How the Irish Are Solving Their 'Troubles'

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Jerusalem Post, May 12, 2004

In the past thirty years of sectarian violence between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, where the population is barely 1.6 million, 3,600 people have died and more than 40,000 have been injured, more than half of them civilian non-combatants. That would be tantamount to more than 20,000 Israelis. The Irish call their years of conflict the "Troubles." We call ours the "Situation." The terms convey similar messages about failed peace efforts; extremists' victories; moderates' helplessness, the pervasive sense of dread in the present, the deep pessimism about the future.

Of course, no two conflicts are identical, yet the parallels between the Troubles in Northern Ireland and our Situation are sobering. Like ours, the dispute between the Catholics and the Protestants in Northern Ireland is a seemingly intractable conflict based on the volatile combination of ideology, religion, history, turf, terrorism, and civil rights, fanned by hatred, rage and resentment.

But there's one really big, and critical difference. In Northern Ireland they talk about the Troubles in the past tense, while we don't see an end to the Situation. What do they know there that we don't know here? The Irish have learned that conditioning a political breakthrough on a cessation of terrorism will only encourage terrorism. That walls and fences that are at best short-term solutions that will, in the long run, only make things worse. That economic progress is essential to the political progress. In Northern Ireland they seem to know that peace-making can't be left to the politicians or the elites. They don't talk about "The New Northern Ireland" and they know that entrenched hatreds don't die easily. But fewer people are dying on the streets of Belfast and Derry, and that's what matters most to most people.

In 1998, Catholics and Protestants, with Irish, British, and American prodding, signed the complicated and intricate Good Friday Agreement, which was supposed to create a power-sharing arrangement for Northern Ireland. Like many of our agreements, the Good Friday Agreement is deeply flawed, based on constructive ambiguity that made it possible for adversaries to work together and develop trust. But now, that ambiguity - especially with regard to the IRA's decommissioning (disarming) - actually hinders, rather than promotes the process.

In October, 2002, British Prime Minister Tony Blair dissolved Stormont, the Northern Irish assembly, and put Northern Ireland back under direct (British) rule, after disclosure of an alleged IRA spy ring in the assembly. The capture of three senior IRA operatives allegedly training Columbian revolutionaries didn't do much to create a sense of political trust, either. Then in November, 2003, provincial elections brought the extremists from both sides - Sinn Fein, allied with the IRA, and the Democratic Union Party, allied with Protestant paramilitary groups - to power.

Since then, the Catholic and Protestant elected officials can't even agree to convene the assembly and insist that they will never speak to each other. They voted for the extreme parties, yet Protestants and Catholics haven't gone back to killing each other. Despite the deadlock, violence remains relegated to the margins, mostly the work of drug lords and organized crime and Protestant paramilitary groups who oppose the Good Friday Agreement, attacking Protestant paramilitary groups who support it.

Today downtown Belfast is cosmopolitan and upscale. There's a swank new convention centre and concert hall complex along the Lagan River, renovated markets, and expensive, gated apartments in converted Victorian warehouses and lofts throughout the city. Wealthy Catholics and Protestants shop peacefully together in fancy boutiques and share their Guinness in trendy pubs. But only a few kilometres away Catholics and Protestants live in completely segregated neighbourhoods and every square foot of territory is contested. An inaptly named "Peace Wall" winds through the northern and western parts of the city, twenty meters high, topped with barbed wire.

Throughout the city, more than forty sections of walls and fences, locked and patrolled by armed security personnel and closed circuit cameras, keep the communities apart and prevent them from lobbing Molotov cocktails at each other. Within each community, walls and billboards are filled with elaborate murals calling up memories of massacres and historical grievances. "We shall never in any way submit to the rule of the Irish" declares a Protestant mural, decorated with cameos of paramilitaries who died in the conflict.

In Catholic areas, portraits of the dead, like hunger striker Bobby Sands, warn the residents never to forget and encourage them to seek their revenge. But few are taking up the call. Instead, chartered buses bring groups of European and American tourists to view the murals, and cabbies make a good living conducting "peace wall tours." Public housing is scarce in Belfast, but authorities do not even attempt to move Catholics into empty Protestant homes, or vice versa. Community leaders know that the walls that keep the warring sides at bay are only postponing the ultimate

solution. The walls deepen resentment and serve as a constant, irritating reminder that neither the leaders nor the people have found a better solution. In a tense situation, they act as magnet for rage and resentment.

In response, civic leaders, supported by academics and numerous nongovernmental, people-to-people organizations, have begun to create dialogue groups, particularly women's groups. Others are working in their own communities, attempting to prepare the adversaries for dialogue. Local leaders broker quiet agreements on the ground between former paramilitaries. In some neighbourhoods youth leaders have even organized a few clean-up campaigns to paint-over sectarian graffiti and murals, replacing them with mutually acceptable sporting and cultural heroes and murals extolling the virtues of recycling instead of paramilitarying. Aware of the incendiary effect of a conspicuous security presence, the Good Friday Agreement pulled the British army out of the city centres, the bleak treeless streets, and the trash-filled abandoned lots. Instead, they use closed-circuit television and have painted their patrol Land Rovers a friendly white.

Two yellow cranes of the shipyards - nicknamed Samson and Goliath - can be seen throughout Belfast, a mocking reminder of Belfast's once-glorious shipping industry. The Titanic was built here but was captained, the locals are quick to remind you, by an Englishman. Along the interfaces, unemployment rates top 40%, and 70% -80% of children, Catholic and Protestant alike, live under the poverty line. Suicide is the principal cause of death of young adults in Northern Ireland. Not everyone can adapt to the changing economic, community, ideological, and political circumstances, and unemployment could become a source of jealous competition over scarce jobs and resources, as it often does in our region.

Instead, the Good Friday Agreement created an Equality Commission. Well-resourced and budgeted, reinforced with statutory authority, the Equality Commission monitors places of employment and recreation to ensure that Protestants and Catholics are treated equally and that education furthers inclusion, diversity, parity, and community. And, knowing that the peace process will ultimately be dependent on the quality of peoples' lives, civic leaders are creating retraining programs, professional education plans, and actively recruiting funds and investors from abroad, especially from the Irish diaspora in the United States.

Ironically, they even fly our flags in Northern Ireland - the Israeli flag waves over Protestant areas, while the Catholics hoist the Palestinian flag. The flags are merely another way for the adversarial communities to tout their conflicting identities, mark their territories, and line up against each other. But watching those incongruous flags fluttering against the blue-green Belfast hills, I realized that they are also,

unintentionally, telling us that we can learn from Northern Ireland's experience. Above all, we can draw hope.