRA members to meet, and while punishment beatings are not a viable option now, other creative means such as restorative justice need to be used to prevent paramilitary groups and dissident Republicans exploiting this opportunity. The article will now focus on one particular manifestation of disengagement – community activism at interface areas - to demonstrate how it functions to prevent TPV. Before explaining the preventative function of community activism, the article will now briefly provide background to the data that grounds the analysis.

Methods and Interview Data

The article draws on interviews conducted in Belfast, August 2013. It was decided to restrict data collection to Belfast primarily due to the greater level of community activism around the city's interface areas: in the past, violence has erupted at Belfast interface areas and has spread throughout the region. Data collection was based on judgemental sampling and snowballing techniques, thus identifying potential participants working in interface areas who would then suggest other interviewees within the network. For example, the former IRA prisoner group, Coiste arranged interviews with former combatants and the community workers introduced the researcher to other colleagues in mobile phone network. However,

one problem with arranging interviews through Coiste is the possibility that interviewees will stick to a party political line[43]; to overcome this problem the article sought to also use actors not affiliated to Coiste but who worked closely with their members to help corroborate the findings, unlike a number of other studies who worked through Coiste[44]. Another benefit of this combined snowballing and judgemental sampling strategy was it helped to corroborate details and provide a more holistic perspective, thus overcoming criticism of the interview method lacking completeness. Overall, the methods used provide a rich understanding of how actors work with one another and perceive their roles, and as it focuses on a specific role (i.e. community work) it has greater comprehensiveness than other studies which have interviewed former combatants but not taken into account their environment or who the interact with[45].

Overall, there were three types of interviewees, although there was often an overlap between the former combatants and community workers. Given how the mobile phone network consists of only a couple of people on each side of the interface areas in Belfast, the number of interviews is fairly representative. For institutional ethical reasons, these sources were kept anonymous. The first were former combatants who mainly consisted of five former IRA members. One of the former IRA combatants had not been a member of Sinn Fein and did not support them, but was opposed to violence and worked at interface areas. The other four interviewees from this group were members of Sinn Fein, with one being a senior figure in the group's disengagement. The former combatant group also included figures from the Irish National Liberation Army and the Ulster Defence Association, who provided useful insights on some of this community work which were more critical. Finally, whilst it was unclear the extent to which the interviewee was a former combatant, a convicted member of the Real IRA was interviewed.

The second group of interviewees were community workers: some of whom were also former combatants, were overtly linked to the political groups affiliated to paramilitary organisations, or who had personal ties to former combatants as a result of being involved in the community. The term 'community worker' is used loosely to refer to people who work in the voluntary sector or indirectly connected with (local) government; in many cases the interviewees were directors of the organisations or project managers. The activities of these community workers include: interface work; youth work; conflict transformation, restorative justice and truth-telling; or writing, encouraging and managing funding proposals. Approximately half worked in predominantly Catholic, Nationalist, Republican areas and the

other half working in Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist areas. The community workers were able to provide substantial depth of knowledge with regard to Republican areas as many have lived there all their life and the lack of an overt political affiliation for some community workers meant that they were less concerned about projecting a political agenda.

The third group of interviewees can be classified as state and security officials, who helped to provide a context to the study, whether this was with regard to the UK's counter-terrorism strategy against Jihadists, institutional pressures that the police face, or the internal politics of policing. One of the interviewees in this category was responsible for assessing the extent that the community groups set up by former combatants had legitimately moved away from violence and were adhering to criteria for accreditation by the government. Therefore, these interviews were crucial for corroborating findings from the other groups of interviewees and added significant weight to their credibility, thus improving the analysis of how the mobile phone network functions to prevent interface violence.

Interface Violence and the Trigger Causes of Terrorism

Prevention strategies seek to remove the causes of violence, and trigger causes are unique insofar as relatively unpredictable events can provoke a backlash among a 'radical milieu', thus providing opportunities for militant groups to launch an attack, mobilise the population, or establish their legitimacy. One such trigger cause is interface areas in Belfast which are structurally rooted in the design of the city and community divisions. Republican and Loyalist communities in Belfast are often divided by barriers, known as 'peace walls', with both communities meeting at certain intersection areas. During the contentious marching season, Republican and Loyalist parades can lead to riots at these choke-points. Also, these interface areas are part of a tug of war between disengaged Republicans and dissident Republicans, with the latter recognising that the 'radical milieu' in interface areas can provide support for their armed campaign. In recent years, mainstream Republicanism has lost ground to dissident Republicans in some interface areas, such as Ardoyne[46], thus providing dissidents with a space to attempt to stoke tension, mobilise support and engage in limited violence. In the most volatile of interface areas, the militant groups have a significant presence in their communities and this presence has often come at the expense of the police-force who have traditionally struggled with legitimacy. During the conflict, groups such as the IRA would assume a de-facto policing role to fill the gap that they had encouraged. However, the culture

of antipathy toward the police that the militant groups fostered have limited the extent the police could assert themselves in these communities once the groups began disengaging.

In the case of Northern Ireland, much of the initial violence at interface violence has little to do with the broader conflict and those involved have no political motivation[47], and it by and large involves stone throwing, which can hardly constitute terrorism or political violence. Yet there are two factors that make interface areas unique in terms of trigger causes in Northern Ireland. Firstly, what may simply be characterised as anti-social behaviour among young people in another context, this low-level violence is often interpreted as constituting part of a zero-sum political conflict between both communities – therefore, it is the Catholics/Protestants who are identified as throwing the stone, for example, rather than a young person. Interfaces are by and large durable structures, meaning they are regular, difficult to change but at least predictable. Interface violence tends to be triggered by events that have particular resonance with Loyalist and Republican identity, such as parades, sports, bonfires, and flag issues[48]. As these events are mostly regular and closely tied to identity it means that interface violence and the 'peace walls' are a relatively durable structure, which reinforces the perception of the 'other' in negative terms. The limited interaction between communities on either side of the interface means that violence is underpinned by rumours, mistrust and suspicion[49], which in turn makes it difficult to remove the 'peace walls' to foster trust[50]. Secondly, while they may not be direct trigger causes of terrorism, they can quickly escalate into more serious forms of TPV because they provide opportunities for militants to exploit the tensions. One senior security official in Northern Ireland stated that the violence 'starts off with a low level of violence but it can escalate into terrorism'[51] and a community worker engaging with former combatants commented that 'all you need is one person to be killed by accident or design, and it could just set off an inferno in a place like that'[52]. One Loyalist mentioned that violence can develop in three stages: firstly, bricks and bottles; secondly, petrol bombs; and thirdly bombs and guns[53].

Therefore, interface areas function as potential trigger causes of violence which are structurally durable, meaning they have existed broadly independently of political changes that have emerged as part of the peace process or even the IRA's disengagement. Nevertheless, one interface worker – a former member of the IRA – commented that the growing acceptance of policing has meant that it is the police who would now deal with violence[54], yet it was clear there are still gaps in the PSNI's ability to manage violence at the interface areas[55]. Historically, the illegitimacy of the police in interface areas – both

Republican and Loyalist communities – often means their intervention would actually exacerbate rather than calm violence[56], and that these areas were traditionally under the influence of paramilitaries who – prior to disengagement – would encourage violence by young people when it was in their interest. Subsequently, a social space has existed in Northern Ireland which could potentially destabilise disengagement and the peace process, often against the wishes of the IRA and the militant groups who would later disengage. It could function as an opportunity for grassroots activists opposed to disengagement or the peace process to de-rail negotiations, as a means to assert their authority, to strengthen their position with new recruits, or the violence could take a life of its own and restrict the bargaining power in political negotiations. Furthermore, the tensions that arise at interface areas and with parades can push the PSNI forces to a breaking point to undermine their effectiveness at providing security, which gives significant influence to paramilitary groups who wish to destabilise the political process[57]. It was this potential to disrupt the disengagement process that prompted the mobile phones network to emerge in the late 1990s, which lay the groundwork for co-operation between militant groups in order to prevent violence from erupting.

The Mobile Phone Network

The mobile phones network has its roots in the interface violence that erupted in North Belfast in 1996, leading to violence and rioting in nationalist areas throughout Northern Ireland. As stated above, the violence was triggered by a combination of controversial parades, rumours and mistrust between communities, and the lack of a police force with the legitimacy to contain the rioting. In response, in 1997, a statutory sector organisation gave mobile phones to key groups and individuals in existing community networks. They would keep the phones turned on all the time during the parades season with the aim of keeping people away from interfaces, preventing stone-throwing, calming tensions and defusing rumours[58]. The success of the network in 1997 led to the increase and expansion of the mobile phone network, yet over the years the network has transformed. At first, a long list of numbers would be made available to the community for people to phone interface contacts when an issue emerged, but then the contacts began to use their own personal phones, forming relatively small clusters of people – two or three – on each side of the interface[59].

Since its inception, the network has morphed into three dimensions: a smaller formal network of community safety partnerships; a larger network of former combatants such as a

project called the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium (BCRC) – which is dominated by former IRA members[60]; and informal networks, including former combatants and, for example, one woman's group in the Short Strand/East Belfast[61]. Former combatants from the IRA, the Official IRA, the INLA, the UDA, and the UVF are to varying degrees involved in the networks at the interface areas. Paramilitary organisations have been able to adopt a central role in the mobile phone networks because the contacts have more respect in the community and among young people than, say, community workers, and their role in the conflict provides them with legitimacy to engage with the 'other', whereas for others it would be normatively prohibitive. However, membership of a paramilitary organisation does not necessarily give automatic credibility, therefore former combatants who live in the area will be utilised[62], which incentivises the maintenance of a command structure.

Therefore, the mobile phone network provides some informal organisational continuity, whereby nodes in the network will mobilise former combatants to resolve interface problems. Another key factor in the growth of the networks was, at the beginning of the network, the police force would actively encourage it by utilising former combatants to help calm down interface areas:

> Then what would have happened is the poli*ce would call and say 'listen we are a bit stressed can you go up, there's a riot taking place'. We'd go up and there's two jeeps sitting there, and the police sitting in the jeeps saying 'we can't get out of the jeeps for security reasons, we don't have the riot gear on'. And we'd say 'hang on, are you kidding me'. So we'd have to go in and say 'hang on you are not doing it on these people's behalf or have a wee discussion why they shouldn't be doing it. So on both sides you'd have to intervene. Other time*s you would *phone up the other side and say 'hang on, they are gathering here because they think you have over 300 petrol bombs over there' 'hang on, we're here because we think you have 300 petrol bombs'. Sometimes you'd have to go back to people* and tell *them what they didn't want to hear because they had gathered because* they thought they were threatened by the other side.[63]

Therefore, pressures at the community level incentivised the maintenance of networks that had previously made up the militant groups instead of breaking them up, which began to

function as an early warning system to de-escalate potential conflict. While the interviewee above argued that such intervention has been less regular, interviewees from an INLA and Loyalist background talked about the continued role of former combatants in calming interface violence in the last few years. The mobile phone networks, and the role of former combatants within them, has helped to reduce the risk of riots and further escalation by managing the interface areas and dispelling rumours of imminent attacks from opposing sides:

> There were instances in Ardoyne where there was an Orange march passing Ardoyne and one of the newspapers put out a story that the INLA was going to attack the march. Of course, that triggered off a response in the Loyalist areas, that people were going to come along and prevent the INLA from attacking the march. Again, people around the table discussed it and representatives from the INLA constituency assured the Loyalists that there was absolutely no truth in this. *The loyalists went back in their communities saying 'nobody is to go to Ardoyne, this isn't true' and there was no riot, basica*lly. Whereas if it had been allowed to run its course, there probably would have been. [64]

As it was established prior to the Good Friday Agreement, the mobile phone network helped to reduce violence which could have derailed the peace process. The gradual process of disengagement through the mobile phone network not only provided combatants with a new role, it also functioned to reduce the risk of recidivism which could have pulled them and their organisation back into conflict. In addition to reducing violence, it has also limited the opportunities available to dissident Republican groups. There has been much discussion on how former IRA figures and Sinn Fein have lost influence in some interface areas such as Ardoyne, which have subsequently turned into areas where dissident Republicans are 'free to play' [65]. However, the mobile phone network has acted as deterrence to paramilitary organisations who wish to use violence[66] because it builds on a broader base of legitimacy than just the IRA, and the dynamics of the network pushes groups to co-operate.

In addition to preventing an escalation of violence, former combatants have been crucial in trying to de-essentialise the violence occurring at interface areas. At root of the interface violence and its ability to escalate is its interpretation in terms of political cleavages, therefore 'ordinary violence' is framed as political violence. Therefore, one of the most

crucial but understated ways that former combatants prevent TPV is to challenge the perception that interface violence should be seen as part of a political or identity conflict:

> *So I'd go up to residents doors and they'd tell me they [came from the other side] and smashed my windows. I'd ask if they did it the other night and they'd say 'no, a few kids went up there and threw a few stones', to get to the truth and how things began. So whenever an attack happened it was 'republicans from Ardoyne attacked Loyalists from Glenbryn', but it was just two drunks coming up the road they weren't endorsed by anybody. It wasn't done as part of a community so don't come to us saying that republicans are attacking the community.*[67]

The network has become a means of group competition for authority and influence in communities, with the informal networks of former combatants utilising gaps in the network to assert their role. Therefore, whereas in the past competition for community influence may have manifested in violence, the shape of the network provides the same incentives but instead it rewards disengagement. The community sees former combatants actively working to contain violence and shifting to restorative justice schemes to replace the punishment beatings that, in the past, would have helped them maintain community influence. In many accounts, the visible community work that has emerged from disengagement – and which could only be maintained by remaining disengaged – has helped some former combatants to even improve their influence[68]. Whilst disengagement would assume an integration of combatants into society, the networks have allowed the organisations to continue in an informal manner, and while this provides them with a potentially powerful role in society, the structure of the networks incentivises co-operation and disengagement. Since the mobile phones network provides groups with a way to maintain and build their influence socially and politically, community activism provides many attractive resources which the groups compete with each other to establish. Competition has provided multiple options for collaboration between communities, providing them with a choice, and it has helped to fill the space where the IRA is relatively weak and the dissident Republicans seek to exploit[69]:

> *We are not part of [the BCRC] and we don't want to be part of it, right. But still, the Loyalists call us because, as they would turn around and say, 'the Provies*

[the IRA] work 9-5, it would be great if that was the only time there was trouble, but th*e trouble is always at night' and they don't come out and won't be seen. And one of the aspects, one of the reasons why they can't go out to areas like* Ardoyne and tell the kids to get off the streets is because the kids would tell them to fuck off.[70]

Therefore, while the IRA former combatants would have worked to control areas, they would have been limited in their reach (especially in Loyalist areas), but the network provides incentives to co-operate to reduce the risk of violence more holistically. Participants in the mobile phone network gain incentives from their involvement, and the only way to ensure their own efficacy in the network is to co-operate, be reliable and trustworthy. If a participant can no longer have influence at interface areas or does not answer the phone regularly, the nodes in the network will utilise other contacts in rival paramilitary groups. Consequently, the network encourages deeper interaction and co-operation, thus acting as a pull-factor away from violence:

We became ac*countable to each other, and that's when the mobile phones came in. And we would meet each other on a fortnightly basis, so if I say to you there's* a problem, you need to get this sorted out. If you come back to me in a fortnights *time and I'm sitting there looking you in the eye going 'what did you do about that', and I know if you're bullshitting me if you like, I'm not gonna phone you anymore. That relationship diminishes. If you come back and say 'here's what I* did, blah blah blah blah, and we stop bull*shitting each other... So I think that's* how it began to change, it came from this personal commitment in a way to each *other and coming back and saying 'well, no point in me bullshitting you because* you can do it to me next week. I think we have to be honest and up-front with each *other and deal with it that way', and I think that's how that stuff developed.*[71]

Subsequently, Republican and Loyalist former combatants began meeting more regularly, which had previously only happened in much smaller ways in prisons because of the strong normative constraints against inter-community dialogue. While there were traditionally strong disincentives for inter-group interaction in both communities, the work of

the network and experience as a former combatant gave a green light for interaction, which began to grow beyond the remit of the mobile phone networks:

> We meet fortnightly and regardless of what happens, every fortnight for the last *eight years. You come in and sometimes going 'there's nothing happened this week and we'll call this meeting off',* but then you go *'no, because these meetings* are useful, they keep us in touch with each other, we know what we are doing and it also develops that relationship where we have a trustful working relationship. *There'd be an*other six or seven chairs in this room and eighteen people would be *in the room and maybe every second Monday morning. And I wouldn't have gone* out with a drink with any one of them - so we have a working relationship and probably a friendly enough relatio*nship. We are pally like but we wouldn't go over to someone's for dinner...but hopefully the relationship can work in that* direction, but we are just not there at the moment.[72]

While inter-group and cross-community co-operation improved the efficacy of the mobile phone network in calming interface violence, the occurrence of regular dialogue also helped to build trust and avoid misinterpreting signals. Partly building on this earlier dialogue, funding from the European Union's PEACE II project (2000 to 2006) was utilised by former combatants to develop a number of projects on conflict transformation, prevention and inter-community dialogue. The different groups began to invite each other into the 'other's' community, going to trips to Dublin and Stormont together, and bringing young people from one side of the interface to the other[73]. Also, senior leaders of the paramilitary groups in Belfast, including representatives from the IRA, began to hold meetings regularly throughout the 2000s up until now. The growing dialogue firstly built up enough trust to prompt other paramilitary groups to consider disengagement, and secondly, it helped to prevent a slip-back into violence during contentious flash-points. One interviewee present at meetings of senior paramilitary figures in Belfast discussed their importance:

> These relations were so important that eventually they contributed to, in large part, the decommissioning of weapons by the UDA, the INLA and the OIRA, and that happened a few years ago. Another thing the relationships around the table

prevented was a slide back into conflict on a number of occasions. When the two soldiers were killed in the barracks [and the policeman in 2009]...that was a very dangerous period because that could have slipped back into conflict. The loyalists came to the table, they were quite angry. Initially, when the policeman was killed, it was pointed out around the table that this represented an old mind-set on the *point that the police...belong to your community because that's th*e impression you are giving here, and that they now belong to everybody, so people on the nationalist side are entitled to be just as annoyed as on the Unionist side. I think for a number of the Unionist groups around the table...it was a wake-up for them *you know, suddenly they thought 'that's true, that is a mind-set we've had'...In* fairness to them, they took it on-board and went back into their communities and *said 'look, there's no support for this amongst the nationalists/Republican* community in general*'. They just kept a lid on things. Same when the two soldiers* were killed; same situation again. Recognition that there was no support for this *anymore, that people didn't see this as contributing in any way as a way forward,* and again the Loyalists went back into their communities and put a lid on it.[74]

Throughout this period, dissident Republican groups continued to be active, but their ability to escalate the conflict by killing two soldiers and a policeman was severely limited by the inter-communal dialogue and ability of Loyalist leaders to assert their authority in their communities. Therefore, the presence of former combatants at a community level, facilitated by EU funding and the success of the mobile phone networks, has occupied a space that fosters disengagement in society: this can be contrasted with earlier incidents during the Troubles where killings would lead to a significant escalation in violence. Therefore, disengagement in Northern Ireland has taken a unique form whereby informal networks of former combatants and command structures have complemented political change from the Good Friday Agreement. Thus, community activism that emerged through the IRA's disengagement has limited the risk of riots occurring that could destabilise the peace process – although it has not stopped them completely – and it has encouraged a number of militant groups to disengage.

Mechanisms such as the mobile phone network are short-term fixes which are contingent on cross-community support for the initiative to be maintained. Such networks have the potential to build cross-community trust to remove 'peace-walls' and to provide the

space for the PSNI to develop their legitimacy[75], however greater support needs to be given to make such networks more durable and resistant to the interests of paramilitaries. While mutual dependency incentivises co-operation and deeper disengagement and the rarity of cross-community dialogue amplifies the importance of such networks, recent developments in the Loyalist community have disrupted the network and some of the benefits it brings.

Weaknesses of Networks: Loyalist Discontent

The transformation of militant groups into informal networks has helped to overcome and contain trigger causes of violence and it has had a domino-effect on other militant groups, but wider structural causes of conflict can undermine it. The mobile phone network can help to contain manifestations of violence that emerge from these structural causes however it is not a mechanism which can resolve these broader issues. Frustrations with the political system has led to low-scale Loyalist violence which may be indicative of the limits of the political system in dealing with identity and constitutional grievances, and these tensions cannot be dealt with through mechanisms such as the mobile phones network. Two periods of Loyalist violence emerged, one in 2011 with paramilitary-influenced attacks on the Short Strand (a Republican enclave in East Belfast), and the 2012-2013 riots and protests following the decision to remove the Union flag from Belfast City Hall. In both cases, the mechanisms of managing conflict mentioned previously failed to work, firstly because the rationale behind removing the flag – equality - did not resonate with the Loyalist community, and secondly, the mobile phone network broke down. Disengagement and the mobile phone network is contingent on cross-community support, but some issues can undermine this support, particularly on identity and constitutional matters:

We actually had a meeting here to discuss the issue [of parades] back in January, and it was quite hot. To be honest it was people from the Loyalist side, they were absolutely bouncing up and d*own…. Now we had discussions here and we had* fairly senior people from the organisations around the table, and the Unionists/Loyalists were absolutely livid about the flag coming down. And other people were saying this is part of the equality agenda but th*ey weren't buying it.* That to me was very revealing because that was an issue that was quite contentious and quite inflammatory and people, well certainly the Loyalists, had

moved back into the old camp. The whole [equality agenda] was quickly side-lined, and no doubt that would have ricocheted back into communities as well. They were actually bringing the feelings of the communities with them as well, but instead of challenging them locally...and the unionist politicians stirred the thing up.[76]

Therefore, while the equality agenda facilitated dialogue between both communities with regard to policing, thus de-escalating the risk of violence in 2009, it has been unsuccessful in creating agreement on identity issues (such as parades and flags) – beyond containment - or constitutional issues:

[At a meeting in 2013 between the Belfast paramilitary leaders, a senior IRA *figure] said 'look lads' he said to these senior Loyalists, 'there is a train coming.* Only thirty-six percent of primary school children, right now, are from the Unionist tradition. So you better be getting your people ready for this, preparing *the way forward, not pretending that there is going to be no change'...[The* loyalists] were stunned, absolutely stunned. One of them actually sai*d, 'shit' he said, 'does that mean you are going to get what you want, and we aren't going to get what we want'.*[77]

Inter-group dialogue is limited in terms of how it can convince Loyalists to contain violence, which can be linked back to the lack of a similar internal discussion that the IRA went through. Other factors include internal Loyalist politics which has incentivised groups to encourage violence and has limited the capacity of the mobile phone network in containing it:

I think definitely in the last few years because relationships have been fragmented, the phones have routinely just been turned off. So there has been more of a tendency to do that recently where relationships are bad with Republicans and relationships are *bad with the police, and we are not going to fill the police's role* and we are not going to talk to Republicans, so we are going to turn our phones

off. There are still key people within the community who keep their phone on, and when it works well, it works really well. I think there has been some really good relationship-building and there have been very good forums where straight-*talking has been able to take place, but it's very difficult to maintain those* relationships in an environment like this where probably we are at the worst place we have been since the [GFA]. *It's difficult to keep the relationships going in the face of opposition from your own community who calls you 'traitor' for* being involved in those discussions.[78]

However, another factor that limits the capacity of the mobile phone network in containing violence is its informality:

What has happened in Northern Ireland is mechanisms like the mobile phone *network have grown up organically and evolved organically, but aren't funded or* supported strategically at a high level. So they are difficult to sustain and the *baton isn't going to be handed on because it is all about the current relationship, it's not about the framework in which they operate. It's not about systems or any of that, it's* all about the relationship. And those guys are all tired and there is *very, very little personal and human support, partly because people don't know how to ask for it because it's such a macho culture.*[79]

In essence, the mobile phone network reflects the same system that operates at the political level: when one community is in opposition to a decision, they can veto it, but at the community level this results in violence rather than a vote being cancelled. While there was some cross-community work to calm down violence during the flag protests[80], and some dialogue still continued during this period, the violence demonstrated that the mobile phone networks and disengagement is far weaker on the Loyalist side, leaving it open to challenge from paramilitaries in favour of using violence. The personal strain that involvement in the networks also make it difficult for its members to stand against the tide of community anger consistently, and the inability to formally recognise that policing is partly dependent upon paramilitary groups has limited the support the state can provide[81]. Furthermore, the dependency on former combatants and the lack of a durable mechanism means that there may

not be anyone to pass on the baton – or the phone in this case[82]. While the state may have built enough legitimacy to take over, the recent Loyalist discontent suggests that mechanisms such as the mobile phone network will still be crucial in preventing violence.

Implications: Utilising Former Combatants in Preventing Terrorism

The article will now return to discuss the points that were raised with regard to disengaged combatants preventing terrorism through community activism. As prevention is often reliant on community-based co-operation, former combatants can provide substantial resources and access to a 'radical milieu' that the state may find difficult to engage with, or alternative community activists will have less credibility. The article has shown that in communities which can be described as constituting the 'radical milieu', state institutions and the police force have little legitimacy, and interventions to contain violence can be counter-productive. Former combatants have much more influence in the communities because they have cultivated this relationship for decades – therefore the key factor on whether combatants are useful is if they have credibility in the community. In Northern Ireland, the mobile phone network and community activism by former combatants helped to occupy the social space that the state could not, but this has been a transitive role whereby the police force could gain more legitimacy.

However, the extent to which they can prevent terrorism is dependent upon their commitment to disengagement. The DDR literature takes this commitment as a given but its overall importance implies that any further analysis should incorporate considerations on the types of commitment and attitudinal change required to ensure that DDR is successful. The terrorism literature is familiar with this debate with regard to the de-radicalisation debate, and while this has been relegated to the issue of recidivism reduction[83], the fact that disengaged militants can play a role in prevention adds a new dimension to the debate. Thus, while the type of attitudinal change that occurred among the IRA may not correspond to how de-radicalisation has been conceptualised[84], the article shows that there is a need to re-examine attitudinal change in more nuance – as there are clearly differences between Republican and Loyalist disengagement processes.

Thus, once attitudinal change has occurred, it can underpin disengagement which can then be effective at preventing TPV through community activism. Schmid called for an early warning system to prevent terrorism, which presumably would be state-led. However, the

article has shown how former combatants in Northern Ireland have effectively set up an early warning system through inter-group meetings. The meetings provided insights into the fears and feelings in each community, allowing the group leaders to discuss any potential threats and, once assuaged of the threat, could then return to the community to defuse the tension. The mobile phones network overcame the lack of communication between communities whereby the former combatants could gain an idea of what was triggering an escalation in violence, allowing them to then de-escalate and de-mobilise young people before the violence got worse.

Building on this point, another substantial element of preventing terrorism is the removal of the causes of terrorism. While the literature has emphasised root causes the article has shown that trigger causes can be significant insofar as they can lead to greater levels of violence, they can be contagious geographically, they can suck disengaged militants back into violence, and they can provide opportunities for dissident groups. Furthermore, trigger causes in Northern Ireland are linked back to different layers of durable structures, such as 'peace walls', road systems, parades, identity and culture. A dyadic process of state-led and community-led action can help to overcome these problems but in the meantime it is former combatants in a community role who are best to mitigate these problems, however, they do not have the sufficient resources to offer a long-term solution to trigger causes. In addition, the article has highlighted an issue in terrorism prevention which has been insufficiently explored: the de-essentialisation of violence as a counter-terrorism strategy. Former combatants in the network explored sought to reconstruct how the community perceived violence, from perceiving stone throwing as a political threat from one identity onto another, to perceiving it as youth criminality. De-essentialising violence has relevance to other attacks, for example the Woolwich killing, whereby successfully framing the killing of Lee Rigby as a murder rather than as an act of terrorism may help minimise the violent reaction.

Furthermore, the maintenance of an informal command-structure was crucial insofar as it provided direction and resources which could pressure dissidents or provide the framework for the mobile phones network. Without the continued existence of a command-structure, the meetings between the leadership may not have been as successful at returning back to the communities to contain violence. However, the idea of maintaining a command-structure of a militant group that has been involved in terrorism is understandably controversial: Northern Ireland may be unique insofar as how open groups linked to terrorism, past and present, can mobilise. Yet the maintenance of a command-structure does not

contradict the expectation that a group involved in terrorism should organisationally disband: the command-structure has been mediated through informal networks and NGOs which would have continued regardless. In cases where a terrorism group disengages completely, its members will still meet up and the command-structure will be maintained or recognised informally, like a veterans' association. Therefore, disengagement strategies should not be overly concerned about the extent there has been organisational disbandment, as the maintenance of a command-structure can be utilised in conflict transformation and preventing terrorism. This is not sui generis nor necessarily controversial, as this command-structure is informal and would exist in some shape or form regardless of the extent it is marginalised or utilised by state intervention.

Finally, while organisational disengagement through a community route has been successful in preventing TPV in the case-study presented, there are some reasons to be sceptical about its transferability. While the utilisation of Jihadist former combatants by the UK may offer a similar pragmatic approach to preventing terrorism, the government's desire to avoid giving a voice to those who challenge values the government wish to promote – for example, on gender – has limited the transferability of a community approach[85]. However, it is not ideology that is the main factor in shaping the extent to which disengagement through a community route can work. The mobile phone network above was necessary because the state could not penetrate a significant number of communities, these communities were substantially divided, and former combatants had far greater influence in their community and were able to cross the divide. Therefore, disengagement through a community route may be more effective in preventing terrorism when these situations exist, rather than necessarily being shaped by ideology or typology of terrorism.

Conclusion

To summarise, through a mix of pragmatism by the state security forces, commitment to disengagement, and the provision of financial incentives from an external actor (the EU), a unique disengagement route into community activism was created for (former) combatants. The states' weakness in containing violence at interface areas which could trigger terrorism provided an opportunity for former combatants to work together. The strong divide between communities and the lack of inter-communal dialogue meant that informal networks of former combatants placed them in a unique position to contain violence and challenge the perception that the violence was even political. The structure of the network facilitated co-

operation and deeper moves toward disengagement. Its pluralistic nature within Republicanism and Loyalism meant that there was competition: if one former combatant could not deliver results, another former combatant could step up. The binary nature of the network meant that both Republicans and Loyalists had to work together. The network then led to trust developing which facilitated other militant groups to disengage, who could then work together to contain the trigger causes of violence which would otherwise help dissident Republicans mobilise for a larger terrorism campaign. However, more durable structures need to be in place to replace the network, but it has been the success of the network which has brought about the conditions where the state can begin to attempt fill this space.

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