



# Trust in me: Allegiance choices in a post-split terrorist movement



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## ABSTRACT

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.

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“It was not clear-cut hard political people deciding. It was human factors that was deciding why some people went with one side over another.”

[(Interview with Mick Ryan, March 24, 2009)]

## 1. Introduction

Trust is a concept familiar and integral to all. As individuals, but also as a society, we go through our everyday lives consciously and unconsciously trusting a variety of people, organisations, systems and entities

to carry out their designated functions. As no one is fully self-sufficient everyone requires trust in others (Bluhm, 1987). From commuting to work to banking, eating out to posting a letter we place our trust in a range of people. However, when this trust dissipates so too does the effectiveness of the social structures supporting our society. Recent times have seen a variety of social movements and protests arise due to a significant decline in the trust of institutions, individuals or principles. From the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street, the Ferguson protests to the London riots one of the central themes present was distrust; distrust in the political elite, financial institutions, the police or the judicial system.

While it is clear that trust is a vital component in our everyday decision-making the present article aims to analyse the role that it plays in the decision-making process of members of terrorist groups, and

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specifically allegiance decision-making within terrorist movements. This exploratory research is based on interviews with 43 rank and file and leadership members of the Irish Republican Movement, and analyses the role which trust played in their allegiance decisions in the lead-up to and aftermath of an organisational split. The research focuses on 4 splits in the movement; 1969/70, 1974, 1986 and 1997. These four splits saw the birth of some of the most dangerous paramilitary groups in Ireland and Britain's history, the Official IRA, Provisional IRA, INLA, Continuity IRA and Real IRA (See [Morrison, 2014](#)).

Throughout this article there is continuous reference to terrorism, terrorists and terrorist groups. Each of these terms is contentious in their own right, and has justified chapters, article and books to debate their true meaning. The aim of this article is not to enter into this debate. However, it is recognised that it is necessary to define these first order principles. Therefore for the purpose of this article terrorism is defined as the employment of violence, or the threat of violence, to bring about political effect. The aim of this action is to bring about a state of fear in a wider audience than the direct physical victims of the initial act or threat of violence. A terrorist incident should be defined by the use of, or threat of, violence to bring about political effect. Therefore terrorism is a tactic that can be employed by any individual or group, whether they are state or non-state actors. However, in order to be defined as a terrorist or a terrorist group the utility of terrorism must be one of the dominant tactics used in order to achieve one's aims. Therefore not everyone or every group who has utilised terrorism once should automatically be classified as a terrorist or as a terrorist group.

In order to understand and appreciate terrorist groups, their strategies, tactics and evolution we must be able to analyse their decision-making processes and what influences them. McCormick posited that there are three theoretical strands that can assist us in understanding terrorist decision-making; strategic, organisational and psychological theories ([McCormick, 2003](#)). Building on this the present article analyses decision-making from a psychological point of view. Shapiro rightly notes that any interpretation and analysis of decision-making requires a detailed knowledge of the people involved and their roles within the group ([Shapiro, 2012](#)). It is clear that this respect for role-specific heterogeneity is essential if we are to advance our understanding of terrorist actors and decisions they make ([Gill & Young, 2011](#)). Within terrorist groups, as with all other human organisations, individual actors have different levels of experience, knowledge, influence and skills as well as different duties within the organisation. Similarly the decisions they make are heterogeneous. These heterogeneities must be respected more within our research. It is out of respect for this that the analysis hosted within this article differentiates between the individual actors interviewed. It emphasises the importance of assessing the decision-making of leadership and rank and file members separately.

While [McCormick \(2003\)](#) and many others understandably focus on the decisions that lead to terrorist events it is also essential that in order to gain the full understanding of what it means to be involved in a terrorist group that we must also analyse those decisions that are not directly related to a violent act. Throughout the lifetime of a terrorist group, and the careers of its individual members, the acts of violence and the decisions leading to them only represent the sporadic peaks of activity. While it is clear that we need to understand these peaks of violence it is when we also understand the troughs of non-violence that we will be able to fully understand what it means to be involved in a terrorist group ([Morrison, 2013](#)). The present article focuses on one of these 'troughs', the organisational split. Specifically it assesses how and why people decide their organisational allegiances in a post-split environment, and questions what role if any trust plays in these decisions. For some reading this the area of organisational split, and more specifically post-split allegiance decision-making, may seem like only a small sliver of the terrorist experience. This may be so. However, it is only when we truly understand each of these small slivers, and their relevance that we can even come close to fully understanding what it means to be involved in a terrorist organisation. As will be shown throughout the

article it is often times these non-violent decisions that lead an actor to the persistent utility of violence.

Up until recently the academic community has largely ignored organisational splits in terrorist and insurgent groups. However, recent times has seen a modest growth in the analysis of the issue. Over the past few years it has been shown that a competing leadership structure, alongside the employment of tactical violence can expedite the splintering of an organisation ([Asal, Brown & Dalton, 2012](#)). It has also been demonstrated that splits can be an integral part of the politicisation of an erstwhile violent group ([Morrison, 2014](#)) and we now know that the length of civil wars are not necessarily extended as a result of organisational fragmentation ([Findley & Rudloff, 2012](#)). As can be observed from these stated examples, and across the broader literature, the majority of splits analysis focuses on the organisational and conflict related factors leading to and resulting from division. However, by examining individual decision-making the present article moves beyond the more common organisational assessment. It aims to assess what influences an individual's allegiance choices. In doing so it attempts to come closer to understanding why the resultant parent and dissident factions emerge and how their overall levels of membership will be decided.

This article is therefore more in line with Ethan [Bueno de Mesquita's \(2008\)](#) article 'Terrorist Factions'. In this article Bueno de Mesquita develops a model to ascertain what factors may affect terrorist mobilisation and the likelihood of a splinter faction developing. However, in order to inform this organisational analysis Bueno de Mesquita also questioned why members of a continuum of potential terrorists would align themselves with one side over the other. In doing so he rightly states that the allegiance decision-making can be made as a result of ideological and/or non-ideological factors. Referencing [Stern \(2003\)](#) he states that these non-ideological factors may include the charisma of the leader and the level of private goods the faction can afford to provide. However, as has been previously stated the present article assesses a previously under-researched non-ideological factor bypassed by Bueno de Mesquita and others, the factor of trust. While the aim of both this article and Bueno de Mesquita's may seem similar, namely assessing why people will choose one side over the other, the approaches to answering this question are starkly different. While Bueno de Mesquita utilises algorithmic modelling the present article analyses data gathered through an extensive interview process. These should not be seen to be in competition with each other. On the contrary these, and other future research on the area, should be regarded as complementary and developing our knowledge of the topic.

Terrorist groups the world over have defined, and legitimised, their existence based on their ideological and strategic foundations. It can therefore be at times intuitive to presume, and easy to find evidence to support, that individual members and supporters join, align and stay with the groups based on these same ideological beliefs and strategies. [Bin Hassan \(2006\)](#) claims that it is ideology that drives and motivates terrorists. [Orsini \(2012\)](#) in his research on the Italian Red Brigades cautions against making group wide generalisations, yet goes on to claim that all of the murders carried out by the Red Brigades draws one's attention to the causal power of ideology. However, as is acknowledged by each of [Bin Hassan \(2006\)](#), [Bueno de Mesquita \(2008\)](#) and [Orsini \(2012\)](#) ideological commitment on its own is insufficient to explain why an individual may become involved, and stay involved, with a terrorist group. Taylor and Horgan outline that irrespective of ideology, politics or social processes that engagement in terrorist behaviour essentially involves an individual having and taking an opportunity to partake in terrorist behaviour ([Taylor & Horgan, 2006](#)). Developing on this in order to align with, and join, a specific terrorist organisation irrespective of one's ideological beliefs and strategic support for the utility of violence, one must also have an opportunity. By accepting this we must then ask 'what creates this opportunity?' While there are a variety of factors which may bring it about the present article will focus on one of the most under researched. That factor is trust.

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