

Reframing War to Make Peace in Northern Ireland

IRA Internal Consensus-Building for Peace and Disarmament

Benedetta Berti & Ariel Heifetz Knobel*

Abstract

In exploring alternatives to armed struggle, how do non-state armed groups embark on such complex internal discussions, and how do they reframe their world-view and strategy to persuade their militants to support such transition?

The article tackles this question by examining the internal processes of consensus-building that brought the most prominent militant organization in Northern Ireland – the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) – from violent struggle for independence to non-violent political participation in the political system it had previously fought to expel.

The study relies on fieldwork and applied research through interviews, conducted in Northern Ireland and Ireland with key stakeholders, ranging from ex-prisoner leaders and former militants to politicians, official negotiators and civil society practitioners who work with various conflict parties on the ground. Historical literature and primary sources are also used, including Sinn Féin and IRA official documents. All primary sources are integrated with the theoretical literature on intra-group consensus-building and discursive reframing.

The analysis underscores the importance of discursive practices to ensure frame-shift in both the understanding of the conflict (consensus mobilization) and the means chosen to wage it (action mobilization). The case of the IRA further reveals the importance of preserving continuity with an organization's core ideological pillars as a key mechanism to minimize chances of internal strife, along with enlisting credible supporters from the 'militant constituency' – such as former prisoners and/or militants with deep and personal involvement in the group's armed struggle.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, intra-group negotiations, disarmament, political transition, IRA.

* Dr. Benedetta Berti is a Kreitman postdoctoral fellow at Ben Gurion University, a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), a lecturer at Tel Aviv University and the author of *Armed Political Organizations. From Conflict to Integration*. <<https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/armed-political-organizations>>. Ariel Heifetz Knobel is a conflict transformation practitioner, facilitating Track 2 and Track 1.5 initiatives in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and working with Northern Irish peacemakers to bring best practices to the region. She has served as Public Diplomacy Director for five states at the Israeli Consulate to New England, and as a mediator in Boston's district courts.

1 Intra-Group Consensus-Building in Violent Conflict

The relationship between intra-group dynamics and inter-group conflict in the context of civil wars and internal conflicts has been a subject of inquiry in the international relations and conflict resolution literature. Yet, despite a growing awareness that intra-group negotiations may be as important in determining the peaceful outcome of a conflict as official negotiations between warring parties (Lilja, 2012), the subject remains under-explored. Less emphasis has been generally placed on the intra-group mechanisms and consensus-building processes that occur within armed organizations or within a camp of similar groups (Bakke *et al.*, 2012: 266).

Shifting the focus to the largely neglected intra-group dynamics adds an important level of complexity to the study of non-state armed groups. Indeed, as argued by Bruce Hoffman, armed groups “throughout history have presented themselves as monoliths: united and in agreement over fundamental objectives, aims, strategies, tactics and targets. Too often their opponents succumb to such fiction” (Hoffman, 2006: 19).

Instead, armed political groups, as types of complex micro-social systems, are internally heterogeneous and composed of different subunits that engage in organizational politics –“those activities taken within organizations to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources to obtain one’s preferred outcomes in a situation in which there is uncertainty or dissensus about choices” (Pfeffer, 1981: 7). Deconstructing the myth of internal unity highlights the importance of intra-organizational dynamics and internal mechanisms armed organizations employ to maximize cohesion and minimize intra-organizational conflict.

Internal mechanisms and processes to foster internal cohesion and promote intra-organizational support for inter-party negotiations occur prior to, during and after formal inter-party peace negotiations. They are key to ensuring that the external talks proceed in the right direction. Similarly, in interstate disputes, domestic processes of reframing and bargaining have long been known as key elements behind the negotiating table (Putnam, 1988).

In the context of inter-group conflicts between non-state armed groups (NSAGs),¹ the stakes are especially high (Schneckener, 2009: 8-9). Indeed, as part of an effective process of political engagement in inter-party negotiations, NSAGs are often required to guarantee a temporary halt to all armed activities. In the longer term, they are also expected to commit to either disarming and dissolving or integrating their military apparatus.

But both temporary and permanent cessations of armed struggle must be strongly backed from within the ranks of the armed group and its constituency in order to be successful. Indeed, rebel factions that participate in inter-party peace negotiations and agree to alter their reliance on violence without the backing of their military leaders and constituency make a risky bet, increasing the chances of these actors intervening to sabotage the political process (Nilsson, 2008; Pearl-

1 Defined as armed organizations willing and capable of using force to attain their political, economic or ideological goals and not under the formal or de facto control of a state.

man, 2009). Just as importantly, the failure to build internal support for both ceasefires and long-term transitions away from violence can contribute to internal conflict and heightening the chances of schisms (Crenshaw, 1991: 80-81). Lacking strong internal and grassroots support can also limit a group's ability to make concessions towards peace, as any opening at the negotiating table could risk further igniting internal struggle (Moore *et al.*, 2014).

Therefore, consensus-building processes and mechanisms aimed at fostering internal support for peace negotiations are incredibly important for both preserving internal cohesion and boosting the chances of such negotiations yielding successful results. Yet, intra-organizational dynamics are still under-researched in the broader conflict resolution literature (as well as in the Northern Ireland case more specifically), and this article aims to address this lacuna.

2 Research Question and Methodology

The above lacuna will be addressed by focusing on the case study of the 'republican movement' – respectively, the IRA² and Sinn Féin – often cited in the literature as a successful example of violent-to-political transition. While the IRA and its shift towards disarmament has been aptly analysed, much less emphasis has been placed on understanding what tools and mechanisms republican political and military leaders employed to build internal consensus to support the peace process. The article addresses this gap by answering the question: *what deliberate discursive tools were used within the republican movement to build internal consensus to support their transition away from violence?*

The article answers this question by relying on the extensive historical literature on the Northern Ireland conflict as well as by examining a number of important primary sources (obtained through digital archives), including both Sinn Féin and IRA documents, such as internal political communiques, strategic memos and official statements made publicly in the press.

In addition, the article draws on fieldwork conducted in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (11 interviews and 3 lectures), all with people directly and deeply involved in the conflict and ongoing peace process. All interviews were conducted from June to August 2010 under the auspices of a research fellowship sponsored by the Harvard Program on Negotiation and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Interviewee profiles ranged from political figures directly involved in the Track 1 peace talks, including Bertie Ahern, former Prime Minister (Taoiseach) of Ireland, to prominent ex-prisoners such as Michael Culbert, head of Coiste na n-Iarchimi (republican ex-prisoners association), to clergy-confidants who facilitated secret dialogues within and between militant groups,

2 The article will use the term 'IRA' to refer to the Provisional Irish Republican Army (which is sometimes referred to as 'PIRA'). The term 'PIRA' refers to the military organization created in 1969-1970 following a split in the IRA in Northern Ireland. The breakaway faction assumed the name of the Provisional IRA, whereas the rest of the organization came to be known as the Official IRA (OIRA). As the OIRA gradually lost prominence, the PIRA became the main armed group in the republican camp and, gradually, it came to be popularly referred to as simply 'IRA'.

such as Gary Mason of the East Belfast Mission and Gerry Reynolds of Clonard Monastery, and others. All interviews began with open-ended questions, followed by more specific follow-up questions. Former combatants were asked the same initial lines of inquiry, focusing on identifying key factors that caused them individually to move away from violence, as well as key factors that convinced others in their militant groups to adopt non-violence. Non-combatant interviewees were asked a different line of inquiry, regarding their opinions on the causes that moved combatants as individuals and as groups away from violence and towards engagement. Most interviews lasted one hour. Before proceeding to the results of the study, let us examine some background about the conflict at hand.

3 The Northern Ireland Conflict

The conflict in Northern Ireland has a political, ethno-national and territorial nature (Cochrane, 2013; Smithey, 2011; Tonge, 2014). At the root of the modern ‘Troubles’ lay incompatible political claims: On the one hand was a republican or nationalist camp, predominantly Catholic, self-identifying as Irish and seeking an all-island Republic of Ireland. On the other hand was a unionist or loyalist front, mostly Protestant, self-identifying as British and wanting Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom (McAulay and Spencer, 2011). The subdivision within each side came to imply people’s willingness to support violence in pursuit of their political goals (with paramilitary groups explicitly referred to as “Republican” or “Loyalist”) (Fitzduff, 2002: 211).

The political and territorial dimension of the conflict was further complicated by socio-economic and ideational elements. Historically, the Protestant population on the island of Ireland enjoyed a clear socio-economic and political advantage over the Catholic population. Protestant religious institutions made claims of divine right to the land and superiority over Irish Catholics (Mason interview, 2010), including invoking scripture to make political arguments for British and Protestant rule, while the Irish Catholics suffered from structural discrimination and were often treated as *de facto* second-class citizens, politically marginalized and economically disadvantaged (Terchek, 1977). Nevertheless, religion itself was not the disputed issue over which communities fought. The content of the conflict centred on political ideology (the national identity of the state), and the expressed goals of every paramilitary referred to this dispute, with combatant groups themselves not religious.

The transition from conflict to peace was long and complex in the case of Northern Ireland, culminating with the signing of the 1998 Belfast or ‘Good Friday’ Agreement (GFA). The agreement centred on self-determination for the people in Northern Ireland and established local political institutions on the basis of power-sharing principles (White, 2013).

Implementing the GFA was an accomplishment of monumental proportions for all sides involved, especially given the challenge of keeping spoilers—armed factions who boycotted the peace negotiations and agreement—at bay and preserving internal backing. In 1998, the death toll from these spoilers nearly tripled

from the previous two years (McKittrick and McVea, 2001). Nevertheless, all the main paramilitary organizations, including the IRA, maintained their commitment to the peace process and, notably, they did so while preventing mass-scale defections (Shirlow *et al.*, 2010)

Significantly, peace in Northern Ireland, as represented by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, was achieved without reconciliation of the armed parties' political aspirations. The conflicting visions for which they were fighting did not change; yet they committed themselves to non-violent strategies in pursuit of these political aspirations.

Therefore, even though many outsiders to Northern Ireland view the current status of the political environment as 'post-conflict', it would be more accurate to describe the post-1998 period as 'post-agreement', an ongoing phase of conflict transformation needed to address societal divisions, without ignoring, of course, the undeniable progress (White interview, 2010).

In this context, the IRA's relinquishment of armed struggle appears especially interesting. The Provisional Irish Republican Army, an armed organization capable of sophisticated and deadly terrorist operations, was created in the late 1960s as a result of a split within the organization in Northern Ireland. Its roots are deeply intertwined with contemporary Irish history, dating back to the 1916 'Easter Rising' anti-British rebellion and the 1919-1921 Anglo-Irish war, where the IRA acted as the Irish people's army (Kelley, 1988: 44).

Since its creation in 1969-1970, the modern IRA (or PIRA) evolved into the main armed group within the republican camp, playing a crucial role during the 'Troubles' (1969-1998). Of particular significance throughout this period was its ambiguous relationship with the main republican party, Sinn Féin, officially separated yet very much intertwined with the IRA. The IRA's de facto acceptance of the 1998 GFA and its subsequent shift towards disarmament, with the final decommissioning of all weapons in 2005, was matched by the political rise of Sinn Féin. Let us turn now to the results of the study – how internal consensus was achieved within the republican camp by focusing on the discursive tools employed to create internal support for such transition.

4 Internal Consensus-Building within the Republican Camp

4.1 Re-Framing the Conflict (*Consensus Mobilization Strategies*)

Shifting from warmaking to peacemaking (from a strategy of armed struggle to that of unarmed politics) required the republican movement to first and foremost reframe its own understanding of the conflict in Northern Ireland. This enabled its supporters and militants to continue to back the group's revised political vision. These consensus mobilization strategies (Klandermans, 1992: 80) allowed for a gradual internal acceptance of alternative approaches, while preserving internal cohesion. They came about through internal and backchannel dialogues.

The IRA traditionally saw itself as fighting a war of national liberation to expel what it perceived as the unjust and illegitimate 'British occupation' of Northern Ireland. With the explicitly stated goal of creating a Socialist Republic in

the island of Ireland, the IRA defined itself “as the legal representatives of the Irish people”, asserting that it was “morally justified in carrying out a campaign of resistance against foreign occupation forces and domestic collaborators” (Green Book, 1977: 2-3).

Accordingly, the IRA had a very clear movement ideology based on proclaiming the unjust and untenable nature of the political status quo, asserting the need and responsibility to change the situation through a sustained campaign of armed resistance and urging supporters to back their efforts by either joining its ranks or by providing logistical, material or ideational support (Green Book, 1977). Depicting the status quo as one of perpetual warfare, the IRA listed as its enemies “all those opposed to our short-term or long-term objectives” (Green Book, 1977: 6); but focused specifically on the British government, its institutions and representatives, seeing in this sense unionism mainly as a by-product of the British presence rather than as an independent political movement (Neumann, 2005: 955-956). Nationalist parties that did not subscribe to the republican agenda – mainly the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) – were labeled as “collaborationist and thus an enemy of the people” (Green Book, 1977: 6). Politically, the republican movement subscribed to the view that the existing political institutions were illegitimate, with Sinn Féin’s political strategy historically being based on the principle of abstentionism, refusing to take office in both the Republic of Ireland and in the United Kingdom (a policy that ended, respectively, in 1986 and in 1998).

While important internal discussions over strategies and tactics began already in the late 1970s, the republican movement’s gradual reframing of its view of the conflict can be strongly linked to Sinn Féin’s efforts in the mid-1980s to boost its electoral strength (Berti, 2013). In these years Sinn Féin’s leader Gerry Adams began talking about the need to create a “nationalist consensus”, hinting at the necessity to coordinate with both the SDLP and the Irish government (Neumann, 2005: 955-956).

In this context, Gerry Adams entered into backchannel talks with nationalist SDLP leader John Hume. The effect of these conversations was an ideological shift that ‘tempered’ the IRA and Sinn Féin (Reynolds interview, 2010). The six-year dialogue, which occurred secretly until news reports exposed them in 1993 (McKittrick and McVea, 2001: 187), challenged republican ideology by exploring the nature of the conflict and, as a result, the possibilities for resolving it.

At the same time, since 1987, Catholic clergy in Belfast and Derry began helping the IRA and Sinn Féin in conducting an internal dialogue to explore potential political solutions to the conflict. These discussions, spanning five years and occurring alongside the Adams–Hume secret talks, produced two public Sinn Féin documents: the *Scenario for Peace*, in 1987, and a revised version called *Towards a Lasting Peace*, in 1990, which was later used by republican leaders as terms for negotiations and as a tool for internal consensus-building.

During these internal and backchannel dialogues, the republican movement gradually reframed its understanding of the conflict in a substantial way.

First, there was a profound and gradual shift from describing the war in Northern Ireland as a national liberation struggle of an oppressed people against

a colonial power (Britain), to seeing it as the reflection of an internal conflict over the mutually opposite political aspirations of two communities within Northern Ireland (unionist/loyalist Protestants and nationalist/republican Catholics).

In the 1987 *Scenario for Peace*, Sinn Féin, while recognizing that the rights of unionists as a national minority in a United Ireland should be addressed, depicted the conflict as between the republican movement and the United Kingdom. However, by the early 1990s, the tune started to change, also influenced by Hume's view that: "the heart of the problem [for Irish Catholics] was not the British but the Protestants, that the problem was the divisions between Unionists and Nationalists, and that partition was not the cause of division but a symptom of it." Therefore, the "mission of nationalism... was not to drive out the British but to convince Unionism that its concerns could be accommodated in an agreed Ireland" (McKittrick and McVea, 2001: 135). In *Towards a Lasting Peace*, this view is accommodated within a republican framework by stating that: "Peace requires a settlement between Irish nationalists and Irish unionists" (1992). The shift was reiterated in the April 1993 joint statement of Gerry Adams and John Hume, issued after their talks were exposed in the press, as these revelations had placed both leaders under great pressure to produce something important and constructive (McKittrick and McVea, 2001: 190-191). That month, they released a joint statement that acknowledged the "right of the Irish people as a whole to national self-determination", which necessitates reaching an agreement "between all the people of Ireland". Such an agreement is "only viable if it enjoys the allegiance of the different traditions on this island by accommodating diversity and providing for national reconciliation" (Rowan, 1995: 95).

Although the republican movement had always spoken about the right to self-determination as a key element in justifying their cause, the reframing of the struggle as one for self-determination contributed to moving away from the irredentist and absolutist 'independence or civil war' approach of the early days. This indirectly provided a safer ideational space to test new approaches to the republican struggle, by de facto lowering the bar of what victory would look like for republicanism.

In tandem, this process also led the focus to shift from the self-described historical injustice of the past towards stressing the importance of redressing the inequalities of the present, another discursive reframing that allowed to go beyond the 'intractability' of the conflict as well as to strengthen Sinn Féin's role as champion of socio-economic issues, a topic that would become integral to its post-GFA identity (Rafter, 2005).

After the initial statement, Hume and Adams released additional documents about the prospects for launching a new peace process, bringing an atmosphere of anticipation to the public (McKittrick and McVea, 2001: 190-191). Through the later statements, Adams and Hume not only strengthened the references to self-determination, but went further by stressing how "no internal settlement in Northern Ireland" was possible, thus shifting the framing of the British and Irish government from 'enemies' to potential 'persuaders' and active players in assisting to solve the conflict (Neumann, 2005: 955-956). In hindsight, Adams believes that claiming "there can be no internal settlement in Northern Ireland had sent a

clear message to the British and Irish governments and to the unionists that it was time for political change” (Rowan, 1995: 47). The Hume–Adams dialogue has been cited as a “critical juncture that became the cornerstone of the peace process”, and quoted by Adams himself as “probably the most significant element of the peace process” because it “shattered the illusion that the Northern conflict was intractable” (Rowan, 2008: 40-41).

Sinn Féin’s discursive reframing from independence to self-determination and from asymmetrical warfare to internal conflict opened the door to pursuing alternative and unarmed approaches while still preserving the core tenet of republicanism, namely the political vision of a United Ireland, thus minimizing chances for internal strife.

4.2 *Re-Framing the Tools (Action Mobilization Strategies)*

Just as importantly, transitioning from violence to non-violence required the effective use of action mobilization strategies, focusing on ensuring support for the newly chosen means of pursuing the organization’s goals (Klandermans, 1992: 80). These strategies are especially important when attempting to shift an armed organization’s course away from violence, particularly when such a group’s collective identity and ideology – defined as “a verbal image of the good society and of the chief means of constructing it” – (Downs, 1967: 237) is constructed around the notion of the legitimacy and importance of armed struggle and the inherent injustice of the political status quo.

As a self-proclaimed army, the right and responsibility to use force lay at the very core of the IRA’s identity (Green Book, 1977: 4). The IRA’s strategy at the time of writing the *Green Book* was based on the view that the use of force would achieve the group’s political objectives by implementing a strategy of attrition, a ‘Long War’ that would force a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland by making the cost of preserving the status quo unbearable. In this sense, high-profile terrorist attacks in mainland Britain and perennial instability and violence in Northern Ireland served as core elements of this strategy.

With the history of the IRA – itself deeply defined by its armed struggle – the reframing from violence to unarmed politics was an especially important one in building support for peace. The process was complex and gradual.

First, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, republican combatants increasingly felt they were not getting any closer to victory in their fight against the British State (McGuinness, 2010; Gallagher interview, 2010; Logue interview, 2010). The situation was indeed a hurting stalemate (Weinberg *et al.*, 2008), in which the IRA did not envision victory to be within their immediate reach and in which the group also started to believe that the continuation of the status quo – with the ongoing British law-enforcement and military campaigns – would eventually weaken the group and its effectiveness (Corry, 2009; Sheridan interview, 2010).

In 1989, historic IRA strategist Danny Morrison – who had coined the dual-strategy phrase ‘Armalite and ballot box’ in 1981 – stressed the belief that armed struggle was still imperative by stating that “when it is politically costly for the British to remain in Ireland, they’ll go (...) It won’t be triggered until a large number of British soldiers are killed and that’s what’s going to happen” (Smith, 1995:

243). But that once stark belief had already started to shake during the 1980s, in particular due to the rise of republican leaders like Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness who “dispelled” republican perceptions that “victory was imminent” and who argued that armed struggle alone was “inadequate” and politics was necessary to “augment” the struggle (McKittrick and McVea, 2001: 128). The discussion over boosting Sinn Féin’s role became more central following the hunger strikes in the early 1980s. With the issue of the IRA prisoners and their struggle to have their political status recognized in the front pages, the republican movement and Sinn Féin saw indeed a rise in public support, resulting in stronger internal pressure to devote more resources to politics (Berti, 2013: 148-149).

The perceived lack of military breakthroughs was also worsened by the unending violence and civilian bombings between the republican and loyalist organizations in the early 1990s (Foster interview, 2010). During the same period John Hume also publicized problematic death statistics that showed that the IRA had killed six times more people than the British army, RUC (police) and UDR (local infantry regiment) combined (Rowan, 1995: 45). Indeed, the ideological changes that accompanied the Hume – Adams dialogue contributed to the sense of futility around violence. With a perception that high civilian casualties and failure to secure substantial changes on the ground had “dented the confidence of some of our supporters”, the time was ripe for discursive reframing (English, 2003: 260).

Much of this discourse took place in prison. For disillusioned Republicans, prison provided fertile ground, as it gave them the space and “psychological containment” to explore and debate risky ideas (McBride, 2014). Prisoners discussed things that were not being talked about on the outside, and played an active role in the organizational direction of the IRA, from the 1970s till the 1990s (Moloney, 2010: 366). Inmates preserved their command structure, and maintained constant communication with the outside leadership. The sense of community and purpose among republican inmates created an “MO [Modus Operandi] of resistance” and a norm of personal development. Where combatants were grouped together, they supported each other and were “driven” to become “better people to pursue the struggle, not nicer but better, which also meant better [and more critical] thinkers” (Culbert interview, 2010).

Republican leaders’ acknowledgment of the stalemate also greatly increased members’ readiness to accept political engagement as an alternative strategy, not simply part of a dual strategy. It led to an ethical discussion, with Republicans asking themselves, “If we can’t win the war, then why are we prolonging it?” (Logue interview, 2010) and “Why kill?” (Culbert interview, 2010) – although the bulk of the conversation had more to do with the strategic value of armed struggle, rather than its legitimacy. Danny Morrison today describes the transition that occurred within republicanism as “The head had to rule the heart, and the head knew we were in a military stalemate.” (Rowan, 2008: 110). This logic was reflected in Gerry Adams’ briefing to the IRA leadership two days before the IRA’s famous ceasefire announcement of 1994. Embarking on a ceasefire, he said, in order to give the political track a chance, offered “the potential to break ‘the political, constitutional, and military stalemate’” (Rowan, 1995: IX, 98).

In the observations of a senior security figure on the ground in Northern Ireland: “We got as far as we could... Some [Republicans] saw ‘violence until Brits out’, but the more clever ones knew that you can’t just get them out of Ireland... realistically there are 1.5 million in Northern Ireland, and 750-800,000 see themselves as British. So people with more understanding started to recognize that somewhere you had to compromise” (Sheridan interview, 2010). Gradually during the 1990s, senior political and militant figures began referring to the role of force as a bargaining tool in forcing compromise, rather than as the principal means to obtain their political goal (see “TUAS” document, 1994).

In the decade following the 1998 peace agreement, there was another gradual shift in the IRA’s assessment of the role of armed struggle. And in 2005, the organization completed its process of decommissioning, handing over the vast majority of its weapons to the satisfaction of an independent international commission. In the discursive reframing process, the use of force was progressively branded as, at best, unnecessary and, at worst, unhelpful in achieving the desired political goals.

The IRA’s historic decommissioning announcement reflects both the strategic nature of its decision and the priority it placed on internal consensus and consultations in order to grant legitimacy to the decisions of the leadership:

The leadership of Oglaiigh na hEireann [IRA] has formally ordered an end to the armed campaign [...] The Army Council took these decisions following an unprecedented internal discussion and consultation process with IRA units and Volunteers. [...] The outcome of our consultations show very strong support among IRA Volunteers for the Sinn Fein peace strategy. (IRA, 2005)

Such strategic logic is again reflected in Adams’ speech that same year: “In the past, I have defended the right of the IRA to engage in armed struggle. I did so because there was no alternative... now there is an alternative... The way forward is by building political support for republican and democratic objectives across Ireland and by winning support for these goals internationally” (Adams, 2005).

Juxtaposing these messages illustrates how the group branded its transition as a strategic, rather than ideological one, thus not having to denounce its past or relinquish its vision. In turn, this helped the group in ensuring (mostly) internal cohesion and ideological continuity.

5 Delivering the Message and Implementing the Transition

The process of discursive reframing happened over the course of two decades within the republican movement, spurred by political leaders and prisoners, and largely supported internally. Leading this process were a number of new leaders who had risen within the IRA during the latter part of the 1970s with the gradual replacement of the traditional leadership of the movement. The new republican leadership focused as much on armed struggle as on grassroots mobilization and on building a political constituency. This new leadership, particularly through

Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and Danny Morrison, gradually gained control of some key posts within the republican movement, with Adams being elected as Sinn Féin president in 1983 (Hannigan, 1985). Adams and McGuinness allegedly also became part of the IRA Army Council, although this claim cannot be ascertained and is still denied by republican leaders (Rafter, 2005). In turn, it was this integration between military and political objectives and leaders that made sure that the discursive reframing publicly spurred by Sinn Féin was not pursued against the wishes of the Army Council – the IRA’s de facto executive body.

With Gerry Adams playing a crucial role, the internal debate in the 1990s focused on analysing the advantages of non-violent resistance (*not* pacifism) (Foster interview, 2010). This option was carefully framed in line with the broader ideological framework, thus allowing combatants to maintain their sense of loyalty.

The senior leaders promised that their “aims and objectives (...) would not change, the organization would remain intact, [and] munitions would not be handed over in case there was a need to return to violence.” They carefully maintained their credibility and purposefully managed sentiments and morale within the movement. Sentiments varied by seniority, with mid- and high-ranking commanders overall cynical yet willing, and with the grassroots membership far more reluctant to implement a ceasefire (Rowan, 2008: 85).

Leaders kept their “finger on the pulse” and actively engaged people at all levels of the organization and among republican supporters. “People in the areas knew us”, recounts one senior Republican. “We’re part of our communities”, and this minimized suspicion that the leadership might betray its followers (Culbert interview, 2010). Both Adams and McGuinness were ex-prisoners who had strong credentials and reputations within the republican movement, particularly because of the alleged positions on the Army Council. Consultations continued at all stages, including during and after the Good Friday talks, as Sinn Féin negotiators continuously went back to confer with the IRA Army Council at every step (unnamed interview, 2010).

Gestures were also important in maintaining credibility: After the Hume – Adams talks were exposed and loyalist – republican killings spiked in 1993, Gerry Adams publicly carried the coffin of an IRA bomber alongside masked gunmen at his crowded funeral. Adams did this knowing he would be heavily criticized by the media and that it would make it harder to engage in inter-party talks, but he did it “to stay connected as a leader with his own people” (Corry, 2009: 11). One NGO practitioner describes Adams as “the thinker” and McGuinness as “the relational person, who kept the boys together” (Corry interview, 2010).

Clearly, the internal discussions over prioritizing unarmed struggle and political activism were backed by important Republicans with militant pasts as well as by internal processes of consultation. The consultations required for the Republicans to make this transition also reflected the strategic nature of their reconciliation with unionism: The Republicans did not suddenly “believe that violence was morally wrong” (Rowan, 1995: 84). Indeed, the discussion did not focus on the legitimacy, but rather on the utility of force, thus allowing the group to preserve its political goals and honor its past.

Despite some internal dissent, the IRA agreed to an unconditional ceasefire in August 1994 in order to create conditions that would enable Sinn Féin to pursue Track 1 negotiations with the British government. To gather support for such a move, the IRA leadership assigned a team, led by ex-prisoners Bobby Storey and Brian Keenan, “long recognized as two of the hardest men of the IRA” with “pasts that preserved their credibility” (Rowan, 2008: 36), to prevent other groups – mainly the INLA and Republican Sinn Féin – from spoiling this process (Rowan, 1995: 101). The darker side of these efforts, however, was that vocal critics were marginalized and dissent was actively suppressed. PR materials supporting political negotiations with the British were sent into the prisons, while IRA members who rejected the new strategy were moved to criminal blocks (away from political prisoners), excluded from meetings and suffered “character assassinations” (Foster interview, 2010). Dissenters alleged that the Northern Ireland police (RUC) began targeting and arresting those Republicans who opposed Adams and that Sinn Féin strictly imposed discipline for the sake of unity, even threatening death to defectors (Foster interview, 2010; Moloney, 2007).

The republican leadership’s emphasis on gaining endorsement of the prison population both to justify the ceasefire and to pressure the British is reflected in Sinn Féin’s newspaper *An Phoblacht*, which described republican support for peace this way in 1995: “No one is dissenting from the peace process and we accept there is a need for dialogue. The view from the jail is that they [the British] hoped to put pressure on the IRA and wreck the peace process, but in being flexible the IRA has taken the moral high ground” (Rowan, 1995: IX-X).

Once released, IRA ex-prisoners, given their unique credibility, played an activist role in changing public and combatant sentiment towards non-violence (Culbert interview, 2010; Mason interview, 2010). Their influence rested on their ability to reformulate paramilitary strategy and enable combatants to abandon the violent struggle without abandoning the cause or betraying their comrades (Mason, 2011). Beginning in 1994, these ex-prisoner leaders even worked together with their loyalist enemies (whom they knew from prison) to preserve the ceasefires (Roberts interview, 2010).

External players were also important in helping republican leaders build internal consensus for the strategic shift away from armed struggle. The rise of the United States as a credible and ‘honest’ mediator in the early 1990s is a clear example of this trend. The election of Bill Clinton in 1993 presented leaders like Gerry Adams with the opportunity to make the case that backing the peace process was the best strategic choice for the republican camp. Not only was there a general perception that President Clinton was invested in the peace process and “substantially influenced” by the Irish-American lobby (‘TUAS’ document, 1994), but his own decision to grant Gerry Adams a visa to visit the US in January 1994 contributed to simultaneously increasing the republican camp’s trust in the potential role of the United States as an ‘honest broker’ (including its ability to stand up to the British government) as well as to strengthen the notion that negotiations did not mean surrender or abandonment of republican ideological beliefs (Stevenson, 1996-1997). The international legitimacy granted to Adams and McGuinness was a crucial tool used by the republican leadership to demon-

strate the fruits of the democratic, non-violent process. In addition, it is important to note the vital roles played by the Irish and British governments, who positioned themselves as secondary parties and ethnoguarantors (Byrne, 2007) for the local parties in Northern Ireland. Private reassurances and public gestures made by London and Dublin throughout the 1990s, such as Dublin's lifting of the infamous broadcasting ban, were hugely influential in enabling the republican leadership to build support within its movement for peace negotiations and a peaceful outcome.

In general terms, the consensus-building process was successful as it allowed preserving a substantial backing from the majority of the group's supporters, particularly its combatants. At the same time, there were a number of 'hard-core' irredentist members who rejected the entire process, eventually leading to an internal split in October 1997 and to the creation of the Real IRA (RIRA), along with the 'sympathetic' 32-Counties Sovereignty Movement. While the RIRA never gained prominence or influence, still the group has been responsible for a number of gruesome terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, the bulk of IRA membership and weaponry remained under the command of the IRA leadership as it transitioned away from violence.

6 Summary and Discussion

The issue of how violent organizations build internal consensus to persuade their militant constituency to support the transition from armed conflict to political negotiations is an important yet under-researched question in both the conflict resolution and the security studies literature. Yet building internal consensus for such a shift while preserving both cohesion and a sense of ideological continuity is a key challenge, requiring armed groups to invest in internal strategies to rally militant and grassroots supporters behind their planned transition.

It was a task that the IRA leadership took very seriously. Indeed, Sinn Féin's leader Gerry Adams famously said: "The most important and crucial negotiation was with our own constituency, particularly with the activist core of this constituency" (Adams, 2003: 288), highlighting the importance and complexity of intra-group consensus-building.

The article tackles the question on intra-group consensus-building by focusing on the case study of the 'republican movement' in Northern Ireland. It emphasizes the importance of internal discursive practices to ensure frame-shifting in both the understanding of the conflict (consensus mobilization) and the means chosen to wage it (action mobilization). In the case of the IRA, these included reframing the conflict from an asymmetric war of national liberation to an internal conflict and from a struggle for independence to one for self-determination. In addition, the republican movement also reframed its view of the utility of force, eventually depicting armed struggle as unnecessary or finally unhelpful to their cause. While none of these changes forced the group to revise its ultimate political vision, they provided an expanded and more pragmatic framework, one that allowed for concessions and adaptations to be made without losing face.

Our analysis of the republican camp's reframing of both the Northern Ireland conflict and its operational strategy reveals a number of interesting commonalities: in both types of mobilization, the process of discursive reframing was gradual and complex. Even more importantly, in both cases new operational and political concepts were presented in a way that would protect the legacy of the group's past and its constitutive values while adjusting to the shifts in reality. The result was the creation of a new political discourse that ensured ideological continuity with the past while also proposing an alternative future political path. Political and community empowerment through Sinn Féin, also allowed the combatants' sense of purpose and identity to remain untouched as it offered an alternative outlet for serving the republican cause. Ideological continuity allowed the group to 'save-face' and avoid having to deny or recuse its past or accept defeat, both options that would have in all likelihood increased the chances of internal conflict.

In addition, an analysis of the republican camp's reframing process in the decade prior to the GFA emphasizes the importance of enlisting credible supporters from within the 'militant constituency' – such as former prisoners and/or militants with deep and personal involvement in the group's armed struggle – to further emphasize the sense of continuity with the past and thus minimize chances for internal strife.

Crucially, the nature of peacemaking in Northern Ireland never sought to redress this cognitive gap between the IRA's *de facto* renunciation of violence and its *de jure* retaining of the legitimacy of armed struggle. Likewise, just as the IRA was not asked to denounce the legitimacy of violence (but only to cease its active use), the group was also never forced to de-conflict its continuing commitment to an all-island Republic of Ireland with its participation in the political institutions of (British) Northern Ireland. By focusing on the IRA's actions rather than on its internal reframing, the GFA was created and signed, ending decades of bloody war. This in turn seems to point to the importance of better understanding armed groups' intra-group dynamics, 'sacred values' and internal discursive practices.

The seemingly imperfect and 'ambiguous' commitment to peace required by the main warring parties in Northern Ireland has meaningful implications for general management or resolution of violent conflict. As a less ambitious outcome than those typically pursued by peace-builders and conflict resolution practitioners, the case of Northern Ireland seems to suggest that a strategy shift may be useful in cases where final status reconciliation is unlikely in the near future. Indeed, the GFA never managed to reconcile the political visions of the main conflicting parties. Yet, seventeen years later, all the main sides continue to honor their commitment to a non-violent pursuit of their goals by jointly managing the political and economic affairs of a society that remains deeply divided and sectarian. Still, with all its shortcomings, imperfect peace and cognitive ambiguity are inherently preferable to open war and ideological rigidity.

References

- Adams, G. (2003). *A farther shore: Ireland's long road to peace*. New York: Random House.
- Adams, G. (2005). *Speech*. Reprinted in Rowan, B. (2008). *How the peace was won*. Gill and Macmillan Press: Dublin.
- Bakke, K.M., Gallagher Cunningham, K. & Seymour, L.J.M. (2012). A plague of initials: Fragmentation, cohesion, and infighting in civil wars. *Perspectives on Politics*, 10(2), 265-283.
- Berti, B. (2013). *Armed-political organizations: From conflict to integration*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Byrne, S. (2007). Mired in intractability: The roles of external ethno-guarantors and primary mediators in Cyprus and Northern Ireland. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 24(2), 149-172.
- Cochrane, F. (2013). *Northern Ireland: The reluctant peace*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Corry, G. (2009). *Overview of peace process concepts from the perspective of a practitioner*. Unpublished paper. Revised with Patrick Hynes.
- Crenshaw, M. (1991). How terrorism declines. In C. McCauley (Ed.), *Terrorism research and public policy* (pp. 69-87). London: Frank Cass.
- Downs, A. (1967). *Inside bureaucracy*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- English, R. (2003). *Armed struggle. The history of the IRA*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fitzduff, M. (2002). *Beyond violence: Conflict resolution process in Northern Ireland*. New York: United Nations University Press.
- Green Book (Book I and II)* (1997) Available at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/organ/ira/ira_green_book.htm>.
- Hannigan, J.A. (1985). The Armalite and the ballot box: Dilemmas of strategy and ideology in the provisional IRA. *Social Problems*, 33(1), 31-40.
- Hoffman, B. (2006, May 4, 19). *The use of the Internet by Islamic extremists*. Testimony presented to the U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Available at: <www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND_CT262-1.pdf>.
- IRA statement in full. (2005). *BBC News*. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/4724599.stm>.

Benedetta Berti & Ariel Heifetz Knobel

Kelley, K.J. (1988). *The Longest War: Northern Ireland and the IRA*, 2nd edition. Westport: CT, L. Hill.

Klandermans, B. (1992). The social construction of protest and multi-organizational fields. In A. Morris & C. McClurg Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers in social movement theory* (pp. 77-103). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lilja, J. (2012). Outbidding and the decision to negotiate. In W. Zartman, M. Anstey & P. Meerts (Eds.), *The slippery slope to genocide: Reducing identity conflicts and preventing mass murder* (pp. 126-153). Oxford Scholarship Online, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199791743.001.0001.

McAulay, J. & Spencer, G. (Eds.). (2011). *Ulster loyalism after the Good Friday agreement: History, identity and change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

McKittrick, D. & McVea, D. (2001). *Making sense of the troubles*. London: Penguin Books.

Moloney, E. (2007). *A secret history of the IRA* (International ed.). Canada: Penguin.

Moloney, E. (2010). *Voices from the grave: Two men's war in Ireland*. New York: Perseus Books Group.

Moore, G., Loizides, N., Sandal, N.A. & Lordos, A. (2014). Winning peace frames: Intra-ethnic outbidding in Northern Ireland and Cyprus. *West European Politics*, 37(1), 159-181. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2013.801576.

Neumann, P.R. (2005). The bullet and the ballot box: The case of the IRA. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 28(6), 941-975.

Nilsson, D. (2008). Partial peace: Rebel groups inside and outside civil war settlements. *Journal of Peace Research*, 45(4), 479-495.

Pearlman, W. (2009). Spoiling inside and out: Internal political contestation and the Middle East peace process. *International Security*, 33(3), 79-109.

Pfeffer, J. (1981). *Power and organizations*. Marshfield: Pitman Publishing Inc.

Putnam, R. (1988). Diplomacy and domestic politics: The logic of two-level games. *International Organization*, 42(3), 427-460.

Rafter, K. (2005). *Sinn Fein, 1905-2005: In the shadow of Gunmen*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.

Rowan, B. (1995). *Behind the lines: The story of the IRA and loyalist ceasefires*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press.

Rowan, B. (2008). *How the peace was won*. Dublin: Gill & MacMillan Ltd.

Schneckener, U. (2009). *Spoilers or governance actors? Engaging armed non-state groups in areas of limited statehood* (Research Center (SFB) 700: Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood – New Modes of Governance, Working Paper Series, no. 21). Available at: <www.sfb-governance.de/en/publikationen>.

Shirlow, P., Tonge, J., Mcauley, J. & McGlynn, C. (2010). *Abandoning historical conflict? Former political prisoners and reconciliation in Northern Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Sinn Féin Ard Chomhairle. (May 1987/November 1989). *A scenario for peace* [Discussion paper]. Available at: <www.sinnfein.ie/files/2009/AScenarioforPeace.pdf>.

Smith, M.L.R. (1995). *Fighting for Ireland? The military strategy of the Irish Republican Movement*. Routledge: London.

Smithey, L. (2011). *Unionists, loyalists and conflict transformation in Northern Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stevenson, J. (1996-1997, Winter). Northern Ireland: Treating terrorists as statesmen. *Foreign Policy*, 105, 125-140.

Terchek, R.J. (1977). Conflict and cleavage in Northern Ireland. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 433, 47-59.

Tonge, J. (2014). *Northern Ireland: Conflict and change*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Towards a lasting peace. (1992). Available at: <www.sinnfein.ie/contents/15212>.

'TUAS' document. (1994). Available at: <<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/organ/ira/tuas94.htm>>.

Weinberg, L., Pedahzur, A. & Perliger, A. (2008). *Political parties and terrorist groups*. London: Routledge.

White, T. (2013). *Lessons from the Northern Ireland peace process*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Interviews³

Ahern, Bertie, Former Prime Minister (Taoiseach) of Ireland and signatory to the Good Friday Agreement, July 2010, Dublin, Ireland.

Corry, Geoffrey, Former Chair, Glencree Center for Peace and Reconciliation, July 2010, Dublin, Ireland.

3 Interviews were conducted during June to August 2010 by Ariel Heifetz Knobel.

Benedetta Berti & Ariel Heifetz Knobel

Culbert, Michael, Director, Coiste na n-Iarchimi (Republican ex-prisoners network) and IRA ex-life sentence prisoner, July 2010, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Foster, Gerry, Development worker, Teach na Failte (Republican socialist prisoners/ex-prisoners support group) and INLA ex-prisoner, July 2010, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Gallagher, Dermott, Former Director-General, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, July 2010, Dublin, Ireland.

Logue, Paddy, Co-founder, An Teach Ban (Donegal Peace Centre), August 2010, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Mason, Gary, Methodist Minister/Superintendent, East Belfast Mission and intermediary to Loyalist paramilitaries, July 2010, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Reynolds, Gerry, Catholic Priest, Clonard Monastery; former intermediary to the IRA, August 2010, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Roberts, Tom, Director, Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Center (Loyalist ex-prisoners association); Chair, Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium; UVF ex-life sentence prisoner, July 2010, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Sheridan, Peter, Chief Executive, Cooperation Ireland; former Assistant Chief Constable of Northern Ireland, Royal Ulster Constabulary, August 2010, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

White, Ian, Founder/Director of International and Political Programmes, Glenree Center for Peace and Reconciliation, August 2010, Wicklow, Ireland.

Public Lectures⁴

Mason, Gary. (2011). Public Lecture at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. November 5.

McBride, Peter. (2014). Public Panel at Sapir College, Sderot, Israel. May 29.

McGuinness, Martin. (2010). Public Panel at the Falls Road Library, Belfast, Northern Ireland. August 3.

4 Public Lectures were attended during 2010 to 2014 by Ariel Heifetz Knobel.