



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Henry McDonald

Henry McDonald is the author of six non-fiction books, including a history of the Irish Battalion of UNIFIL in south Lebanon. He was born in Belfast and his formative years were dominated by the Northern Ireland Troubles.

McDonald has worked as a BBC Security Correspondent in Northern Ireland, as a features reporter for Channel 5 News for the island of Ireland, has travelled extensively in the Middle East and is currently the Ireland Correspondent for The Guardian and the Observer newspapers. This extract from his latest book is his private analysis and his alone.

He is an unapologetic supporter of Everton FC and is presently finishing off the first draft of his first novel.

ABOUT ZWORD

Z Word is an online journal focusing on the contemporary debate over Zionism, anti-Zionism, antisemitism and related areas. Editorially independent, Z Word identifies and challenges anti-Zionist orthodoxies in mainstream political exchange.

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ESSAY

Arguments: The Limits of the Northern Ireland Analogy

By Henry McDonald

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Rodolfo Walsh: "Zionism," he said, "is the enemy of all mankind."

THIS IS THE SECOND in our occasional series, Arguments, in which Z Word writers examine certain recurring themes in the ongoing debate about the Middle East.

ANY FOR THE MIDDLE EAST?

Northern Ireland is one that is frequently drawn. With President Obama's appointment of George Mitchell as his Special Envoy to the Middle East, the Irish comparison has come under renewed scrutiny, by dint of Mitchell's previous role as the Clinton Administration's Special Envoy to Northern Ireland.

AND THE MIDDLE EAST?

THE MIDDLE EAST?

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Gunsmoke and Mirrors—How Sinn Fein

Dressed up Defeat as Victory, available from the website of Macmillan Ireland.

Joking Apart

It was arguably the most unlikely of places to illuminate the chasm between Irish republican and Islamist terrorism. The 'Star Letter' of the January 2008 edition of the British toilet humour magazine/comic 'Viz' counter-posed the terrorism of the IRA and Al Qaeda.

The correspondent, one Nick Pettigrew from London, wrote: '30 years ago, the Irish were our most feared terrorists and now they have theme pubs everywhere. So by 2047 will Britain be full of Islamic Extremist theme

pubs? Because I don't much like the sound of that.'

On a frivolous level the joke is a cheap jibe at the Irish, all the Irish, including all of those Irish, the majority on the island and beyond, who detested the 'armed struggle.' But on another plane the quip actually exposes the radical difference between republican paramilitaries and the soldiers of extreme Islam. Because it suggests that despite all the ruthlessness, dedication to cause and self-sacrifice Irish republicans have always had other worldly concerns. Their universe was not completely consumed by an all encompassing theology even if at times republicans behaved fanatically and acted as if on some messianic mission.

The contrast is worth exploring because since the peace process, the cease-fires and the present historic compromise at Stormont it has become fashionable to quote the North of Ireland as a good example for other conflicts, as a template to bring all those other interminable struggles across the planet to an end.

At present it has become vogue in certain British Foreign Office circles, among former members of MI6, pro-Arab sections of academia and the liberal press to draw comfort from the example of the Irish peace process.

In particular a number of influential voices in British public life have been arguing that once upon a time it was taboo to talk to the IRA. However secret channels set up between the Provos and British Intelligence (and hence Her Majesty's Government) eventually bore fruit with the 1994 cease-fires and all the changes that flowed from it. Hence, these voices contend, if only the West could do the same with Islamist movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah in the Middle East and even some sections of the Taliban in Afghanistan there could be room for optimism, even an end to these conflicts.

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On the surface this thesis appears seductive: if the most sophisticated terrorist organisation in the western world can be brought in from the cold then surely the

same can be done with the likes of Hamas and Hezbollah.

However, the formula is in fact entirely bogus and anti-historical.

Tactics and Strategy

The parallels between the Irish republican death cult and the Islamist one appears at first to be remarkably similar. Groups like the IRA, Hamas and Hezbollah seem to revel in the iconography of martyrdom. One of the most striking things you notice on a first visit for instance to the Shia heartlands of south Lebanon was the profusion of posters of fallen fighters and murals depicting their new status in a rainbowed paradise after-life of flowing fountains and doves along the walls of towns and villages where Hezbollah and the more openly pro-Syrian Amal were dominant. The iconic imagery, in terms of both tone and style, are almost exactly like those murals of the Irish hunger strikers and fallen IRA 'volunteers' that prior to the latter stages of the peace process covered the walls of west Belfast and Derry, even down to the ubiquitous beards. Moreover, the willingness of IRA and INLA prisoners to sacrifice themselves on hunger strike, to starve themselves to death in pursuit of political causes, seemed to equate with the self-immolators who strap bombs to their bodies killing themselves as well as their enemies. But in fact this is where the comparisons end and the contrasts begin.

Irish republicans throughout the generations have never lacked physical courage in pursuit of their goals. They have however been subject to certain boundaries imposed by their own particular background and culture. Throughout the hunger strike the prisoners' supporters insisted that their fast for political status was not slow drawn out suicide, which for centuries was regarded as a sin in Catholic theology. It seems puzzling none the less that a political movement that produced activists willing to starve themselves to death for a cause would regard still suicide bombing as anathema.

Tommy Gorman, as head of the IRA's 'Engineering Department' in the Belfast in the 1980s, knew many young men and women willing to transport bombs into the city centre and at security bases. They risked death or arrest as couriers of lethal explosive devices. Yet Gorman recalls that during the armed campaign no one ever volunteered for a suicide mission against a British Army or RUC target.

The IRA veteran who literally swam into republican folklore in 1972 when he escaped from the Maidstone Prison Ship moored in Belfast Lough is best positioned to explain why no one was willing to destroy themselves along with others in a few seconds for the ‘struggle.’

‘In all the years I was in the IRA there wasn’t a single volunteer I came across who came forward willing to be a suicide-bomber. The hunger strike was

“It is telling that the closest the IRA came to Islamic-style suicide bombing was to use proxies, those forced at gunpoint to become ‘human bombs.’”

different because for the prisoners there was always a back-door to life. At any time their demands could have been met and the fast would have been over and their lives saved. That’s the crucial difference.’

Gorman is visibly amused at the notion that there would have been a reservoir of suicide-bombers: ‘Even if anybody had come forward with the idea that they wanted to blow themselves up alongside Brits or cops he would have been sent packing. He wouldn’t have been taken seriously.’

It is telling that the closest IRA came to Islamic-style suicide bombing was to use proxies, those forced at gunpoint to become ‘human bombs.’ It is also revealing that the tactic was quickly abandoned by the Provisionals following a wave of national revulsion against such an inhuman strategy.

On October 24 1990 the Provisional IRA launched a series of co-ordinated ‘human bomb’ attacks on four separate British Army vehicle checkpoints across Northern Ireland. The largest loss of life occurred at the Coshquin checkpoint on the Derry-Donegal border. The ‘human bomb’ chosen for the attack was Patsy Gillespie, a Catholic civilian who worked in the canteen of a local British Army base and was thus regarded by republicans as a ‘collaborator.’ Patsy Gillespie forced at gunpoint into a van packed with 1,000 lbs of explosives. He was strapped into the drivers seat and ordered to drive at top speed into the checkpoint. Their chosen target had been told his wife was being held by an armed gang at their home in the nationalist

Shantallow area. As soon as he arrived at the checkpoint the IRA detonated the bomb inside the van by remote control blowing Patsy Gillespie and five British soldiers apart. On the same day the IRA in south Armagh tried the same tactic by strapping a local south Armagh man into a van loaded with explosives. On this occasion the driver managed to dive out of the vehicle before impact. One soldier died at the checkpoint near Newry. A third attack using a ‘human bomb’ was foiled outside Roslea, Co.Fermanagh.

Ed Moloney in his masterpiece ‘A Secret History of the IRA’ has described the ‘human bomb’ tactic as a public relations disaster for the Provisionals. The almost instant abandonment of this ultra-cynical, callous means of delivering huge bombs to British bases is further proof of the limits Irish politics and culture placed upon the ‘armed struggle’. In Gaza, from the destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11 to the resumption of suicide bombs in Israel on February 4 2008, Palestinians openly celebrated the exploits of suicide murderers in the streets; in Ireland the use of the ‘human bombs’ sickened an entire nation and drove the mass of the Irish people even further away from the Provisionals’ project. Moreover, as Moloney has argued with some justification, national revulsion against the ‘human bomb’ murders eventually re-inforced that faction of the republican movement determined to run down and ultimately end the armed campaign. The cult of Irish republicanism may be rooted in blood sacrifice but when it came to the ‘human bombs’ it was the blood sacrifice of others.

It is not just the contrasting tactics that radically differentiate the pragmatic Provisionals with the theocratic-driven militants of Hamas and Hezbollah. Throughout their campaign of terror the Provisionals always sought out an ‘address’ to deliver offers of negotiation. It was of course generally speaking to the wrong one—the British government, rather than the true ‘British presence’, i.e. The unionists. None the less from the very outset the Provisionals were eager to open up dialogue with their enemies. Indeed there is anecdotal evidence that in the 1990s a modus operandi was established between the UVF and IRA in Belfast to avoid the two organisations ‘taking out’ each other’s respective leaderships. In some cases senior IRA figures in the city alongside their old rivals in the Officials also met with loyalists on a regular basis to carve up building site rackets in the city particularly in the 1980s.

Islamist movements have no ‘address’ because they don’t recognise its right to exist, namely Israel. Rather they



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seek its ultimate destruction. In the end the Provisionals have had to settle for something far less than their ultimate goal of a united Ireland. Movements such as Hamas are maximalist by nature, they are all-or-nothing organisations which regard any compromise as tantamount to something akin or even worse than religious apostasy. That is why throughout the period of the Oslo peace process in the mid 1990s Hamas and its offshoots and allies resorted to the tactic of blowing up buses, cafés and bars in Israel proper as a means of destroying the

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accord between the Labour dominated government in Jerusalem and the more secular Fatah under Yasser Arafat. Unlike Irish republicans, the entire Islamist world view is coloured by an unbending theology rooted in the early centuries of the last Millennium; republicanism, at least in theory, as opposed to the Provos’ malpractice of it, is rooted in the 18th century European Enlightenment.

The Good Example Fallacy

The narrative of the Irish peace process suggests a leadership driven by entirely practical concerns, willing when necessary to dump old ideological certainties in the pursuit of limited goals. Dissidents jibe that Sinn Fein’s entry into and embrace of the parliament at Stormont would be akin in the Middle East to Hamas entering the Knesset. In that at least the dissidents have a point.

But even the most militant dissident Irish republican while admiring of Hamas and Hezbollah’s obduracy has not resorted to one of their principal tactics—suicide murders. In the period before, during and after the Good Friday Agreement was signed there were plenty of bombs detonated aimed at undermining support for Trimbleite-unionism in the same way as Hamas and Islamic Jihad tried (and were arguably successful) to erode Israeli public support for the Oslo peace process. However, even after

the breakaway Real IRA caused such carnage at Omagh the dissidents immediately stepped back from the brink and declared their own cessations of violence. In addition the Real IRA didn’t deliberately set out to kill civilians including women and children. Their operatives botched the placing of the car bomb in the town centre and failed to give an adequate warning. Clearly the Real IRA, just as the Provisionals had done before them, recklessly put civilians at risk in their bid to kill members of the security forces and cause massive economic damage. There is though a clear difference between the Irish republican dissident’s lethal carelessness and the deliberate targeting of pizza parlours, discos and even Irish bars in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem where the operative (the suicide-murderer) knows he is going to kill men, women and children.

Leaving aside the absence of the suicide-bomb in the Real IRA and Continuity IRA’s arsenals both organisations could, if they only get lucky once, detonate bombs that could in an instant shake the political institutions up at Stormont to their foundations. They could mimic that other barbaric strategy of the Sunni Jihadists and ex-Baathists in Iraq who have bombed Shia mosques and districts in order to foment outright sectarian civil war. RIRA, CIRA and any other faction to emerge in the near future could follow suit and indiscriminately bomb Protestant heartlands.

But they chose not to do so partly to pay lip service to Wolfe Tone’s original definition of Irish republicanism and in the main because they know deep down the disaster they would be bringing down not only on themselves but also the community from which they come. The parallels therefore between the rejectionist republican and the Islamic militants of all hues, Shia and Sunni, are entirely illusory.

Given the frequent exposures of informers, agents and spies inside the Provisionals it has become blindingly obvious that the British had a deep insight into the direction sections of the IRA leadership, most critically its Belfast based commanders, wished the organisation to travel. They encouraged, persuaded and if Brian Nelson, the British Army’s spy inside the UDA, is correct also ensured certain republican leaders like Gerry Adams stayed where they were in the long terms interests of a peaceful settlement. By contrast no single figure like Adams appears to be emerging, or is likely to emerge, from inside say Hamas that can tilt the Islamist movement away from its all-or-nothing ideology.

The-fallacy-of-the-Good-Example even applies

to less extreme conflicts such as the struggle between the Spanish State and the Basque terrorists of ETA. Although ETA's 'war' has lasted longer than the Provisional IRA's it has not only claimed less lives (under 900 victims) the Basque separatist organisation has undergone almost double the number of splits and schisms than republicanism over the last forty years.

There have been aborted attempts to push ETA and Madrid towards negotiations and have involved the likes of Fr Alec Reid, one of the two Clonard priests that played such a critical role in helping Adams reverse the Provisionals out of the armed struggle *cul de sac*. Once again however there is a crucial difference in the quality of leadership. So far the present ETA leadership has proved as intractable and ideologically rigid as those in charge of Republican Sinn Fein or those allied to the Real IRA. If ETA and its political wing followed mainstream Sinn Fein's example then they would have to settle for what is already been on offer since the 1978 post-Franco constitution: devolved autonomy but within the Spanish State. This is essentially what the Good Friday Agreement and later the deal at St. Andrews resulted in.

So for ETA to accept its equivalent on the Iberian Peninsula, a GFA-style settlement would be tantamount to total surrender. Given the nihilism of ETA's seemingly endless violent campaign as witnessed in the cold blooded murder of a former Spanish Socialist Party in the Basque region just prior to the 2008 General Election there appears to be no evidence that realism is dawning among the *Etarras* (militants). As we approach the end of the first decade of the 21st century it appears that ETA still have evidently learned nothing from the Irish peace process.

One of the process' mini-growth industries over the last decade has been the travelling caravan of ex-paramilitaries, both loyalist and republican, alongside politicians who have visited almost every other conflict zone on the planet since the cease-fires were declared. They have journeyed from Israel/Palestine to South Africa, Latin America to Sri Lanka. In each unresolved region of discord the local warring parties have sought out advice and succour of some of the key protagonists of Ireland's 'war.'

Former enemies such as the late David Ervine and Martin McGuinness have travelled to both the disputed Jaffna peninsula and to Israel-Palestine where they relayed their experiences on how to shut down conflict and de-activate underground armies. They went there

no doubt because they genuinely believed they could do some good. Perhaps they might succeed somehow.

In arguably the most dangerous of any of those conflict zones, Iraq, the advice of another major actor in Northern Ireland has been sought out for advice—the British government and its security forces. Representatives of the Iraqi government in 2007 were fascinated to learn from PSNI officers training and liaising with local police in Basra and Baghdad that the British State had constructed and paid for a crude mechanism to dramatically reduce sectarian slaughter—the building of the gloriously misnamed 'peace walls' separating Protestant and Catholic areas particularly in Belfast. PSNI officers returning from Iraq later remarked that the Iraqi authorities were embarking on a series of similar walled barriers which would 'protect' rival Sunni and Shia areas from one and other.

The other 'authorities' in Iraq, namely the Americans, also realised they had something to learn from how Britain slowly but surely defeated the 'armed struggle.' As Mary Ann Clancy pointed out in her survey of the Bush Administration's attitude to Northern Ireland, the Americans were fascinated by Britain's secret war against the IRA. In those U.S. State Department and White House officials who spoke to Clancy appeared far more interested in Britain's use of informants inside the IRA and externally the promotion of potential peace faction within the republican movement than in the nurturing of all encompassing political dialogue between the warring parties. The only 'good example' the Americans saw from the Northern Ireland conflict was the one that Britain used to close down the IRA's armed campaign. The Americans at least had seen through the smoke and mirrors of the Irish peace process and the polite fiction that the final outcome had been some sort of honourable draw. 