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Focus

From Extremism to Inclusion: How Hardliners Joined the Peace Process in Northern Ireland

by [Gary Mason](#)

I am a Methodist clergyperson, so I'm on the Protestant side of the fence in a religious framework. I see my identity as British, Irish and also European. Identity is an incredibly complex thing. I've spent 30 years based in Belfast, little more than a hundred meters from those "peace lines" which are basically barriers that still exist between the Catholic and the Protestant communities. I have spent most of that time as a persuader, or an influencer, on those who were pursuing what they called political violence. I negotiated with both the Irish Republican Army (IRA) on the Republican side, and on the Loyalist, Unionist side with loyalist paramilitaries, trying as an influencer to move these people towards political dialogue and political inclusion.

From 1992 to 1999, a Catholic Dominican sister who had spent 25 years working in South Africa against Apartheid and I initiated a project literally right on the interface during the early 1990s — a very difficult time in our society — to provide what we call a "safe space" to deal with difficult issues, a sphere for uncomfortable conversations — to make sure that the two communities were hearing each other, understanding each other. We were trying to engender some hope in the midst of a very difficult conflict. From 1999 until 20 months ago, I played a key role in an urban project called Skainos, which was a \$30 million post-conflict shared-space urban village, employing 100 staff and 150 volunteers. The idea was to create a space, a peaceful area, that could be shared, together dealing with all the different pieces of life, such as social economy, employability, homelessness and faith. One of the key goals of Skainos was to ensure that the difficult conversations took place. Two years ago, I started an NGO, Rethinking Conflict, and now I spend my time working between the Middle East, the Irish situation post-conflict and also doing some work in the United States.

A colleague of mine who is a research fellow at Queens University, Francis Teeny, said "We most certainly knew how to end the war, but we just don't know how to build the peace." And George Mitchell, the American senator and facilitator, in a lot of conversation pre- and post-Good Friday Agreement, said that the implementation of the agreement will be more difficult than getting to the agreement. And he was right.

The Importance of the C Word: Context

To explain who is considered a hardliner in Northern Ireland, and how to talk to them, I mostly come up with the c-word, which fits also in the Middle East: Context. A well-known Loyalist paramilitary who ultimately pursued what is called political violence said: "In the late 1960s someone flew over Northern Ireland, sprayed us all with lunatic gas, and we all started killing each other." So there was a context to the killing. People who had grown up in a very tightly knit sectarian society began to act in very

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abnormal ways. In saying that, as a religious person, I am not condoning political violence. Yet if we are to bring violence to an end, we do need to understand, clearly and concisely: Why do people choose terrorism?

To give you context: 80% of the people who went through the penal system in the conflict in Northern Ireland — if they had been born in Paris, Berlin or Stockholm, would not have otherwise been in prison. So the question is: Why did 80% of a population that went through the penal system make those choices?

Context and Terrorism

If people living in a deeply divided sectarian society feel that there are no alternatives to change in a political framework, there is always the chance that they will resort to violence. I personally would choose a peaceful, nonviolent strategy but there is always the potential and possibility that others may make different choices. On both sides of our political divide — Loyalists and Republicans — there were a number of people of my generation primarily who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s who chose political violence.

It has been said that the only way to end the violence is to talk to the people who hold the guns. For many people, that was a very difficult choice to make, but the constant stalemate in our conflict drove certain people who realized we needed new thinking to look for unconventional ways to end this bloody conflict. A number of those conversations began with people who were in prison. In the late 1980s or 1990s, a number of us were having conversations with people who believed the only way forward to achieve their political goals was through armed struggle. Catholic clergy and Protestant clergy began to try to influence these people to reshape their mindset.

From Armed Struggle to Political Struggle

As the 1980s progressed, the Republican movement and Sinn Féin moved to a strategy of the ballot box on one hand and armed struggle on the other. They were on an evolutionary path from what they called armed struggle towards political struggle. There was agreement between the British, the American and the Irish administrations that there needed to be a new way to get beyond this constant downward spiral of futile violence. We used confidence-building measures that were crucial.

For example: Peter Brooke, the British secretary of state for Northern Ireland in the early 1990s, made a speech using the unusual phraseology that Britain had no “selfish strategic or economic interest” in Northern Ireland and would accept unification, if the people wished it. “It is not the aspiration to a sovereign, united Ireland against which we set our face, but its violent expression.” The speech had a huge impact on Republican thinking and paved the way for the Downing Street Declaration. For the Republican movement, that was music to their ears. People in my unionist community were saying: This is a signal that the British are going to disengage. That wasn't what he was saying - it was misinterpreted - but it was really sending a signal to the Republican movement that the British government wanted to see the island of Ireland and Northern Ireland at peace with itself and gradually moving towards power-sharing and a meaningful peace.

One of the reasons why our peace process is succeeding is that it is managed by people who work in difficult segregated communities every single day, ensuring that the hard gains won in our peace process continue to be bedded down. And that is why I say we need the role of civil society to maintain the sometimes fragile peace.

A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Rebuild Society and Move Towards Peace

Back home we have a theory called the political peace process versus the social peace process, because politicians work with the assumption that once a political deal is done, societal healing automatically follows. It needs to be underlined that this is not necessarily the case. I often put this in medical terms to help the thinking behind this theory: Let's assume I have cancer. I go back to Belfast or I go to a hospital or doctor in Tel Aviv or Ramallah. The approach that will be taken by the medical people will be the multi-disciplinary approach. All the specialists will bring in their expertise to attempt to solve my difficulties. If we move to conflict transformation, often we work on the assumption that it is only politicians that can create the context for peace. Yes, we need politicians - their role is important, in fact crucial - but we need NGOs; we need theologians; we need ethicists; we need women's movements; we need lawyers; we need a multi-disciplinary approach to rebuild society and move people towards peace.

In our context, a number of people facilitated a lot of quiet conversations in the late '80s and '90s with those who were involved in violence, as governments usually do not talk to people involved in terrorism. However, the British government did meet with the leadership of the IRA in the early 1970s, and the IRA gave them an ultimatum to disengage from Northern Ireland. The Republicans refused to consider a peace settlement that did not include a commitment to British withdrawal, a retreat of the British Army to its barracks and a release of Republican prisoners. The British refused and the talks broke up.

Before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, and well after the signing, a number of people like myself were really sounding boards for the British government, the Irish government and the American government. I always say the best way to describe this is that we were giving temperature measurements of what we felt the Republican and the Loyalist movements were saying and trying to build some trust between them - when one moves, will the other respond?

Don't forget that the Good Friday Agreement involved two years of protracted negotiations from 1996 to 1998. The seeds for this agreement were probably sown after the hunger strikes. Probably by 1985, Republicanism as a movement realized that their long-term strategy needed to be political rather than military. But that evolution of thought took time. When people move away from political violence, it is absolutely crucial you bring your movement with you. In your context in the Middle East, the last thing the region needs is a multiplicity of groups shredding off in different directions. Within Republicanism, they had decided to move forward with the political struggle, and in 1994 they ensured that the vast majority of their movement moved in that direction when they declared their ceasefire, and when the Loyalists in 1994 also declared their ceasefire. Ultimately the IRA ceasefire was broken on February 9, 1996, and one of the reasons, from their perspective, was that the British were making unreasonable demands of their movement so soon into a fragile possible peace.

Honestly Asking the Difficult Questions

Prior to the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire in 1996, I was in the process of organizing a meeting for about 100 people from my community with some leading Republicans in Belfast. In February 1996 the IRA blew up Canary Wharf in London, literally ripping the economic heart out of London. I was under immense pressure to cancel that meeting from people within my religious world, from politicians and from others. I refused to cancel the meeting. Consequently, a number of leading Republican strategists were in a room with 100 people who were honestly asking them pretty difficult questions. For example: Why do you as the political wing of the IRA

support an organization that plants bombs in London, killing innocent civilians? This actually allowed people in civil society to ask some of these people difficult questions, which is key. At the meeting I said: As raucous, difficult and volatile as this conversation might be, it is not as loud and as damaging as bombs going off in London's Canary Wharf. Even during the most difficult times in conflicts, there need to be channels that allow key people to have meaningful conversations to attempt to end the cycle of violence.

Religion and Religious Leadership Needs to Play a Key Role

I suggest strongly that, in the Middle East, religion and religious leadership needs to play a key role. When we look at the civil rights movement in the 1960s in the United States, it was led by a clergyperson, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Also look at South Africa and Bishop Desmond Tutu - I've also done work with Bishop Peter Storey who was a close ally of Desmond Tutu. Within the Northern Irish context, I think of Catholic and Protestant clergy who were very influential in spearheading the way forward. They were not the complete panacea for the conflict, but they played a very strategic role.

I am having conversations with people in religious roles in the Middle East exploring those questions. What is the role of religious leadership? Back to my multi-disciplinary approach — in partnership with others, not in isolation. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the British Commonwealth, says that religion has power, and wherever there is power, it can be used, misused and abused. He says religion is like fire: It warms but also burns, and we are the guardians of that flame. So if religion is such a powerful force in this region, what is the role of good moral religious leadership in this region?

Signals to the Republicans and the Loyalists

U.S. President Bill Clinton also played a very strategic role in the Irish peace process. There is a large Irish-American constituency in the Northeast of the U.S., and I think Clinton took a very difficult but strategic risk in giving Sinn Féin Republican leader Gerry Adams a visa to enter the U.S. in early 1994. It was not an overnight decision; there were competing views among his advisors about whether this was the correct decision. This could end up being political suicide, they thought. He was persuaded, in the end, with many saying: We really believe if you do this, it could be a game-changer. That was a very big confidence-building measure. There was a mechanism that began in more militant Republican minds that, if we go completely down the political route, there could be possible political rewards.

The following year, in November 1995 - Clinton delivered a major address in Northern Ireland in West Belfast, directly behind the church and community project I was spearheading at that time - and, after that address, travelled down a set of established routes in his vehicle and, at a certain point, turned left. At this moment, Gerry Adams happened to be tottering right on the pavement there with his little bag of scones that he had just bought. Sheer coincidence of course! So Clinton gets out of his vehicle, walks over and publicly shakes the hand of Gerry Adams. What did that say? Several things. It said: As the leader of the Free World, we are bringing Republicanism as a movement into the political process. To many Republicans, it sent out the signal that political dialogue achieves more than armed struggle. Do not assume that handshake was organized overnight - it was not. This was another key moment in the evolution of Republicanism from a military movement to a movement of political dialogue. There were still difficult days ahead, with the IRA breaking its ceasefire as highlighted above, but it is generally acknowledged this was another key moment in changing the mindset of armed struggled advocates in the republican movement.

Within Loyalism, there were four key words they needed to hear to move forward: “The union is safe.” We will not be bound into a United Ireland. These were the keys of the Good Friday Agreement to the Unionist community. In other words: The principle of consent. Democracy gave the majority currently living in Northern Ireland a vote on whether or not to see the island of Ireland united.

The Good Friday Agreement – a Win-Win Situation

The Good Friday Agreement was a masterpiece of political compromise. What they really did was to create a win-win situation for every person. In your context in the Middle East, if you eventually do get to a deal signed in Ramallah, Jerusalem, Paris, London, Washington, DC or New York, it is absolutely crucial that all the representatives of both constituencies walk out of the room with smiles on their faces. If people feel humiliated or marginalized, they will not be able to sell it to their constituencies. The Good Friday Agreement was crafted in a way that made it possible for it to be sold to all the different constituencies. From the Protestant British Unionist Loyalist perspective, “the union is safe” was the key component that allowed them to feel comfortable with it. Within Republicanism they believed that the agreement set out a political and institutional framework within which many of the causes of conflict could be addressed.

Also, bringing Sinn Féin into a power-sharing government was another crucial point. There was no zero-sum game. People could walk out of those protracted negotiations and say: There is enough here for us to move on.

The Importance of Words

Words are crucial! Decommissioning of weapons was a very long process, and “decommissioning” was a very British word that the IRA believed signified surrender. So the IRA rejected it. The phrase they used was: “We are putting our weapons beyond use.” Those on the Unionist side didn’t like the d-word, either, so they used the phrase: “We are putting our weapons beyond reach.” So terms that seem insignificant to outsiders can be crucial because they smack of surrender to those groups who, in their context, had lost family and friends in their struggle.

In Northern Ireland, we are making progress, but we use the phrase *peace process* for a reason. That is exactly what it is, a process, and a process requires patience, determination and, most of all, time.

Concerning the Middle East, to quote Rabbi Sacks, “weapons win wars but ideas win peace.” As I look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I hope that you can find meaningful ideas about the way forward. I think it is time for some creative thinking, some joined-up thinking. It’s time for some of that multi-disciplinary approach that I talk about, where everyone is at the table. That is going to be crucial, and I think that religious people need to be there.

This article was developed from a presentation by Gary Mason at an event organized by IPCRI “From Extremism to Inclusion,” in November, 2016, inspired by events in Northern Ireland.

