# Reality Check: The Real IRA's Tactical Adaptation and Restraint in the Aftermath of the Omagh Bombing

by John Morrison

## Abstract

*The Real IRA (RIRA) has been the most consistently active of all of the violent dissident republican (VDR) groups in a post-Troubles Northern Ireland, including in its contemporary guise as the New IRA. This group's violence has claimed the lives of police officers, soldiers, suspected-drug dealers, its own members, and innocent civilians. Shortly after its formation, the group's members were responsible for the single worst atrocity of the Troubles—the Omagh bombing of August 1998. From that attack to the group's resurgence in 2007, its violent activity changed in focus. This was largely a result of the post-Omagh response from the legislature and security services. These external pressures worked in parallel with internal brakes to violent activity. The present article utilises the internal brakes typology alongside political organisational theory to assess the non-violent decision-making processes during this period. Central to this analysis is the consideration of the primacy of organisational survival. In the article, primary source interviews and organisational statements are assessed.*

**Keywords:** Northern Ireland, Real IRA, terrorism, restraint, dissidents

## Introduction

The Troubles in Northern Ireland are over. The conflict that claimed the lives of more than 3,600 people [1] was ostensibly brought to an end with the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in April 1998. Alongside the subsequent St. Andrew's Agreement, this has brought Northern Ireland on a slow transition into a post-conflict society. Huge milestones have been reached. The Provisional IRA have put their arms beyond use and are now on permanent ceasefire. There are no longer British Army Patrols on the streets of Northern Ireland. The often unstable, power-sharing agreement is in place. As a result, the people of Northern Ireland are jointly governed by political representatives from their own communities.

However, there are still those who aim to drag the country back to the dark days of conflict. Most notably, violent dissident republican (VDR) groups have continued to engage in paramilitary activity. The most dominant of these groups have been the Continuity IRA (CIRA), Óglaigh na hÉireann (ONH), Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD) and the Real IRA (RIRA). None of these have been able to maintain the consistency, lethality, or the levels of support that their predecessors in the Provisional IRA (PIRA) had during the Troubles. Yet theirs is still a threat to be taken seriously. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement these groups have been collectively responsible for the murder of police officers, soldiers, drug dealers, their own membership, suspected 'touts' [2] and innocent civilians. The most lethal of these groups has been the RIRA. In the first year of their existence, they were responsible for the single most deadly attack of the Troubles, the August 1998 Omagh bombing. In more recent years, under their new guise as the New IRA, they are more consistently associated with the targeting of police officers, prison officers, and drug-dealers within Republican communities, rather than mass casualty bombings such as Omagh.

In his analysis of VDR activity, Horgan proposed that there are three distinct waves of violent dissident republican activity. The first wave relates to the pre-Omagh bombing period from August 31st, 1994 (the first known armed activity of the CIRA) to August 15th, 1998 (the day of the Omagh bombing). The second wave was from August 16th, 1998 to January 27th, 2007. The final, contemporary wave starts on January 28th, 2007 (the day of Sinn Féin's endorsement of the PSNI as the legitimate police force of Northern Ireland), and continues to the present day. While the first and third waves are defined by the upward trajectory of violent activity, the

middle wave is noteworthy for the sporadic nature of the campaign.[3] By applying the internal brakes typology and political organisational theory, this article seeks to assess the nature and focus of the organisation's violence in the years that immediately followed Omagh. In doing so, the article aims to address the role that internal brakes and external pressures played in the violent and non-violent decision-making processes of the dissident republican organisation. Central to this analysis is an assessment of the role that the primacy of organisational survival can and does play in organisational decision-making processes.

## *Internal Brakes and Organisational Survival*

In their 2019 analysis of why extremist groups choose not to engage in violent activity or specific forms of violent activity, Busher, Holbrook and Macklin propose a typology of 'internal brakes' on violent escalation.[4] These internal brakes are conceived of as the intra-group mechanisms that inform the decision not to engage in, or to limit their use of, violence. Thus, the typology does not focus on the external factors such as counter measures deployed by the police, security services, or other state or non-state actors. Within the descriptive typology, detailed across this Special Issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*, they identify brakes that work on five different logics: strategic logic, moral logic, logic of ego maintenance, logic of out-group definition, and organisational logic.

Upon assessment, one can see the parallels between the proposed typology and political organisational theory. The central premise of political organisational theory is that the primary aim of the political organisation, either violent or non-violent, is organisational survival. This has to be achieved before the group can even begin to consider the achievement of the ultimate strategic goals, their desired *public goods*.[5] In order to ensure the organisation's survival there has to be a consideration of keeping both the membership and external support, both passive and active, on one's side. This resonates with the emphasis in the internal brakes typology on brakes that work on concerns about how the use of certain forms of violence might undermine external support for the group. This can, in turn, have a detrimental effect on the possibilities of organisational survival.

It would be understandable to consider organisational survival purely in terms of numerical assessments of internal membership and external support. However, it has been proposed that we need a more nuanced understanding of survival that goes beyond this quantification. For example, for those 'fundamentalists' within the terrorist organisation it is not enough for the organisation to just survive as an entity, it must survive in a form they both respect and recognise. Therefore, if there is a threat to what they see as the fundamental identity or direction of the group, be that strategic, tactical, ideological or otherwise, this can cause internal conflict and the potential fragmentation of the group.[6] This aspiration for the survival of the organisation in a form that the membership both respects and recognises can be seen at play in the moral logic and ego maintenance brakes.

The moral logic brake relates to where moral norms and evaluations are developed by the extremists to provide a set of principles that must be met before they engage in violent activity. This can include the identification of specific groups, individuals or locations as illegitimate targets of violence in general, or alternatively specific forms of violence. By maintaining these moral stances, it can also assist in maintaining the organisational survival. When this logic is persistently ignored it can threaten the continued unity of the group.

When considering ego maintenance this relates to how the group wishes to self-identify. This covers the groups' narratives surrounding their non-violence and their disassociation from internal factions, or external partners, who engage in more, of different, violent activity. If there is a persistent and negatively construed divergence from the established narrative, whether the divergence is perceived or actual, this can also be a threat to the both the numerical survival of the organisation and the survival of the group in a form that is both respected and recognise.

The divergence referred to above can be seen illustrated in the final brake, that of organisational logic. This includes organisational developments that may influence the decision-making processes of the groups. When considering this through the lens of political organisational theory it is imperative that any significant organisational developments, especially when the development(s) could potentially be considered threatening to the organisational identity, are managed in a gradual and considered manner so as to provide the best opportunity to maintain organisational unity both in terms of membership and support.

There are clear illustrations of both successful and unsuccessful implementation of such organisational developments in paramilitary Irish Republicanism. A clear example of this comes at the very origins of the Troubles. During the mid to late 1960s the demilitarisation of the IRA was being proposed in tangent with significant political change within the movement. When considered in conjunction with the destabilising context of late 1960s Northern Ireland, the proposed organisational logic of full demilitarisation was seen by those who ultimately exited the movement to form the Provisional IRA as threatening to the organisational identity of the movement. In contrast, when one considers the gradual politicisation of the Provisional Republican movement at the end of the Troubles this was more successful due to the gradual implementation of organisational developments, including the adherence to non-violence. This only took place at times when the leadership were in a position to maintain the membership and support of the large majority of the movement. [7] The purpose of the internal brakes typology is to focus on the internal decision-making processes since, as the authors observe, this aspect of what inhibits further escalation of violence has tended to receive less scholarly attention than questions about how violence is inhibited by external developments. However, in order to get a holistic understanding one must, as Busher, Holbrook and Macklin acknowledge, also consider how the brakes relate to external pressures on the group, as well as the broader context in which they find themselves. These external factors can and do have significant impact on the internal decision-making processes.[8]

### Irish Republican Brakes

When considering the combined application of the internal brakes typology and political organisational theory across paramilitary Irish republicanism, there are clear examples illustrating their applicability to our understanding of Republican non-violence. One only needs to go to the direct orders of the training and induction manual, the Green Book, to see the directives in place as to what form of violent activity is acceptable and what is not. Contained within this are discussions of how the choice of victims and targets is defined by the conditions in which volunteers find themselves. Here we can see that, upon their initial arrival in Northern Ireland, that the British Army, later the primary target, were not considered justifiable victims.

> In September 1969 the existing conditions dictated that the Brits were not to be shot, but after the Falls curfew all Brits were to the people acceptable targets. The existing conditions had been changed.[9]

Within the same section the manual outlines how the constitutional nationalist party, the SDLP, was not a legitimate target. This was in spite of the perception that they had proven to be 'collaborationist and thus an enemy of the people'.[10] However, as they were political representatives of the broader nationalist community, involved in the campaign for civil rights, they were not deemed to be legitimate targets. For both the internal membership and the external support of the group it is imperative that there is a clear set of boundaries established as to who is a legitimate target, and who is not. If these boundaries are repeatedly crossed without clear strategic justification this can prove to be detrimental to the long-term survival of the organisation.

Evidence of internal brakes is present not just in relation to the targeting of individuals. It also relates to the geographical location of violence, as demonstrated in the Army Council Easter 1950 statement on the clarification of Republican objectives. In this it is stated that:

> ...in order that no excuse may be provided for using coercion, and to define quite clearly the fact that the

Irish Republican Army has only one enemy, England, no sanction will be given for any type of aggressive military action in the 26-County area.[11]

While this was presented nineteen years prior to the dawn of the Troubles, and became official policy in 1954,[12] it was brought forward into the contemporary conflict as General Army Order no.8. As a result, the direct and purposeful targeting of members of An Garda Síochana (the national police force of the Republic of Ireland) was not deemed to be morally or strategically logical, even though like the RUC they were actively investigating the actions of the paramilitary Republicans. Despite this, there were a number of Gardaí killed by both the PIRA and INLA during the course of the Troubles. Gary Sheehan, Frank Hand, Seamus Quaid, Michael Clerkin, Samuel Donegan, and Jerry McCabe each lost their lives in PIRA armed activities. However, in each instance they were not the direct target of a pre-planned operation. Instead, they were killed in the process of disrupting paramilitary operations, kidnapping, bank or post office robberies.

Throughout the history of the PIRA, and all other Republican groups, there has been a series of ceasefires.[13] These have allowed the leadership of the movement to negotiate with a variety of actors, be they the Northern Irish Office, intermediaries to the British government, or the government itself. Ceasefires allowed members to regroup, while taking a break from intense conflict. During these ceasefires, the targeting of members of the security forces was generally called off – a clear example of 'brakes' being applied. However, this cessation did not stretch to all forms of violent activities. As noted by Silke, in the aftermath of the 1994 ceasefire, while there was a cessation in nationalised 'terrorist' violence, there was a marked increase in localised paramilitary style attacks targeting known criminals, and suspected informers.[14] From the perspective of political organisational theory, the continued utility of divergent forms of violence, and organisational activity, are necessary in order to maintain the chances of organisational survival. They allow the group to maintain a powerful and threatening presence within the areas in which they operate, thus maintaining the support of their membership and the republican communities they claim to represent. It also demonstrates to those who could potentially threaten their power and existence that they are still in control and their cessation should not be mistaken for their exit.

At the heart of all the decision-making by the Provisional IRA during the Troubles, with a permanent eye on what could negatively impact on their organisational survival, was the public reaction. Bloom and Horgan in their analysis of the short-lived utility of the proxy-bombing tactic emphasise that '[t]he sensitivity to public support and reaction to operations circumscribed what the IRA could and could not do.'[15] In their analysis, they point out that the ultimate rejection of human proxies was not a signal of a shift from extreme violence, but more accurately 'a shift in focus on and sensitivity to civilian targets.'

From its writings, it is clear that the paramilitary leadership took this issue of public support into consideration. In order to maintain their support that the group must be able to rationalise their actions externally. This is especially apparent when the violence went outside of their general principles. In certain instances post-rationalisation, they may have to take a localised 'hit' in support. This is only when necessary and not detrimental to organisational survival.

> Many instances have arisen and will arise again when we have had to step outside these general terms of reference to our immediate detriment propaganda-wise and support-wise. However even in such an eventuality, if we rationalise our action, get our defensive before our offensive, try to ensure that we have an alternative, relatively unaffected area of support from which to operate if the support in the area which the detrimental but unavoidable action takes place, we are adhering as best as possible under the circumstances to a proper conduct of the war.[16]

## The Present Study

Represented above are just some of the proposed internal brakes manifested in PIRA activity and directions. The remainder of the article will now present the case of the post-Omagh RIRA. The central aim of the research is to assess if and when the internal brakes typology and political organisational theory is applicable to this case. Any assessment of a clandestine organisation's violent or non-violent decision-making is methodologically challenging. For the purposes of this article a variety of data sources have been analysed. This includes organisational statements,[17] media interviews, state legislation, an interview with the leader at the time of the Omagh bombing of the 32 County Sovereignty Movement and a first-hand interview with a founding member of the RIRA with insight into the violent and non-violent decision-making processes. Both of these interviews were carried out for a previous project.[18] These limited data sources will never be able to give a holistic picture of the decision-making processes in the organisation. However, they can provide the foundation of understanding on which further research can be based. When considering the statements and interviews one must always be aware that the individuals and organisation are outlining how they wish to be portrayed. One must therefore be careful not to over-interpret the findings from any one source.

The methodological approaches to the analysis of the organisational statements, and primary source interviews are described in detail in previous publications.[19] The RIRA interviewee was one of a series of leadership and rank-and-file members of paramilitary republicanism interviewed. Snowball sampling was applied as a sampling technique. The author was put in contact with the interviewee by a former member of the Provisional IRA. The interview was carried out in a public place and was not recorded, at the request of the interviewee. Contemporaneous notes of the interview were developed and verified by the interviewee. Prior to the interview, the interviewee was informed of the purpose of the research, and their right to withdraw at any point. For personal security purposes, they did not wish to sign a consent form. However, they gave verbal consent to their participation in the research. At no stage did any discussion relate to information pertinent to live investigations. In the original analysis interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse all of this interviews. This approach was not repeated for the present research. Instead, select quotes were assessed, based on their relevance to the non-violent decision-making processes of the organisation.

A database of over 200 organisational statements and interviews was compiled to gain an understanding of how the RIRA, and its sister organisations wished to portray themselves. These were sourced from local and national media sources in Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as from Irish republican specific publications. In previous publications, these have been analysed using grounded theory. However, as with the primary source interview, for the purpose of this article select quotes were assessed, based on their relevance to the non-violent decision-making processes of the organisation.

## Real Brakes

On August 15th, 1998, the RIRA was responsible for the single deadliest atrocity of the Troubles. Just after 3pm a 500lb car bomb detonated on Market Street, Omagh. Those responsible called in a series of telephone warnings. However, these contained inaccurate information about the location of the bomb and when it would detonate. This resulted in the police moving the public towards the direction of the explosive, rather than away from it, as was their intention. In total 29 people were killed by the blast, including one mother and her unborn twins. The devastation was compounded further by the hundreds more wounded, many suffering life-altering injuries.

This attack took place 13 weeks after the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, the deal that was internationally lauded as providing the foundations for peace in Northern Ireland. It was also just nine months after the RIRA had formed from a split with the Provisional IRA (PIRA). The group was led by the former Quartermaster General of the PIRA, Michael McKevitt, and leading members of the Provos' [20] Engineering

Department. While the Reals were small in number, they were highly experienced.[21] In the weeks and months preceding the Omagh bomb, they had demonstrated their intention and capability to carry out large-scale bombings to destabilise the nascent peace. Just two weeks previous, the group was responsible for an almost identical attack in Banbridge, County Down. Both bombings took place mid-afternoon on a Saturday. Once again, a 500lb car bomb was placed in the town. Once again, a warning was called in. This time it was only 20 minutes prior to detonation, but with more accurate information than the Omagh warnings. This was not enough time for the police to appropriately evacuate the town centre. The blast injured 33 civilians and two police, causing an estimated £4 million in damage.[22]

Omagh is a predominantly Catholic nationalist town. The bombing was perpetrated at a time of great hope for Northern Ireland, hope that the atrocities of the Troubles were to become a distant memory. The town was targeted in the mid-afternoon on a Saturday, one of the busiest times of the week. The victims were innocent civilians, a number of whom were Spanish tourists. Neither the location nor the victims of the attack could be considered a legitimate target of 'war.' The combination of these factors resulted in an immense local, national and international backlash against those responsible. This backlash allowed both the British and Irish governments to rush through draconian legislation, with the stated aim of bringing those responsible to justice.[23] This included the 1998 Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act in Ireland. This allowed an individual's refusal to answer questions relating to terrorist activity and orchestration while under police interrogation to be held as evidence against them when under trial.

Three days after the Omagh bombing the RIRA announced a suspension to all operations. In doing so they offered their 'apologies to these civilians.' In this statement, they claimed that the attack was 'part of an ongoing war against the Brits.'[24] This suspension, which included internal consultations on the future direction of the group,[25] was quickly followed by a complete cessation of violence on September 8th. This did not prevent the deterioration in the already minimal membership or support of the paramilitaries and their political wing, the 32 County Sovereignty Committee (now known as the 32 County Sovereignty Movement).[27] For many within republicanism the cessation was not sufficient. This is demonstrated in an extract from an interview with a representative of the Provisional IRA on September 3rd, 1998.

> [M]any republicans feel…aggrieved that they have tarnished the name of Óglaigh na hÉireann and many are justifiably angry at their use of the term `Real IRA'. The grouping have done only disservice to the republican cause. They have no coherent political strategy, they are not a credible alternative to the Irish Republican Army. In the immediate aftermath of the Omagh bomb they announced a temporary halt to their actions. This is insufficient. They should disband and they should do so sooner rather than later.[28]

The sentiment expressed above manifested in leading members of the Provisional IRA paying visits to the homes of some 60 members and associates of the RIRA. The ostensible purpose of these visits was to issue threats against any future activity by the group. The visits and threats took place at a time when the leadership of the RIRA was already laying the groundwork for a ceasefire.

Even without these interventions, those who had just recently defected from the Provisionals and Sinn Fein to join the Reals were turning their backs on the newly formed paramilitary group, a point emphasised in an interview with a former member of the group.

> The Omagh bombing stopped the influx of new recruits and support who were loyal before…Omagh was a mistake, not the way things should have been done on a mission.[29]

When the decision was made by the Army Council of the RIRA, and later the Army Convention, to enter into a ceasefire, this was based on the awareness that the Omagh bombing had been a disaster for the newly formed paramilitary movement. As a result of the internal, security, legislative, and public backlash, cessation of violent activity was the only way to have a chance of securing the organisational survival, and thus to

have any chance of extending their paramilitary campaign. This is reflected by a member of the RIRA Army Council, interviewed by Mooney and O'Toole, when discussing the internal leadership deliberations in the direct aftermath of Omagh.

> It was very glum. We were all quiet because we knew how serious things were. There was a debate about what we should do next, after this disaster. We knew we were in a deep hole and some people said we could and should bomb our way out of it. But in reality there was only one thing we could do - call a ceasefire.[30]

However, as with the Provisional predecessors, the leadership of the RIRA were not idle during their ceasefire. They utilised the cessation as a time to regroup and to redirect their violent and non-violent efforts.

> It [ceasefire] was to give us time to regroup. There was no way that we were interested in calling it a day. [31]

They brought in new weaponry from the Balkans, and developed a strategy to attack targets in England. Throughout the ceasefire the word of new arms shipments spread quickly throughout the group. This was purposefully developed to keep the remaining membership and support onside. The news was shared to convince them that the 'armed struggle' was still alive and well. In essence they were 'trying to save their own skin'.[32]

When the group called an end to their ceasefire in 2000, they returned with a very different kind of campaign. Bombings similar to Omagh and Banbridge were not to be seen again. The leadership were not immediately willing to sanction attacks in Northern Ireland. The possibility of civilian casualties, even if not on the scale of Omagh, could be detrimental to their continued existence.[33] They instead turned their concentration to the targeting of strategic and symbolic sites in England. Amongst other attacks this included the bombing of Hammersmith Bridge,[34] Ealing Broadway Station,[35] BBC Television Centre [36] and MI6 Headquarters. [37] There was an understanding in the leadership, and particularly with Michael McKevitt, that another Omagh would be detrimental to any possibility of organisational survival. It would have 'wiped [them] out for good.'[38] However, a bombing campaign in England would demonstrate to their membership and support, both existing and potential, that they were still willing and able to maintain their armed footing. It also told the British and Irish security forces and political leadership that the RIRA still posed a significant threat to the normalisation of peace in Northern Ireland.

It soon became internal policy that an attack in England would be closely followed by one in Northern Ireland. [39] However, unlike during the nascent months of the group, the main focus of their targeting was to be the broader representations of the state. This included police and security services, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) Offices and even the Northern Ireland Secretary of State. When they did attack civilian targets, it was not on the scale of Omagh or Banbridge. They detonated devices on railway lines [40] and carried out firebomb attacks on shops.[41] In the years immediately after the Omagh bombing, the group was functioning effectively. Their bombs were detonating, and civilians were not being killed.[42] The attacks on the BBC and in particular on MI6 headquarters demonstrated to their 'enemies' that they were able to attack high profile and highly secure targets. The lack of a 'second Omagh' was to deter the elongation of the post-Omagh backlash against the group and to thus ensure their organisational survival.

However, for the rest of the opening decade of the 21st century they were unable to launch the sustained paramilitary campaign that their opening years of activity suggested they might once have been capable of.[43] The security and legislative pressure took hold on the organisation. A series of high profile arrests and prosecutions significantly destabilised the paramilitary group. They were the target of successful sting operations and were famously infiltrated by informers. The most high profile was the American businessman David Rupert. Rupert had infiltrated the organisation at the very highest of levels and was to become the lead

witness in the case against Michael McKevitt and other leading members of the RIRA. The leadership were aware of the threat of informers, as there was a long history of informers infiltrating the Irish Republican Movement. They even ran internal misinformation campaigns in the attempt to dissipate the effect.[44] However, even with this awareness they were unable to prevent the significant impact these informants were to have. The evidence of this infiltration in itself inevitably led to internalised distrust, and the ultimate reorganisation of the movement preceded by a downturn in activity.

With the knowledge of the detrimental organisational effect the attack had on the group, the latter half of the decade after Omagh demonstrated the group's desire to distance itself from the bombing. They attempted to downplay the level of their involvement. In a 2008 interview with the Belfast based journalist Suzanne Breen, a spokesperson for the RIRA stated:

> The IRA had minimal involvement in Omagh. Our codeword was used – nothing more. To have stated this at the time would have been lost in an understandable wave of emotion. That is the only detail on Omagh we're prepared to give at the moment. Omagh was an absolute tragedy. Any loss of civilian life is regrettable. No-one in any army, except perhaps those in the American or Israeli forces, wants to kill civilians. But wars don't end because civilians die in them.[45]

Their supporters and representatives have even tried to suggest and imply that there was a 'dark hand' at work in the security forces, or elsewhere, to allow the Omagh bombing to take place. Thus, attempting to forfeit any responsibility that the paramilitaries had for the killings.

> There was a pattern of things started to emanate that the bombing in Omagh wasn't what it first appeared to be that it was Republicans took the bomb in to Omagh, planted it, gave their warnings and all of that. All of the snippets and bits and pieces that came out in the media in the years that followed right up to the present time where the case is going on. The families are taking a case against individuals. It started to become very clear that the hand of someone outside of Republicanism was involved in the bombing.[46]

Over the years there have been the successful bombing campaign in England, numerous large explosive finds,[47] and well-placed hoaxes in Northern Ireland,[48] all demonstrating the organisational capabilities to carry out similar attacks to both Omagh and Banbridge. However, this tactic has not been revisited. Why is this the case? One could argue that this is the result of a combination of strategic, moral and organisational logic. Most critically, this relates to 'strategic brakes' in the form of concerns that violent escalation, or repetition of violence similar to that in Omagh and Banbridge, would increase the backlash against them by the legislature and security services. It would also serve to undermine public support for the group, and 'moral brakes' in the form of the identification of certain groups of actors – in this case civilians – as being illegitimate targets of violence.[49] The legislative, public, and republican backlash the group endured after the Omagh bombing demonstrated to the organisational leadership that the reaction to another similar attack may be too much to withstand. Their organisational survival would be at risk.

In the aftermath, and partially as a result, of Omagh, the RIRA were engaged in internal struggles for the leadership and direction of the movement. The original leadership of the movement was largely imprisoned in the early years of the new century. This struggle for the direction of the movement became so heated that it led to the split in the group, seeing the emergence of a new splinter group by the oft-used name of Óglaigh na hÉireann. The levels of internal disdain that arose during the internal wrangling is best illustrated in a statement released by a group of RIRA prisoners in October 2002, which included Michael McKevitt as a signatory. In it there was the call for the leadership of the 'Army' to stand down.

> On Friday, September 27, in a written communication to the Army leadership, the (Real) IRA unit in Portlaoise prison took the unprecedented step of calling the Army Council to stand down with ignominy. [50]

Throughout the history of Irish republicanism, the movement has been beset by splits and infighting.[51] The RIRA has been no different, as was noted in a variety of Independent Monitoring Commission reports from the time the RIRA was operating in two factions.[52] The tensions mounted between those leadership figures trying to maintain control from within the prisons, and those members who were externally active. This led one member, external from the prison, to declare in an interview with the author:

> I didn't consider people who are in jail to being [sic] part of the army. When you are in jail you don't know what is going on on the outside. Once you get out of jail you should start back at the bottom.[53]

This internal feuding is likely to have had an effect on operational capabilities.[54] It may also, to a degree, have moved the focus away from the shared external enemy and onto the targeting of internal movement rivals – a dynamic also discussed in the internal brakes typology as one of the brakes that work on organisational logic. This internal feuding and factionalism would continue into the second decade of the 21st century with the murder of high-profile figures such as Alan Ryan, and the corresponding acts of retribution.[55]

In the previously mentioned 2008 Suzanne Breen interview, the representatives of the RIRA stated that the reasoning for their sporadic activity levels from 2002 to 2007, and lack of tactical 'success,' was the result of them emerging from extensive restructuring whereby members were dismissed, and individual units disbanded.[56] This restructuring was likely in response to the security services infiltration of the group, which posed a significant threat to their continued survival. It was around this time (2007/2008) that the *Independent Monitoring Commission* started reporting on 'heightened' RIRA activities.[57] It was upon their re-emergence from this restructuring that the group engaged in a period of more sustained paramilitary activity.[58] They truly 'relaunched' themselves in the aftermath of Sinn Féin's acceptance of the legitimacy of the PSNI, and subsequently with the murder of two British soldiers at Massereene Barracks in March 2009.[59] This was followed by the subsequent targeting of police officers and stations. In recent years, this has been carried out under the post-2012 moniker of the 'New' IRA, a group which emerged after a merger between the RIRA, Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD) and other disparate dissident republicans. In their new guise, the group has been responsible for a series of parcel bombs targeting high profile individuals and targets in Northern Ireland, England and Scotland; a sustained campaign of paramilitary style attacks targeting members of their own communities deemed to be disruptive influences, and/or involved in criminality; the murder of the journalist Lyra McKee, and the murder and targeting of PSNI and prison officers.[60] If one is to believe their first organisational statement [61] the 'New IRA' was developed to create a more united violent dissident republican front. However, in the years since their emergence the splintered nature of dissident republicanism remains.

From the analysis of the group's statements, during the current wave of RIRA activity, it is clear that one of their defining characteristics is their opposition to the peace process, and the politicisation of Sinn Féin. In their eyes, the Provisional leadership had sold-out on their Republican ideals and were now 'active servants of the British state.'[62] While members of Sinn Féin were traditionally not deemed to be strategically logical targets of lethal violence, attacks on their homes and offices in recent years indicate that for some of the membership this may be changing.[63] When asked whether Sinn Féin politicians were considered legitimate targets, the RIRA representative rationalised that they were not, because of the potential loss of support as a result.

> Those running the Stormont administration are as much British ministers as those sitting in Downing Street. However, targets aren't chosen always on legitimacy but on whether hitting them would be politically expedient or counter-productive and on the likely effect on public support. The IRA never attacked the British Army in Scotland [64] because of its support base there and what was seen as solidarity with a fellow Celtic nation. But the decision on whether to actually hit a legitimate target is one that is kept under review.[65]

This re-emphasises the centrality of support in the organisational survival of a terrorist organisation.[66] This is summed up succinctly in a 2003 interview with representatives of the RIRA. "No guerilla can exist without a support base." [67] Potential targets may be deemed legitimate, but their lethal targeting may not be deemed strategically logical if it is perceived to be likely that it would provoke a significant drop in support from their organisational base. The lethal targeting of political representatives of the very communities the organisation is reliant on for their small semblance of support would be strategically counter-productive.

## *Conclusion*

From the above it is clear that internal brakes have been applied throughout the history of the RIRA, and Irish Republicanism in general. In a post-Omagh environment, strategic logic, moral logic and organisational developments have each been at play, collectively influencing the violent decision-making processes of the group. Certain victims and forms of violence have been deemed to be either strategically or morally illogical. The rationality of violent and non-violent decision-making processes are demonstrable throughout the groups' actions and statements. At the heart of this has been the primacy of maintaining organisational survival. This therefore led the group to purposefully avoid the possibility of 'another Omagh,' namely, a high civilian casualty attack in Northern Ireland.

As noted by Horgan, during this second wave of VDR activity the legislative and security backlash against the RIRA, and other VDR groups, played a significant role in the violent and non-violent decision-making post-Omagh.[68] These external pressures continued to include high profile arrests, arms finds and (by the group's own admission) [69], the continued utility of informers. Therefore, the rationalisation for the sporadic, and clustered, nature of activity is partially the result of external pressure, making it more difficult to carry out sustained level of violence, including high profile mass casualty attacks.

It is important to remember the Omagh bombing took place only nine-months after the emergence of the RIRA from the 1997 split with the PIRA. It was therefore still developing its independent support base, organisational structure, and strategic outlook. When one considers the primacy of organisational survival, this could potentially have left the group more vulnerable to external backlash than a more established group such as the PIRA. The Reals emerged high in operational expertise, but relatively low in physical numbers. The Omagh bombing ultimately resulted in the incarceration of a sizeable proportion of the senior leadership, and the organisational desertion of a significant section of the membership and support. This therefore severely weakened the movement's ability to engage in their sustained activities. While the organisational timing is important to note, so too is the situational timing. Coming at a time of hope for the peaceful future of Northern Ireland, the national and international impetus for stricter legislative and security reactions was greater. Accentuating this was the fact that this was the highest casualty attack of the Troubles.

What has been presented in this article therefore suggests that, in order to maintain organisational survival, internal brakes were actively applied to reduce specific forms and targets of violence. However, researchers looking to apply the findings from this case to different groups, conflicts, and/or attacks must do so with caution. As with all case studies, there are unique contributing factors to the events and outcomes, as described above. It is only with future comparative research alongside the more detailed data-driven analysis of this specific case that one can assess its wider applicability.

*About the Author:* **John Morrison** *is a senior lecturer in criminology at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is also the host of the* Talking Terror *podcast. John's research interests include the role of trust in the psychology of terrorism, splits in terrorist groups, disengagement, and violent dissident Irish Republicanism.*

## *Notes*

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[18] John F. Morrison, *The Origins and Rise of Dissident Irish Republicanism*, op.cit.

[19] John F. Morrison, *The Origins and Rise of Dissident Irish Republicanism*, op.cit.; John F. Morrison, "Fighting Talk," op.cit.

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