The above quote from Mick Ryan, a former leading member of the Official IRA, opens the 2016 Aggression and Violent Behavior article "Trust in Me: Allegiance Choices in a Post-Split Terrorist Movement." It was chosen to open the article as it sums up the central finding presented from the research. Often times allegiance choices, whether post-split or at any stage of a terrorist ‘career’, are not made as a result of any ideological beliefs. Many of these decisions are based largely on human factors. People ask themselves ‘Who is aligned to that group?’ ‘Do I know them?’ ‘Do I like them?’ ‘Do I trust them?’

This paper analyses exploratory research into how individual members form allegiances in the aftermath of a split in a terrorist movement, specifically the Irish Republican Movement. While the allegiance decision making is not a violent act in itself the decision made often times constitutes a choice between the retention of terrorism as a dominant tactic and the move towards a peaceful, political solution. It may be intuitive to believe that individuals will make such decisions based on the reasoning for the divide or the ideology of the groups. However, through the analysis of over forty interviews with leadership and rank and file members of the Irish Republican Movement the issue of personal trust is shown to be central to the decision-making process, especially in relation to the rank and file of the membership. This finding is concluded through the application of interpretative phenomenological analysis of four core splits in Irish republicanism from 1969 to 1997.

The findings demonstrates the need to, at times, look beyond individual and organisational ideological beliefs when attempting to understand terrorist decision-making. We must also consider more ‘everyday’ factors influencing an individual’s and organisation’s choices. This article focused on the role of trust. However, future research needs to consider the role of other non-ideological factors.

The research found that trust was important for rank and file members in their initial allegiance decisions as well as within their post-split allegiance decisions. In 1969/70 when faced with an option of joining either the Official IRA or the Provisional IRA many young recruits formed their allegiance with little to no understanding of the differences between the two groups. Resultantly their allegiances were often times formed not based on any ideological divide. They were decided based on who whether they trusted, or perhaps distrusted, members of one group over another. The late Dolours Price, convicted for her role in the Old Bailey bombing 1973, describes why she joined the Provisional IRA instead of the Official IRA. Hers was a decision based on the distrust of the leadership of the Official IRA, not due to their ideological leanings.

“There sitting in our front room was Billy McMillen, Bobby McKnight and not one of the Sullivans, another Sticky (member of the OIRA), three of them sitting in our front living room. I remember, I was only a young girl, I remember saying ‘do you not know what’s going on out there? People are getting killed. Who is protecting us?’ They were actually sitting waiting for their lift across the border…That is when I became a Provo (member of the PIRA), nothing to do with their policy, their ideals, not to do with the fact that I wasn’t a Socialist, not to do with the fact that I thought that Stickies were all

Communists, not to do with anything like that, just to do with disgust at their conduct and how they behaved and... My father when they went, I remember him saying 'Sure they sold all the guns to the Free Welsh, they gave all the guns away that crowd. They don't want to fight.' That was my initiation in to the Movement.” (Interview with Dolours Price, April 21st, 2008).

The importance of trust, and distrust, in allegiance related decisions is something which was acknowledged by the leadership of each of the groups. Before making any significant change in policy, strategies or tactics the leadership of the organisation would be sure that this was presented to the rank and file membership by local and national figures who they trusted. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the lead-up to the 1986 split which saw the formation of the Continuity IRA. Francie Mackey, the president of the 32 County Sovereignty Movement explains.

“If you have senior membership who were in the IRA saying that this leadership is 100% solid who on the ground was going to question that?... At key stages in all of this key people in local areas and at a regional area were wheeled out to say that this was 100% sound. If a key person known in the locality to be in the IRA, if that person says that something was right well then it was taken as right.” (Interview with Francie Mackey, June 25th, 2008)

While Mackey was referring to the role of trusted individuals in the lead-up to the 1986 split this can also be seen in the lead-up to the 1997 emergence of the Real IRA. Former leading Provisional, and informer, Sean O’Callaghan describes the critical role which Brian Keenan played in weakening the potential strength of the Reals. O’Callaghan proposes that the influence of Keenan’s support was able to guarantee the support of other leading and influential figures within the organisation for the Provisional’s ultimate de-escalation of the armed campaign and integration into the political process through the signing of the Mitchell Principles.

“If Kennan goes that was straight-forward. That was South Armagh [siding with him]. Absolutely fucking crucial. Belfast what would have happened there? You can take individuals. [Bobby] Storey, [Brian] Gillen, [Martin] Ferris, [Thomas] Slab [Murphy], [Brendan] Hughes all of them. Ah you’re [Adams and McGuinness] gone then. Things have moved away then. Now you’re in serious shit. It was key.” (Interview with Sean O’Callaghan, March 19th, 2013)

Throughout the Troubles and into the peace process Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness garnered significant levels of personal trust across the movement. They have utilised this trust bringing about some of the most significant and dramatic changes in republicanism from the dropping of abstentionism to the comprehensive decommissioning of the PIRA, from power-sharing with their erstwhile adversaries in the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to the support for the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Each of these changes has been historic and has fundamentally changed what it means to be a Provisional Republican. While there have been splits along the way the most striking aspect of this is that these splits have not been more significant and that the emerging dissidents have not been stronger.
In the minds of those dissidents one of the key reasons for this is the extreme trust the membership has in Gerry Adams, a trust that in the dissidents’ interpretation leaves the Provisional population devoid of any critical analysis.

For those dissidents the utility of this trust is portrayed in a negative manner. It is their belief that the leadership, and especially Adams, manipulated this trust and led the movement away from their core values. They utilise this emphasis on trust to portray Adams as an individual who has sold out republicanism, rather than as a leader of the movement.

“They believed in him [Adams]. They put their trust and their belief in a man who walked all over them, who used that belief and that trust to go in the direction he wanted to go, irrespective of the Republican Movement, a united Ireland.” (Interview with Geraldine Taylor, January 23rd, 2009)

What is apparent from the present research is that personal trust has played a significant role in the allegiance decision-making of new recruits within a terrorist organisation. If these findings are replicated elsewhere, and across the trajectory of terrorist group involvement, they may provide an important insight for anyone designing or implementing disengagement or deradicalisation programmes. While the content of these programmes is undoubtedly key it may not be effective if a trusted individual does not deliver it. Those administering the programmes must not presume the dominance of a radical ideology in the maintenance of organisational membership. Instead they must adequately assess the reality of membership, and appreciate the possibly that membership of terrorist organisations is not necessarily first based on ideological grounds (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009, p.4). This assessment must factor in a number of issues including, but not exclusively, organisational experience, organisational position and the role of trust.

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