

# Security Developments in Northern Ireland since the end of the Cold War



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**SINCE THE END OF THE COLD WAR**, Northern Ireland has undergone extensive positive transformation. There has been a marked reduction in terrorism and paramilitary crime, security normalisation and the establishment of cross-community support for reformed policing and power sharing. There is a new *détente* in cross-border and Anglo Irish relations with institutions established to foster governmental cooperation. Sovereignty and constitutional difficulties have eased. Extensive peacebuilding initiatives, community work and integrated education programmes have helped improve social cohesion.

These outcomes can be understood in the context of several key events and related security developments. The sunset of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government in 1990 and back-channels to the IRA (Powell, 2009, pp. 67-68) paved the way for the Joint Declaration of 1993. IRA and loyalist paramilitary ceasefires followed. Ensuing local and international political efforts culminated in the signing of the Belfast Agreement on the 10th of April 1998. For several years, a form of 'negative peace' (Galtung, 1990) existed as complex implementational issues were

resolved. A range of confidence building measures helped secure paramilitary prisoner release and weapons decommissioning, reaching a defining point in 2007 when power sharing was established at Stormont between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein. An **assessment of security developments** underlying these events is thematically presented using **politics, terrorism, policing and crime**, and **identity and culture** as outlines. This builds on an initial assessment of the key referent objects and threat actors involved in the Northern Ireland conflict at the end of the Cold War.



*Loyalist paramilitary mural, North Belfast*  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Glenbryne.jpg>

**In 1989, the Provisional IRA (IRA) was the dominant republican paramilitary actor.** It had sophisticated capabilities, experienced male and female volunteers, a youth wing and effective political representation through Sinn Fein (McDowell, 2007), (Bloxham and Gerwarth, 2011, p. 167).

Legitimate targets included male and female members of the security forces, of which Roman Catholics were particularly threatened. This was designed to ensure that cross-community recruitment into and support of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) remained low. Civilian targets were legitimised and included judges, politicians, prison officers and defence contractors. In isolated cases, the IRA even used 'human bombs' (Moloney, 2007, pp. 347-350).

The IRA attacked economic targets and civil infrastructure, with significant impact on socio-economic development (Jennings, 1998). It claimed to provide protection from loyalist paramilitaries (which it targeted), but was paradoxically the greatest threat to Roman Catholic civilians. Petty criminals (including children)

suffered punishment beatings and knee-capping (Hamill, 2011).

The IRA was a beneficiary of state sponsored terrorism and received extensive weaponry and training from Libya (Harnden, 2011), (Moloney, 2007, pp. 3-34). Its funding streams and criminal activities included racketeering, armed robbery, smuggling, counterfeiting and money laundering. It drew on support locally and characteristically of the New Wars Thesis (Kaldor, 2012), from the sizable Irish diaspora in North America.



*Provisional IRA mural*  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Provisional\\_IRA\\_East\\_Tyrosine\\_Brigade#/media/File:Coalisland.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Provisional_IRA_East_Tyrosine_Brigade#/media/File:Coalisland.jpg)

The **IRA presented a significant threat** outside Northern Ireland. High profile attacks on Downing Street (Whitney, 1991), Warrington (Darnton, 1993), (Powell, 2009, p. 72) and Heathrow Airport (Connett, McKittrick and Boggan, 1994) highlight the dangers posed to military and civilian personnel. Unionists blamed cross-border attacks launched from within the Republic of Ireland on inadequate collective border security.

### LOYALISTS

**The principal loyalist paramilitary actors** were the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). Like their republican counterparts, they had male and female operatives and paramilitary youth wings. Deeply mistrusting of the British and Irish governments they considered state security responses to the IRA inadequate and ineffective (Taylor, 2000). In their minds this gave them a mandate to prosecute their own armed campaigns.

Loyalists targeted republican paramilitaries, politicians and community activists. They attacked civilians in tit-for-tat sectarian revenge killings. They orchestrated street violence, attacked the police

and army and engaged in wide ranging criminality including armed robbery, racketeering, smuggling, counterfeiting and drug dealing. Loyalists carried out punishment beatings and shootings, the victims of which included women and children (McConville, 2014). They killed suspected informers and intimidated witnesses. Attacks outside Northern Ireland were uncommon and the threat posed on the UK mainland and in the Irish Republic was comparatively low.



*Loyalist paramilitary mural East Belfast*  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Seymour\\_\(loyalist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Seymour_(loyalist))

**British state forces** deployed in response to these threats comprised almost 18,000 troops (Ministry of Defence, 2004, p. 130). The role of the army was to contain the IRA and provide operational support to the police. RUC Special Branch and other military intelligence units operated networks of informers in both loyalist and republican paramilitary groups. Informers ran the risk of detection, torture and execution.

Allegations that state forces operated outside of the law and colluded in killings such as that of Belfast solicitor Pat Finucane in 1989 (Rodrigues, 2012), (Lister and Jordan, 2004, pp. 66-84) and the Smithwick Tribunal (2013) investigation into links between the IRA and members of the Irish police raise additional questions about threats posed by the state.

## ADDITIONAL SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Whilst terrorism and sectarian conflict dominated the security agenda, it is important to recognise that domestic violence, non-paramilitary related crime, poor job and health prospects in certain demographics and the marginalisation of gender and sexual equality issues presented

additional human security concerns. Northern Ireland society was morally and socially conservative, economically disadvantaged and had myriad social challenges.



*British Army Checkpoint*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack\\_on\\_Cloghoge\\_checkpoint#/media/File:PVC near Newry.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack_on_Cloghoge_checkpoint#/media/File:PVC near Newry.jpg)

**Changes within the national and international political landscape** were central to security developments. A decisive factor in the resolution of the conflict was the recognition by the IRA that they were in a no-win 'military' stalemate (McKay, 2009, p. 137).

Secret talks with the IRA indicated their willingness to engage in a politically negotiated peace settlement (Powell, 2015, pp. 78-82). Margaret Thatcher was a hate figure for republicans who blamed her for the deaths of 10 hunger strikers in 1981 (Beresford, 1994). With John Major replacing Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1990 there was at least a marginal improvement in the opportunity for political progress. Republicans sought to internationalise the Northern Ireland conflict and developed strong relations with US President Bill Clinton. Shifts in the political landscape helped secure initial IRA and loyalist paramilitary ceasefires in the summer of 1994.

**The British and Irish general elections** of 1997 proved centrally important. British Prime Minister Tony Blair (New Labour), Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern (Fianna Fail) and incumbent US President Bill Clinton (Democratic Party) created

a new nexus of left-leaning, progressive leaders and extensive co-operation between UK, US and Irish governments ensued. This not only helped deliver a second IRA ceasefire in 1997 but provided foundational stability on which to build the peace process. The international political dimension provided a bidirectional channel of influence between the US and Sinn Fein. This channel would be used to help 'shore up' the IRA ceasefire and eventually deliver IRA decommissioning.



*Bill Clinton with Tony Blair*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign\\_policy\\_of\\_the\\_Bill\\_Clinton\\_administration#/media/File:Clinton\\_Blair.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_policy_of_the_Bill_Clinton_administration#/media/File:Clinton_Blair.jpg)

**Evolving domestic and international terrorism** threats had important influences on security developments. Although embryonic, fragile and imperfect, the 1994 republican and loyalist paramilitary ceasefires diminished terrorism threat levels in Northern Ireland. There were promising early signs of security normalisation, with RUC patrols in West Belfast no longer requiring British Army support. Confidence would be severely dented however when the IRA ended its ceasefire in February 1996 with a lorry bomb attack in Canary Wharf in London (Moloney, 2007, pp. 441-442).

### SPOILERS

The emergence of 'new' threat actors such as the Real IRA (RIRA) a republican splinter group responsible for the Omagh bomb (Millar and McDonald, 1998) highlight the dangers posed by dissidents (Borsuk, 2016, p.50). Large numbers of paramilitary prisoners were also released between 1998 and 2000. There was a danger that this could fuel paramilitary activity and increase general criminality, but prisoner release was considered a major component of peace building and risks were taken in this context.

The impact of the al-Qaeda attacks on the US on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 extended to Northern Ireland. With the US prosecuting a 'War on Terror' it became untenable for Irish America to support the IRA.

The arrest of IRA members in Colombia in August 2001 on suspicion of training FARC guerrillas (Cowan and Engel, 2002), (McKittrick and McVea, 2012, p. 269) was also incongruous with US interests. Republicans had worked to internationalise the Northern Ireland conflict and now faced significant international pressure to disarm and fully embrace peaceful politics.



*IRA men arrested in Colombia*  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/smoreno2007/2078575068/>

Security developments were also influenced by policing reform, criminality and de-militarisation. Cross-community support for the RUC was weak. Its membership was predominantly Protestant.

Republicans were in direct conflict with the RUC and targeted and intimidated those that engaged with them. The result was poor access to criminal justice and (in some areas) underreporting of crime.

The Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland (1999) recommended that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) be established, overseen by an independent ombudsman and policing boards with cross-community representation. A recruitment policy was introduced to ensure that 50% of new officers were Roman Catholic. This led to cross-community membership and support for the police, a significant reduction in the security threats faced by officers and a slow but gradual reduction in paramilitary punishment beatings.

Major acts of paramilitary criminality almost derailed the peace process. The £26.5m robbery of the Northern Bank in Belfast in December 2004 was attributed by

Chief Constable Hugh Orde to the IRA (McKittrick and McVea, 2012, p. 278). Weeks later, the IRA murder of Belfast man Robert McCartney further weakened public confidence.

The fallout from the murder was internationalised as Robert McCartney's sisters and fiancée travelled to the United States by invitation of George W Bush (Ibid., p. 279), (Moloney, 2007, pp. 550-558). Significant domestic and international pressure (including from Irish American republicans) was applied to Sinn Fein to deliver on decommissioning and an end to paramilitary activity.



*Northern Ireland Police Patrol*  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Police\\_Land\\_Rover,\\_Belfast\\_-\\_geograph.org.uk\\_-\\_1451374.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Police_Land_Rover,_Belfast_-_geograph.org.uk_-_1451374.jpg)



The **verification of IRA decommissioning** in 2005 (Nieminen, de Chastelain and Sens, 2005) and the establishment of power sharing in 2007, saw the pace of security normalisation quicken (Independent Monitoring Commission, 2007). The end of British Army operations in Northern Ireland (Operation Banner) in July 2007 resulted in troop demobilisation and security infrastructure (watchtowers and bases) being dismantled.

**Dissident republican paramilitaries continued to pose a threat** and military commanders argued that capabilities should be retained (Powell, 2009).

Sinn Fein argued that a continued military presence was a greater risk to long term peace.

**IRA criminal operations continued at scale** and attempts to disrupt them were characterised by republicans as a threat to the peace process and motivated by 'political policing.'



*RUC Base in Crossmaglen, South Armagh, 2001*

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RUC,Crois.jpg>

**The relevance of culture and identity issues to the key security developments** can be traced through complex religious and political fault lines of Irish history. The 1922 Partition of Ireland could be argued to have introduced structural tensions and divided and displaced national identities. The Belfast Agreement sought to resolve these tensions by codifying the right of 'self-determination' and 'parity of esteem' of British and Irish identities in Northern Ireland (*The Belfast Agreement*, 1998). Clauses in the Irish Constitution that claimed sovereignty over Northern Ireland were repealed, easing tensions between unionists and the southern government. Something of a new liberal institutionalist détente was fostered with a North South Ministerial Council to improve political cooperation.

Enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and increasing security normalisation (particularly after 2007) coincided with an influx of workers and migrants from Eastern Europe. This gave rise to new community tensions and racist attacks (Breen-Smyth, 2009) which had largely been absent from the previous decades of sectarian conflict. As the terrorist threat

subsided, latent security and human rights concerns including domestic violence, LGBT issues, abortion and women's rights, physical and mental health (Myers, Hewstone and Cairns, 2009) and social development (Jennings, 1998) became ascendant. This coincided with an increasing liberalisation and secularisation of Northern Ireland society and shifting demographics (Kaufmann, 2011). International and European peacebuilding initiatives along with inward investment brought economic benefits but loyalist communities continued to feel culturally eroded and underserved by the peace dividend.



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag-map\\_of\\_the\\_European\\_Union\\_\(1986-1990\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag-map_of_the_European_Union_(1986-1990).svg)

**Since the end of the Cold War, security threats in Northern Ireland have transformed.** The threat of terrorism, paramilitary violence and paramilitary related crime has significantly reduced. Conflict resolution has been enabled through political co-operation at international, European, national and local levels. Pivotal events that helped secure and build peace include the paramilitary ceasefires (1994 and 1997), the Belfast Agreement (1998), paramilitary prisoner release (particularly from 1998-2000), the establishment of the PSNI (2001), decommissioning of IRA weapons (2005), the St. Andrews Agreement and the end of Operation Banner (2007). After 9/11, the US-led 'War on Terror' made the prospect of an IRA return to wholesale violence improbable.

**Almost 10 years since the DUP and Sinn Fein went in to government,** devolution of policing and justice and support for the PSNI and judicial system has been broadly achieved. There is however an enduring threat from dissident republican terrorism. Republican and loyalist paramilitary groups still organisationally exist and continue to exert influence over communities. As the UK plans to

leave the European Union there are renewed questions about future border security between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. The structural composition of the UK itself is far from certain with continuing debate about Scottish independence. These dynamics have led Sinn Fein to call for a Border Poll to determine Northern Ireland's future. Although this call has been rejected by the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, disharmony between loyalist and republican communities continues, and any change to a 'fragile status quo' could risk renewed conflict.



*Border check point in Strabane,  
Northern Ireland 1968*

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/123732078@N07/17393227>  
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