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Internal Politics and the Fragmentation of Armed Groups

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Armed groups are prone to instability and fragmentation, but what explains variation among the new groups that emerge? I argue that the internal politics preceding organizational splits is critical. When it comes to the survival of breakaway groups, those forming around single issue areas gain an advantage by attracting more homogeneous, preference-aligned recruits. On the other hand, those forming over a variety of grievances attract a more heterogeneous population whose divergent views undermine cohesion and cooperation, necessitate hierarchy, and diminish the odds of organizational survival. I test this argument with a case study of two Republican groups from Northern Ireland—the Real Irish Republican Army and the Irish National Liberation Army. The findings confirm my argument and underscore the limited utility of studying organizational fractures from the sole perspective of contemporaneous external events like conciliation and repression. Rather, I show how internal political dynamics influence the composition, identity, and overall trajectory of breakaway groups. This has implications for designing effective counterinsurgent policies, for understanding the formation of armed groups, and for anticipating whether breakaway groups are likely to escalate, moderate, or adopt spoiling behavior.

Introduction

In 1913 a group called the Irish Volunteers formed in Northern Ireland, seeking to expel British forces and reunite with the Republic of Ireland to the south. In the following decades, splits within the ranks of the Irish Volunteers and their organizational progeny spawned dozens of new armed groups. Some of these fractures produced durable, hard-line spoilers like the Real Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Continuity IRA; others produced violent, unstable groups that battled their predecessors like the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA); and others still produced unremarkable offshoots that soon disappeared. What explains this variation?

While organizational fragmentation is critical to the conflict in Northern Ireland (Horgan 2012, 21), it is just as common elsewhere. Approximately 37 percent of armed groups listed in the Minorities at Risk—Organization Behavior dataset splintered at some point,[1] and nearly a third of groups in Liberia and Sub-Saharan Africa have split as well (Lidow 2016; Woldemariam 2018). Not surprisingly, fragmentation is therefore one of the most common ways for armed groups to form (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2019). Organizational fragmentation is also important because it can fundamentally reshape a group's internal composition and influence their observed behavior (Milliken and Martins 1996; Starke and Dyck 1996; Morrison 2013, 2017). When breakaway groups pull hard-liners away, the parent may be more likely to negotiate and commit to an eventual agreement Bueno (de Mesquita 2008); Lounsbery and Cook 2011, 2015), whereas the offshoot may escalate to unforeseen levels (Perkoski 2015). Instances of fragmentation also reveal important information about group cohesion, control, and the distribution of internal preferences (Cunningham and Sawyer 2014), and newly created intergroup rivalries can have drastic consequences for human security (Cook and Lounsbery 2011; Bloom 2005; Lilja and Hultman 2011; Kalyvas 2006; Rudloff and Findley 2016; Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012).

Existing research on the fragmentation of armed groups overwhelmingly focuses on the factors that increase or decrease the odds of a split (e.g., Asal, Brown, and Dalton 2012; McLauchlin and Pearlman 2012; Doctor 2019; Warren and Troy 2014), while often assuming that it is hard-liners who break away (for instance, Bueno de Mesquita 2008). Consequently, extant findings have little to say about how splits affect organizations moving forward or what explains the variation among breakaway groups. This is problematic because states commonly seek to fragment and divide militants as part of their counterterrorist and counterinsurgent strategies. For instance, the US Army's Field Manual 3-24 notes that "[r]ifts between insurgent leaders, if identified, can be exploited … Offering amnesty or a seemingly generous compromise can also cause divisions within an insurgency and present opportunities *to split or weaken it*" (Petraeus and Amos 2009, Chapter 10, Page 8, emphasis added). If states are going to implement these policies, then it is imperative we fully understand this process.

In this article I refocus attention toward the internal politics that precede organizational splits. I argue that the disagreements underlying organizational breakdown have enduring consequences since they influence which members depart with the splinter and which remain with the parent. When it comes to the survival of breakaway groups, a critical variable is the breadth of their disagreements motivating their departure—what I term their organizational niche. Splinters forming around single issue areas, such as strategic or ideological disputes, tend to attract more homogeneous, preference-aligned members that counteract some of the problematic "liability of newness" (Brüderl, Preisendörfer, and Ziegler 1992) that often causes young groups to fail. On the other hand, splits taking place over a variety of grievances attract a more heterogeneous population. Their divergent views undermine cohesion and cooperation, necessitate greater oversight and hierarchy, and diminish the odds of organizational survival.

These findings reveal that the disagreements within armed groups matter. To understand the consequences of

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organizational fractures, we must look beyond contemporaneous external events like repression and conciliation to understand why splits occur and how members react.[2] As such, these dynamics do not only have implications for the survivability of new groups: the motivations behind organizational breakdown also shed light on the odds of tactical escalation and change, parent-splinter cooperation, and successful negotiation. Of course, research on the formation of armed groups more generally also finds that initial motivations are meaningful (e.g., natural resources, religious motivations, and local embeddedness; Staniland 2014; Weinstein 2006; Pedahzur 2006). By applying a similar lens to organizational breakdown, however, this article makes two contributions. More broadly, it sheds light on the processes underlying organizational fragmentation and formation that have wide-reaching implications. More specifically, it complements existing research on the survival of armed groups by showing how one's formation is linked to conditions associated with cohesion and collapse identified elsewhere. Taken together, this can help analyze, explain, and predict the behavior of contemporary armed groups.

This article proceeds as follows. I begin by conceptualizing and defining organizational splintering, differentiating between various transformations that scholars commonly conflate. I then present my model of organizational breakdown and I derive testable hypotheses that I subsequently evaluate in a case study of two Republican splinter groups from Northern Ireland. I conclude with policy implications, avenues for future research, and other important takeaways.

"Fragmentation" and the Causes of Organizational Splintering

Subnational conflicts like civil wars, insurgencies, and protracted terrorist campaigns are increasingly common. They are growing increasingly complex as well, with multiple armed groups[3] claiming to represent the opposition in many cases. When this sort of fragmentation occurs, it generates a "dual contest" - both between rebels, and between rebels and the state (Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012) - that fundamentally alters the conflict landscape, influencing everything from levels of civilian victimization to state and nonstate strategies (Krause 2017; Mahoney 2017; Warren and Troy 2014, 2015; Krause 2014; Nilsson 2010; Cunningham 2011; Cunningham et al. 2012; Morrison 2013; Horgan 2012; Driscoll 2012; Bloom 2005; Greenhill and Major 2007; Kydd and Walter 2006; Lilja and Hultman 2011).

While interest in fragmentation has grown in recent years, scholars have used this term as a catch-all for distinct organizational and conflict-level transformations. First, scholars often use fragmentation to refer to the proliferation of armed groups in a given conflict regardless of how they emerge (Cunningham et al. 2012; Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009; Pearlman 2009; Nemeth 2014). Here, the focus is on the *cumulative* number of violent nonstate actors to distinguish between a unitary and nonunitary opposition. Second, "fragmentation" can result when groups decentralize due to security concerns (Shapiro 2013; Biddle 2010; Grauer and Horowitz 2012) and to promote regional autonomy as they expand (Mendelsohn 2011; Byman 2014). As Woldemariam (2011, 36) astutely points out, however, this might be "a tactical maneuver that has little to do with any underlying factional dispute." Third, militant groups can seemingly fragment when they create specialized organizations to conduct their most violent attacks (Siqueira 2005; Crenshaw 2013). This compartmentalization strategy can be useful when local supporters disapprove of particular operations (such as suicide bombings) or when groups seek to attract hard-line members away from competing organizations (Moghadam 2003; Gerlach 2001). As before, this is a highly intentional act.

Fourth, and finally, is organizational splintering. Splintering occurs when a subset of members—a minority—of a preexisting group break away to form a new, independent armed organization. These individuals seek to fundamentally alter the status quo, whether in terms of strategy, ideology, organization, or simply leadership. This, in combination with their minority status, allows observers to distinguish splinters from their parents. While observationally similar to extremist wings, what makes them distinct is their autonomy.

Research on organizational splits primarily focuses on why and when they occur. On the one hand, findings suggest that government actions and characteristics of the local operating environment are meaningful. Conciliatory offers might intensify divisions between hard-liners and moderates (Seymour, Bakke, and Cunningham 2016; Paserman and Jaeger 2006; Johnston 2007; Christia 2012), and if group leaders accept a compromise, radical members may break away to perpetuate violence and undermine the agreement (Bueno de Mesquita 2005; Stedman 1997; Greenhill and Major 2007). Repression, however, might unify groups under some circumstances (similar to a rally-round-the-flag effect) (Asal et al. 2012; McLauchlin and Pearlman 2012; Simmel 1955; Coser 1956), but divide them at others (Warren and Troy 2014; Tilly 1978; Olson 1982; Shapiro 2013; Woldemariam 2011). As Zimmerman (1980, 191) rightly notes, "there are theoretical arguments for all conceivable basic relationships between government coercion and group protest and rebellion, except for no relationship," and this appears to hold for organizational cohesion as well. In addition to direct actions by the government, characteristics of the local environment are also significant. For instance, the level of civilian grievances can affect the unity among rebel fronts (Mosinger 2018), as can mediation efforts and the onset of civil war (Seymour et al. 2016).

On the other hand, group characteristics are also significant. Staniland (2010) argues that local embeddedness makes for more cohesive groups. Groups with factionalized leadership, poor leadership, or decentralized authority are also at risk of breaking apart (Shapiro 2013; Doctor 2019; Seymour et al. (2016). As to why, Asal et al. (2012) note that such arrangements "allow for a plurality of potentially competing opinions, objectives, and priorities, and thus are more likely to break apart under external stressors." Tamm (2016), however, argues that splits become more likely when outside sponsors upend the internal balance of power by throwing their support to a rival leader.[4] Finally, underperformance in battle and a sense of uneven burden-sharing (Kenny 2010, 552) can also cause "an organization's constituent units to question the cooperative bargain that is at the heart of the rebel organization" (Woldemariam 2011, 3–4).

[2] A meso- or perhaps micro level approach thus helps to explain macro-level outcomes (Della Porta 2010).

[3] I use "armed groups" and "militant groups" interchangeably to refer to politically motivated nonstate organizations that employ violence against states and/or civilians. My research focuses on organizational dynamics that should broadly apply to these different organizations.

[4] While entrepreneurial rebel leaders can indeed expedite a split, it tells us little about who will follow them or how their behavior will eventually change.

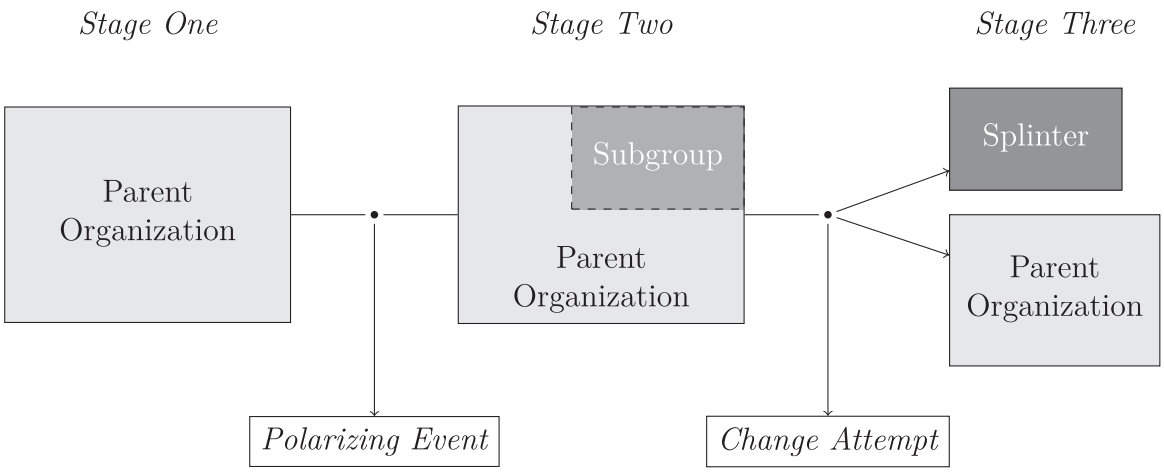

Figure 1. The process of organizational splintering

Taken together, existing research yields important information about the likelihood of fragmentation as it relates to organizational and environmental characteristics.[5] It is tempting, and even logical, for one to imagine how these factors might not only affect the odds of fragmentation but also its consequences. For instance, perhaps splits occurring amid state repression will produce weak, short-lived breakaway groups and the parent's simultaneous demise. Research from other domains, however, suggests that the events contemporaneous to organizational splits have limited analytic utility on their own.[6] As Finke and Scheitle (2009, 12) write, "we must be careful not to let the manifest drama of a schism distract us from its latent causes. Instead of looking to the surface phenomena that occur during schisms, we must examine the deeper sociological and organizational contexts that give rise to schisms." Applied to armed groups, this suggests that we can only learn so much from the "manifest drama" of repression, ceasefires, battlefield loss, and leadership decapitation.

The experiences of armed groups in Pakistan facing the state's violent interventions provide a useful illustration. For Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, violence generated interpersonal feuds that "centered around previously little-known figures in [the group's] hierarchy following the killing of its top leaders" (Gunaratna and Iqbal 2012). Fractures within Tehrik-e-Khudam-ul-Islam and Jamaat-al-Dawaw similarly occurred "along personality lines" following the death of influential commanders (Gunaratna and Iqbal 2012). However, Pakistan's crackdown also prompted disagreements within Lashkar-e-Taiba over matters of funding. The exact timing of the split—while one of the leaders was meeting financial supporters in Saudi Arabia—"indicates that Iqbal's policy of seeking more funds from the Arab countries," in response to the state repression, "was one of the stimuli for the split" (Khan 2005). And finally, repression prompted some groups to increase the frequency and scale of their attacks, which eventually generated internal disagreements over the acceptability of indiscriminate targeting. Describing their rationale for departing the Afghan Taliban, one Jamaat-ul-Ahrar commander noted that "[they] have no vision and mission except to kill innocent people" (Peshawar School Massacre Splits Afghan, Pakistani Militant Groups, 2014). As these examples demonstrate, solely focusing on external events would obscure the very different internal dynamics motivating these splits—dynamics that could help anticipate intergroup conflict, tactical change, or even organizational decline.

The Politics of Organizational Splintering

Organizational ruptures are a natural component of group dynamics. These are not haphazard events (Dyck and Starke 1999, 792) but instead "result [from] internal debate, disagreement, and/or conflict [that] ultimately results in one faction deeming it necessary to move away from the parent organization" (Morrison 2013, 19). This process for a typical armed organization is depicted in Figure 1.

In stage one, armed groups experience relative internal unity, and they are free of cohesive, dissenting factions and subgroups.[7] While informal networks almost always exist—often around ethnicity, kinship, or language (Parkinson 2013)—at this point they are loosely affiliated and not united in dissent of group practices. Although not all organizations manage to achieve this level of unity,[8] it is more likely in young organizations, where the social bonds that underpin subgroups have yet to form, and in those that have recently split, which provides the opportunity for preference alignment as unsatisfied members depart.

In stage two, dissenting factions begin to form. These "social subgroups … share similar attitudes and enduring beliefs" (Carton 2011, 11), centered around dissatisfaction with their organization's trajectory or current practices. Eventually, these individuals "coalesce into a subgroup that [possesses] a true group identity" (Dyck and Starke 1999, 807) that gradually becomes more institutionalized over time.[9] While the formation of subgroups is partly due to innate human characteristics—such as the desire to reduce subjective uncertainty by seeking out like-minded peers (Hogg 2000, 124)—it is often catalyzed by some *polarizing event*. This might include factors discussed earlier such as strategic failure, sociopolitical changes, or an influx of new members that cause individuals to reconsider the status quo and to look for others who feel the same.

[5] It should also be noted that these conditions might be *sufficient* for fragmentation to occur, but not altogether *necessary*.

[6] Although they may "[exacerbate] internal conflict" (Balser 1997, 201).

[7] I use the terms "faction" and "subgroup" interchangeably in reference to informal collectives within organizations.

[8] Which affects the odds—but not the motivations—for splintering.

[9] The level of institutionalization can be gauged by the subgroup's boundedness (ability to enter/exit) as well as its hierarchy and leadership.

Importantly, it is possible to observe these subgroups prior to any split. The Islamic State's split from Al Qaeda, for instance, was anticipated well in advance. Months before their break in July 2005, US forces intercepted a letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri—leader of Al Qaeda—to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—then leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, the predecessor to the Islamic State. In it, "Zawahiri expresses total agreement with the goals of the jihadist military efforts in Iraq but expresses grave reservations with [Zarqawi's] tactics" (Hashim 2014). This document gave US forces insight into the tight-knit faction operating around Zarqawi and the growing rift between Zarqawi and Zawahiri (McCants 2015).

Finally, in stage three, the subgroup breaks away "to establish a new group more in line with the viewpoints and expectations of that section of the membership" (Morrison 2013, 19). Understanding the disagreements motivating subgroups is therefore important because it sheds light on how they plan to alter their behavior after they gain independence. As to when subgroups decide to depart, it appears to be driven by strategic calculations and perceived advantages (Jones and Libicki 2008; Morrison 2013). The departure will also usually follow some *change attempt* where members of the subgroup seek to address their grievances ("apply their voice") in their parent organization (Morrison 2013; Woldemariam 2011; Doctor 2019). Either upon failing or realizing the impossibility of their task, they exit the group to start anew.[10]

Existing research overwhelmingly focuses on stage three, the most visible aspect of an organizational split. In doing so it overlooks critical intragroup politics in stages one and two that are responsible for variation in the membership, goals, and behavior of the splinter. To understand these groups, then, one must first understand the politics preceding splits. In what follows, I consider one facet of this: how internal political dynamics can shed light on a breakaway group's odds of survival.

Organizational Niches and Group Survival

New political parties, religious sects, business firms, and even armed groups tend to develop around organizational niches (Carroll 1984; Baum and Singh 1994a; Singh 1994; Freeman and Hannan 1983; Hannan, Carroll, and Pólos 2003; Hannan and Freeman 1977). An organization's niche is essentially who it appeals to and extracts resources from,[11] and it ranges from very broad (e.g., the Democratic Party) to very narrow (e.g., the National Governors Association). There are rationales for both expansion and contraction. While niche expansion provides a greater population from which to draw members and resources, contraction facilitates coordination, control, and cohesion by appealing to a smaller, more like-minded population. As such, niche size has important consequences; perhaps most significantly, it affects a group's ability to represent and satisfy its members. "The larger the niche size, the more difficult it is for the organization to serve any particular part of the niche as well as a more specialized organization could" (Scheitle 2007, 5). Niche size is also linked to the odds of survival (Baum and Singh 1994b), competition and cooperation (Baum and Singh 1994a), performance (or "fitness") (Sorenson et al. 2006), and resource acquisition (Dobrev, Kim, and Hannan 2001).

Based on how niches have been measured elsewhere (Scheitle 2007), the organizational niche of a breakaway group can be measured as its grievances with the parent. These grievances are identifiable,[12] and they influence who will join and support it (Baum and Singh 1994a; Scheitle 2007). Large niches—when there are multiple, diverse grievances motivating the subgroup—should help fledgling splinter groups appeal to a greater segment of the parent organization. Small niches—singular, focused grievances—should appeal to a smaller pool of recruits, but the recruits will have increasingly similar preferences for their organizational future: preferences for political goals, violence, ideological interpretation, and so on. This pattern holds among many different organizations; for instance, "[h]aving a small niche allows religious organizations to effectively market their goods to a specific segment of the population … and allows individuals to create strong ties within the organization" (Scheitle 2007, 22). Thus, while a breakaway organization's niche is determined before it fully emerges, it will have an enduring effect on their internal composition and organizational dynamics (Falleti and Mahoney 2015). To use an analogy, this is the foundation upon which the group eventually grows, and a corrupt foundation can prove insurmountable.

To illustrate, consider a faction that forms within a rebel group over a shared desire to escalate violence. That faction will draw in members who seek to escalate and expand their operational tempo. This is why the Islamic State broke with Al Qaeda, and it explains why they appealed to some of the most hard-line operatives (McCants 2015). Yet, a faction that forms to escalate violence but also to embrace Marxist ideology will draw in disaffected members who might support both goals, but also perhaps just one or the other.[13] This is similar to revolutionary organizations in Italy where "the encounter of the political entrepreneurs with the alienated youth produced short explosions of violence: the preferences and attitudes of the two groups were too heterogeneous, and a stable alliance was therefore impossible" (Della Porta 2006, 109). Niche size is therefore highly consequential to intragroup dynamics.

Assuming that larger niches attract a wider, more heterogeneous mix of recruits into the breakaway group, then it should also affect specific, observable aspects of the organization. First, groups with larger niches should experience greater rates of disagreement, infighting, defection, and leaking.[14] Summarizing this, Milliken and Martins (1996, 403) write that "the greater the amount of diversity in a group … the less integrated the group is likely to be and the higher the level of dissatisfaction and turnover." This is because groups with larger niches will find it difficult to fully satisfy their constituents who hold diverse goals. Over time, this dissatisfaction can motivate deviant behavior like leaking and defection as members reevaluate their allegiance and grow susceptible to government payoffs and coercion (Gates 2002; Crenshaw 2000). This leads to the first hypothesis:

[10] Thus, since factions take time to develop, and then time their depatures strategically, the conditions surrounding their split could be meaningless—and simply contemporaneous to overlooked internal dynamics—or opportunistic.

[11] Resources can range from toleration to financial and material assistance to outright participation, making this concept applicable across a range of contexts.

[12] By internal discourse and attempts/proposals to reformulate the parent organization.

[13] Existing research confirms that recruits join armed groups for a variety of reasons, and some of the group's goals appeal more strongly to some than to others. E.g. Weinstein 2005; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008.

[14] In a similar way, Pischedda (2018) finds that "ideological differences, disagreements over strategy, [and] different priorities" led to conflicts *between* rebel groups as well. And Gade et al. (2019) find the opposite whereby rebel alliances are facilitated by ideological similarity.

H1: *Groups with large organizational niches will experience greater rates of disagreement, defection, and infighting.*

Second, with a large niche and more preference diversity among its members, leaders should opt for hierarchical organizational structures. Although decentralization and autonomy are preferable from the standpoint of survival, leaders presiding over a heterogeneous membership base may hold legitimate fears of insubordination and deviant behavior. Facing these immediate challenges, leaders may implement management practices and structures that bolster their control (Shapiro 2013). These principal-agent concerns, however, should be less likely when groups experience internal consensus and cooperation (Crenshaw 2000; Gates 2002), which allows leaders to delegate, decentralize, and ultimately increase their security. This leads to the second hypothesis:

H2: *Groups with large organizational niches are more likely to adopt hierarchical organizational structures.*

Third, the eventual implication is that organizational niches will affect rates of survival.[15] This idea finds support in research on organizational ecology where specialist firms—those with smaller niches—tend to outperform and survive longer than generalists (Freeman and Hannan 1983, 1143). For armed groups specifically, the infighting, defection, and leaking that are more likely with a broad niche can be disastrous. And, while adopting a hierarchical structure may seem like a solution, it is undertaken at a cost: structures that prioritize internal control do so at the expense of security. As Shapiro (2013, 26) notes, "[t]he costs for terrorist groups are obvious; monitoring agent activities requires additional communications and record-keeping, which thereby increases the risk of death or imprisonment for everyone in the group." Partially owing to the threatening, anarchic environment (Christia 2012) in which they operate, it should come as no surprise that internal dynamics are foundational to the survival of armed groups.

H3: *Groups with large organizational niches are less likely to survive.*

While larger niches therefore leave groups susceptible to internal and external threats, overcoming them will be especially challenging for young groups. They experience the typical "liability of newness" (Brüderl et al. 1992)—challenges of recruitment, resource acquisition, and credibility that help to explain why so few armed groups persist (Young and Dugan 2014)— and they must also contend with potentially hostile parent organizations and a public reluctant to support yet another armed group.[16] Ultimately, these challenges may prove insurmountable for splinters.

Of course, there exists a large literature on the survival of armed groups more broadly, and my model of splinter formation incorporates some of these findings while complementing others. For instance, organizational structures matter: decentralized groups can more readily survive government repression, head-hunting, and infiltration. My findings show how the odds of adopting these structures, however, are linked to how groups form. Additionally, an organization's ability to survive is not just an internal struggle, but an external one as well. While aspects of the prevailing political opportunity structure (Bosi and Della Porta 2012; Della Porta 2006, 2008), intergroup relations (Phillips 2015), and foreign backing (Tamm 2016; Salehyan 2007, 2011) are indeed meaningful, my research suggests that groups with unstable organizational foundations are more susceptible to external stressors. I test some of these alternative explanations in the case study that follows.

Finally, although it is not my primary focus, this process has ramifications for the parent group as well. On the one hand, research finds that armed groups are at risk of collapsing when larger factions depart (Mahoney 2017). On the other hand, research finds that splits can benefit armed groups when they pull away dissenting individuals (Morrison 2013). By serving as an offramp for dissatisfied members to depart, organizational ruptures can sometimes be preferable to maintaining unity amid internal tension. My argument offers a potential link: parent groups are most likely to reap benefits from splinters with focused grievances that attract a specific subset of dissenting members, like anticompromise and religious hard-liners.[17] Because of their smaller niche, these groups will tend to pull away fewer operatives. Splinters with large niches, however, will attract members from various segments of the group, diminishing the potential benefits while simply robbing their parent of more members. Further research is needed on the relationship between parent and progeny organizations.

Investigating Fragmentation in Ireland and Nothern Ireland: The INLA and the RIRA

In this section, I test my hypotheses using a case study of two militant organizations that were active during the Troubles that engulfed Ireland and Northern Ireland from 1968 until 1998. The Troubles marked one of the most intense periods of conflict between three different sides: the British government, which has controlled the territory of Northern Ireland since 1921; Republican paramilitary forces, including various iterations of the IRA that seek Northern Ireland's independence from the United Kingdom and reintegration with the sovereign Republic of Ireland to the south; and Loyalist paramilitary forces that prefer the status quo and British control. Although these forces have been in a state of relative conflict throughout the twentieth century, the period from 1968 to 1998—the Troubles—marks the most violent period with around 3,600 deaths and more than thirty thousand injuries (Mesev, Shirlow, and Downs 2009). The Troubles ended in 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday Accords, a landmark deal that cemented a democratic pathway to determine the future of Northern Ireland.

This conflict presents an excellent vantage point for studying splintering dynamics. First, organizational fragmentation was not only frequent but it was highly influential (Horgan 2012). Second, the wealth of existing information about this conflict provides unparalleled insights that support hypothesis testing. In the following case study, I draw upon declassified government documents from archives in Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Great Britain[18]; contemporaneous accounts and interviews published in newspapers,

[15] By "survival" I am not only referring to the organization's defeat at the hands of the state, but also to demise via fratricide, further splintering, and violent competition for control.

[16] Internal heterogeneity and niche size may therefore be most concerning for new groups but not necessarily established organizations (e.g., Andrews and Money 2008). In addition, the "sunk costs" of membership in new organizations is relatively low (e.g., Della Porta 2010), reducing the barriers to defection and leaking.

[17] This will also be beneficial for states since separating out ideological or strategic hard-liners allows them to tailor their strategies. This potentially helps to explain why fragmented conflicts encounter more concessions by the state (e.g., Cunningham 2011).

[18] This information was collected during fieldwork in summer 2015.

Table 1. Confirming and disconfirming observable implications

Theoretical expectations	*Confirming observable implications*	*Disconfirming observable implications*
Generally: Organizational niche determined before visible split	Organizational niche determined organically during period of subgroup formation prior to applying voice, breaking away	Group leaders determine niche strategically after breaking away
Generally: Organizational niche not solely determined by external events	Organizational niche shaped by preexisting debates, fault lines within group; similar external events associated with the development of distinct niches	Organizational niche corresponds to new fault lines created by external event; similar external events associated with development of similar niches
Hypothesis 1: Large niches associated with disagreement, defection, and infighting	Disagreement and infighting occur along the lines of initial subgroup development; decision to defect is linked to infighting; more frequent acts of deviant behavior among groups with large niches	Less infighting, defection, disagreement with large niches; equal levels of deviant behavior regardless of niche; infighting and disagreement not along lines of initial subgroup development
Hypothesis 2: Large niches associated with hierarchical organizational structures	Decentralization with small niches, hierarchy with large niches; unsuccessful attempts to decentralize with large niches; leaders reference infighting and original fault lines when deciding structure	Consistent structure across niches; debates about structure unconnected to infighting, heterogeneity; ability to switch between structures
Hypothesis 3: Large niches associated with organizational demise	Group demise hastened by infighting, defection, disagreement between individuals attracted by large niche; leadership recognizes link between heterogeneity and demise; small niches able to overcome significant challenges to survival	Group with large niche able to survive external threats, small niche unable to survive; explanations for demise unconnected to internal dynamics

group newsletters, and research reports; as well as more recent academic works. Taken together, this is a crucial case for my theory that is also ripe for research.

Methodology

My hypotheses ultimately concern the self-reproducing nature of the internal dynamics that precede and motivate organizational splits, and I test these hypotheses with a comparative historical analysis (Falleti 2016; Falleti and Mahoney 2015). More specifically, I use a Bayesian-inspired form of process-tracing (Mahoney 2016) where I evaluate a multitude of evidence to assess whether or not the model and my specific hypotheses receive empirical support, or whether alternative explanations are driving the results. As for the former, Table 1 lays out the observable implications that would help to confirm or disconfirm the hypotheses as well as my model of organizational breakdown.

I use a most-similar case study design (Bennett 2004, 31), focusing on the formation and trajectories of two Republican militant organizations that both formed by breaking away from preexisting groups: the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) and the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA). While they do not share *all* features, they share important characteristics that, intuitively, are related to their survival. For instance, one can directly trace the formation of both organizations to de-escalation by their respective parent groups.[19] In addition, both groups were initially led by charismatic dissenters who shaped the doctrine and structure of their new organizations[20]; both groups sought to influence their parents before breaking away[21]; both groups initially created political and military wings[22]; and finally, they both split from two of the most active, high-profile organizations of their time—the RIRA split from the Provisional IRA (PIRA) in 1997, and the INLA split from the Official IRA (OIRA)[23] in 1974.[24] Despite these similarities, the INLA and the RIRA exhibit very different trajectories and patterns of survival. The INLA has been described as an "ephemeral splinter group" (Smith 2002, 1) that immediately experienced infighting, and within five years it devolved into separate camps claiming legitimacy over the INLA name. On the other hand, the RIRA has been described as an "enduring threat" as recently as 2015 (Whitehead 2015). Despite setbacks including a ceasefire, the ill-fated, horrific Omagh Bombing, and arrests, they have managed to persist for more than two decades.

The Irish National Liberation Army

The INLA broke away from its parent group, the OIRA, in 1974 (depicted in Figure 2). The OIRA itself formed in 1969 after breaking away from another organization (the Irish Republican Army), and their goal was to unite Ireland and Northern Ireland by force. In its first few years, the OIRA was a relatively successful, cohesive organization, but several factors caused this to change (Smith 2002).

Polarizing Events: A Ceasefire and Strategic Reorientation

The development of a coherent subgroup within the OIRA was catalyzed by three events. The first is changes in the sociopolitical environment and conflict landscape. Moloney (2002, 112) notes there was "war weariness" throughout

[19] This is important because de-escalation likely catalyzes hard-liners to break away. Having this occur in only one case might introduce unique dynamics.

[20] Since strong, charismatic leaders could be associated with hierarchy, this is import to rule out.

[21] Those that do not are perhaps more likely to be motivated by personal gain, leading to lower cohesion.

[22] This could plausibly influence a group's membership.

[23] As Smith (2002, 91) notes, "[i]n the space of a year [after forming], the Provisionals had effectively superseded the Officials as the main Republican driving force in Northern Ireland."

[24] Splitting from weak, insignificant organizations might lead to different trajectories.

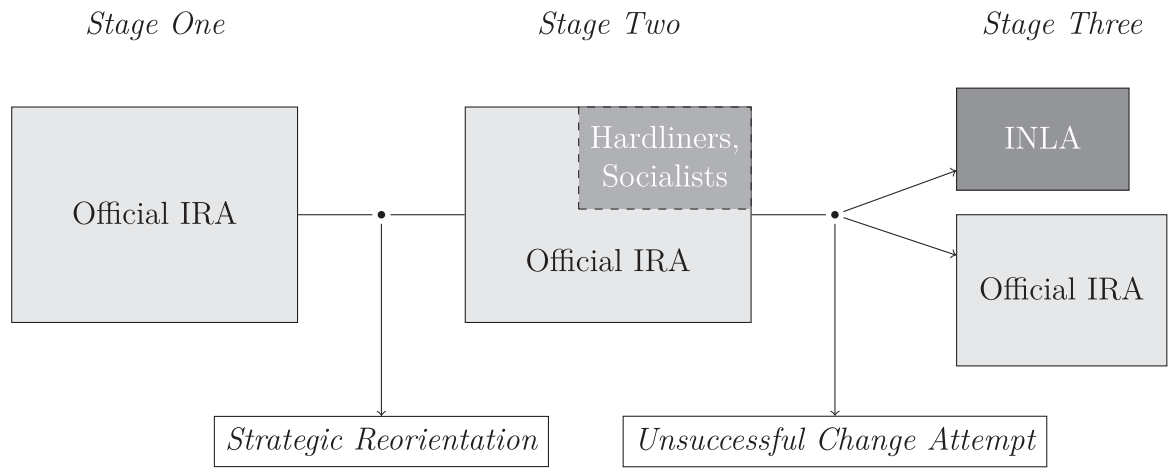

Figure 2. The formation of the INLA

Belfast, prompting many to question whether the armed campaign was hindering progress. "The shootings and bombings had transformed many nationalist areas into terrifying war zones, where people ran a daily risk of running into gun battles or being caught up in nerve-jangling bomb explosions." This sentiment soon colored discussions within armed groups, although it was controversial because the armed campaign was fundamental to the identity of the Republican movement.

Second, what cemented this strategic reorientation was an ill-fated retaliatory attack following the infamous Bloody Sunday massacre that occurred on January 30, 1972. Here, members of the British armed forces opened fire on twenty-six unarmed civilians in Derry, Northern Ireland, killing fourteen. In response, the OIRA planted a bomb at a military base in Aldershot, England, that was home to the unit responsible. Although the bomb went off as planned, it ultimately missed its target, killing six members of the cleaning staff and an Army chaplain. The failure "[c]onfirmed the fears of those on the [Official] Army Council who viewed the 'armed campaign' as a political liability" (Holland and McDonald 1994, 12).

As a result, the Official IRA adopted a unilateral ceasefire in 1972—the third catalyzing event. Combined with the other changes, this inspired significant internal debate and prompted individuals to seek out like-minded peers during this period of strategic and ideological flux.

The Formation and Exit of the INLA

While debate raged inside the OIRA, Seamus Costello soon emerged as a dissident leader. A "compelling orator, dramatic, charismatic, [and] good organizer" (Bell 1979, 413), he had risen through the ranks of the OIRA. Although an ardent supporter of Irish reunification, Costello found himself at odds with other leaders of the OIRA.

The subgroup that eventually coalesced around Costello exemplifies a large organizational niche at the intersection of ideological and strategic grievances,[25] and it therefore appealed to two very different types of individuals. On the one hand, initial disagreement with the OIRA revolved around the 1972 ceasefire. Costello's rejection of the ceasefire meant that the subgroup appealed to some of the most hard-line militants who "were just keen to get at the Brits and the Prods … They couldn't resist the temptation to hit out at the loyalists" (Holland and McDonald 1994, 47). These individuals were only interested in violence and defending the Catholic community in Northern Ireland (English 2004, 177).

Second, while the OIRA considered itself a revolutionary socialist organization—like many other Republican groups—at the time of the ceasefire it was divided over how to achieve this goal and what the socialist institutions would eventually look like. Costello spearheaded one strategy, arguing that the "national question and the social question were not to be approached in schematic stages but had to be fought for at the same time" (Holland and McDonald 1994). In doing so he appealed to a "curious mixture of socialists, republicans and trade unionists" (Bloomer 1988) who saw this new subgroup as an ideological match. As Hanley (2010, 286) notes, many of these individuals saw Costello's group "as having the potential to become a mass revolutionary party." This was a far cry from what the anticeasefire hard-liners envisioned (Whiting 2016, 115).

Costello and his band of supporters eventually broke with the OIRA in 1974 after failing to "change Official IRA policy" from the inside (Holland and McDonald 1994, 33). On December 8, two organizations were officially conceived: the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) and the INLA. The IRSP and the INLA were like different sides of the same coin,[26] with many simply calling them together the the INLA, the Irish Republican Socialist Movement, or the People's Liberation Army.

The Effects of the INLA's Large Organizational Niche

The INLA was a heterogeneous organization comprised of individuals holding starkly different visions for their group. Reports from the British Independent Monitoring Commission, tasked with overseeing the disarmament of paramilitary forces, confirm this: "The INLA is a very volatile mix of people from many and varied terrorist backgrounds. It has a reputation for extreme violence and internal feuding centered round leadership disputes [that] regularly lead to fragmentation of the group" (First Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission 2004). Indeed, much of the original leadership resigned in the group's first year upon

[25] While Morrison (2013) suggests that Costello might have widened the niche intentionally to gain members, he nonetheless capitalized on existing debates within the organization to do so. This underscores how entrepreneurial rebel leaders can indeed manipulate politics for personal gain, but they are still beholden to organizational dynamics.

[26] Most Republican organizations adopted this structure.

realizing that there was no easy way to resolve their internal differences (IRSP– Third Offspring of the Split 1977).

The INLA's large niche and resulting internal heterogeneity had several discrete effects. In line with my first hypothesis, the INLA was beset with internal feuds. In 1975, a year after breaking away from the OIRA, "divisions within the movement were showing themselves" (Holland and McDonald 1994, 60). The first was between Costello and the militant hard-liners whom he could barely control. Costello wanted to moderate the use of force in a controlled, strategic manner, but this proved unappealing to some. "Why would gunmen who had grown restless because of the three-year ceasefire join another organization that did not offer them some military role?" (Holland and McDonald 1994, 55). A second internal feud was brewing simultaneously between "McAliskey," one of the group's leaders, "on the left wing of the [INLA] and the core around Costello in a dispute over the very role of the military wing and the armed campaign" (Holland and McDonald 1994, 60). And third, there were feuds among the lower-ranked members as well. Hard-liners had little in common with the group's more politically-minded recruits, and "[t]his manifested itself as a series of disagreements between the socialist-republican element and the militant nationalists within the INLA." As a result, and not even five years after their formation, "factions within the INLA openly struggled for supremacy" (Bloomer 1988, 5). Tellingly, the nature of these feuds corresponds to the initial, broad platform embraced by Costello.

Feuding and heterogeneity within the INLA eventually encouraged defections and informers as well. Many were willing to cooperate because they had "grown weary of the divisions and disagreements permeating the organisation" (O'Higgins 1987). This made them easy targets for security forces; as one confidential government report from 1979 notes, "the greater risk of arrest and possible conviction will increase the pressure on less committed INLA members" (*Proscription and Deproscription Associations and Organisations/Political Activity* 1979). Even if these individuals were not sought out by the government, they often provided information willingly. Simply put, in the words of one headline from 1982, "Feuds breed informers" (Beresrord 1982). This underscores how internal disagreement directly catalyzed defection and infiltration, all of which can be traced back to the uneasy alliance at the core of the INLA.

Consequently, the INLA adopted a hierarchical leadership structure in an attempt to exert control.[27] Members of the INLA even called Costello "authoritarian" (Kiely 1977), and for those who were promoted to positions of power, "Costello chose only those men he could manipulate" (Holland and McDonald 1994, 39). According to his own calculations, the INLA needed a centralized structure to contain the various elements within the group. It is then no surprise that, after Costello was assassinated in 1977, members of the INLA immediately fought to wrest control and enforce their own strategic visions, and these conflicts fell, once again, along the group's initial fault lines (O'Higgins 1987).

In the end, one can trace the disagreements, infighting, and centralized structure back to the INLA's large organizational niche. This laid a poor foundation for a clandestine group and it eventually made British operations against them more effective (O'Higgins 1987, 22). As such, it is not surprising that in the group's first year, much of its leadership resigned; or that, in its second year, Seamus Costello was murdered, possibly by a faction within his own organization;[28] or that in five years, the group was "leaderless and factionalized"[29] (Bloomer 1988, 8). Interestingly, one need not look further than the INLA's own publication for insight into why a group's organizational niche is significant: "[i]t is necessary to have clarity about the objectives for which we strive, otherwise the fruits of our struggle could slip to counter revolutionaries."[30]

The Real Irish Republican Army

The RIRA is a splinter organization that emerged from the PIRA in 1998 (depicted in Figure 3). The PIRA was the dominant and most widely supported republican militant group throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and it was one of the primary parties that negotiated to end the Troubles. The PIRA itself formed in 1969 when, in another split, it broke away from what was at the time the Irish Republican Army (White 1997).

Polarizing Events: The Mitchell Principles

In the late 1990s, certain events prompted PIRA leaders to consider a ceasefire. English (2004, 307–11) identifies three causes: the PIRA felt they had reached a military stalemate with the British; PIRA leaders could envision definite benefits from ending violence and halting their "pariah status"; and Republicans came to recognize some of the harsh realities of Northern Ireland that they had for years either overlooked or more consciously ignored. Usefully, this mirrors much of the logic that motivated the OIRA's strategic reorientation in the early 1970s.

In response, PIRA leaders warmed up to the ideas of a permanent ceasefire and compromise with the British. Talks between the two camps culminated in the Good Friday Agreement, a monumental deal involving Republican and Loyalists groups as well as the governments of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom. The agreement recognized that a majority of people in Northern Ireland desired to remain part of the United Kingdom, and it would thus remain so until a majority favored reunification. Before these talks could even begin, however, each party had to first agree to the Mitchell Principles, which stipulated that each party must renounce violence and, for paramilitary groups, disarm. It was these principles that most catalyzed the subgroup to form that would eventually become the RIRA (Morrison 2013, 158–59): it "[demoralized] rank and file IRA members whose dedication to armed insurgency against the British in Northern Ireland was proverbial" (Mooney and O'Toole 2003, 23).

Subgroup Formation

The prospect of agreeing to the Mitchell Accords created two oppositional camps within the PIRA. The majority, headed by Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, favored compromise and de-escalation. Hard-liners, on the other hand, were represented by Michael McKevitt, Seamus McGrane, Brian Keenan, and "Frank McGuinness," a pseudonym for the PIRA's top bomb-maker. McKevitt, like

[27] Since the OIRA embraced decentralization—of which Costello was a leader—it is safe to assume that he knew the risks associated with hierarchy (e.g., Hanley 2010, 4037–6).

[28] Although there is still uncertainty over who was responsible, the fact that INLA factions were suspected is indicative of the severe intraorganizational feuding.

[29] Although the "INLA" persisted after this point, it neither approximated a unitary organization nor the group that was originally founded.

[30] Quotation from the IRSP publication, *The Starry Plough* (quoted in Bloomer 1988, 2).

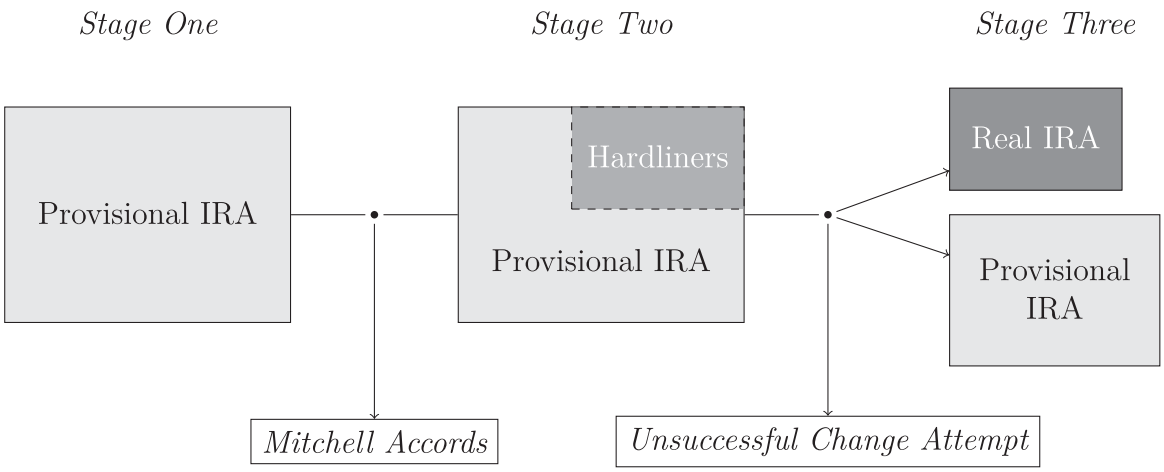

Figure 3. The formation of the RIRA

Costello to the INLA, was central to the group's formation and his ambitions were straightforward: he "aimed to uphold any uncompromising and uncompromised Irish republicanism and to oppose anything emerging from the 1997 party talks that should fall sort of Irish unity and independence" (English 2004, 316). It is this subgroup that would become the RIRA.

The RIRA was therefore built around a single issue and a small organizational niche: they opposed abandoning the revolutionary armed struggle (Dingley 2001, 454). As one of their members noted, "[o]ur goal is the same as the IRA's has always been—to force a British withdrawal" (Breen 2007). The assessment by the British government was equally clear: the RIRA "was formed by defecting members of PIRA who were opposed to the 1997 ceasefire and later to the Belfast Agreement" (First Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission 2004, 15). This lies in stark contrast to the INLA, which billed itself as a defender not only of the armed campaign but also of the socialist cause.[31] This focused, small organizational niche ultimately bestowed important benefits.

The Effects of a Small Organizational Niche

The RIRA's clear platform helped McKevitt "[conduct] a relatively successful recruitment drive … The recruits were hard-line republicans; they saw the IRA not as a political organization but as a religion" (Mooney and O'Toole 2003, 29). The RIRA's vocal disagreement to the Mitchell Accords virtually guaranteed that these hard-liners would be drawn to the new organization, and it also meant that only a very specific type of recruit was attracted. Those joining the RIRA held neither political nor socialist agendas, but they joined to reignite militant republicanism.

The relative internal homogeneity that the RIRA achieved—in large part due to their singular strategic disagreement—had several notable effects that bolstered their survivability. First, and in line with my second hypothesis, the group was able to adopt a decentralized organizational structure and a parallel shadow council that was ready to take over if the leadership was imprisoned or killed. This meant they would be able to "withstand arrests and still maintain violent activity" (Frampton 2011, 117). The RIRA also delegated significant autonomy to local units. Under this setup, major decisions were made by a governing body consisting of an Army Council and an Army Executive, while individual operations were planned and carried out by smaller Active Service Units (Boyne 2009). As one Independent Monitoring Commission Report succinctly notes, the "RIRA lacks an organized structure so that individual units have a considerable degree of autonomy" (First Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission 2004, 15). The RIRA was able to decentralize, mitigating the effects of infiltration and arrests, because McKevitt could trust his operatives with a certain degree of autonomy.

Second, and comporting with the first hypothesis, while no organization is entirely immune to disagreement, the types of arguments that did arise within the RIRA were generally minor. Disagreements tended to be about *degrees* of strategy and not outright alternatives, and feuds rarely escalated to meaningful conflict as a result. Consider, for example, one particular feud at the first organizational meeting:

> "McGuinness' wanted to adopt a new approach … [H]e said a murderous campaign against British soldiers and police would be the best approach. 'McGuinness' argued against using car bombs to destroy towns and commercial targets. Such attacks were useless and didn't advance the cause … Campbell thought otherwise. Large bombs made an impact and sent a clear message to the British government; bombings made Northern Ireland ungovernable. He also argued that there was a greater chance of success with a car bomb than trying to shoot a British soldier, or shoot down a helicopter" (Mooney and O'Toole 2003, 36).

This matter was eventually taken up by the governing Army Council without issue. "Campbell was permitted to run whatever military campaign he felt was necessary," and "McGuinness was satisfied once there was a relentless onslaught against the British." This pales in comparison to disagreements within the INLA.

Ultimately, the RIRA's cohesion and survivability stemmed in large part from their singular strategic disagreement that attracted a like-minded group of republican hard-liners. This minimized the amount of internal feuding, defection, and leaking, and as such group leaders were able to decentralize their command and control. Then, when the rare defection or leak did occur, its impact was minimalized owing to the cellular, compartmentalized nature of the organization that prevented cascading arrests.

[31] Here, it is worth recalling that the primary catalyst for disagreement in *both* groups was de-escalation of the armed campaign.

Table 2. Alternative explanations

Alternative explanation	*Confirming observable implications*	*Disconfirming observable implications*
Leadership decapitation: Killing/arrest of group leaders contributes to organizational failure	Leadership arrest/death contemporaneous to organizational failure; internal problems only begin following leadership loss	Leadership transfer occurs smoothly; groups outlive leadership loss; internal problems precludе and follow leadership loss
Intergroup fighting and competition: Competition with parent organizations makes survival difficult	Competition/fighting with parent group linked to lower recruitment, resource acquisition; intergroup fighting kills crucial leaders who could not be replaced; fighting persists until organizational downfall	Fighting unrelated to recruitment and resource acquisition; group survives despite fighting and competition; failure despite no intergroup competition
Sociopolitical environment: Different operating environments contribute to variation in survivability	More lenient, supportive environments associated with organizational growth and survival; environment attributed to greater local support, recruits, and resources	Greater rates of survival under less supportive environments; resource acquisition similar across environments

Possible Alternative Explanations

Of course, factors beyond the internal dynamics just discussed affect the survivability of armed groups. Here, I investigate the effects of leadership decapitation and loss, competition between each group and its parent, and differences in the sociopolitical environments. These explanations are summarized in Table 2.

First, one could argue that losing Seamus Costello—the INLA's charismatic founder—only a few years after the group emerged precipitated its downfall. Indeed, "headhunting," or taking out a group's leader, is a common counterinsurgency and counterterrorist strategy that can be effective (Price 2012; Jordan 2009). This explanation, however, is insufficient: for one, the INLA's troubles were evident from the start and the heterogeneous mix of INLA recruits were feuding *before* Costello was assassinated. For instance, there was a resignation en masse at their first political meeting in 1975. This implies that the forces responsible for the INLA's demise were present from the beginning. Interestingly, some have speculated that Costello's death might have actually *benefited* the organization as it relinquished his strict control. As one newspaper reported, "[h]is death—through regretted by the organization—actually brought greater unity to it" (Holland and McDonald 1994).

Additionally, the RIRA's founder—Michael McKevitt—was imprisoned only five years after forming, so both organizations were forced to deal with leadership turnover relatively early on. McKevitt was arrested following the RIRA's 1998 Omagh bombing that killed twenty-nine and injured more than three hundred. Here, however, one can see the benefit of decentralization: the RIRA was prepared and plans were in place for others to take over, ensuring a relatively smooth transfer of power (Dingley 2001). Yet, McKevitt's arrest nonetheless stressed the organization, and along with inconsistent statements regarding a ceasefire, the RIRA soon experienced a split of its own with Óglaigh na hÉireann (ONH) coming into existence. While relatively little is known about ONH, it is telling that the RIRA nevertheless persisted and that the ONH even remained loyal to McKevitt while he was imprisoned (Horgan 2012).

A second plausible argument is that the competition between the INLA and their predecessor, the OIRA, created an especially inhospitable environment, whereas the RIRA faced a more lenient environment since their parent group was disarming under the auspices of the British Independent Monitoring Commission (Wright 1990, 30).[32] While fighting between the the INLA and OIRA was fierce (Bell 1979, 421), this argument is belied by the fact that during the deadliest violence, the INLA was thriving. As one declassified British intelligence report notes:

> The Officials were determined not to let the IRSP grow without a struggle … It is indicative of the support for the IRSP that despite constant harassment from Officials the party quickly blossomed. Soon after its foundation the IRSP made deep inroads into Official IRA membership in Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast and Londonderry, and by the Spring of 1975 it was claiming a membership, almost certainly exaggerated, up of to [eight hundred].

Far from faltering, Costello's organization emerged relatively unscathed.

Like the INLA, the RIRA also experienced retaliatory violence and public condemnations from its parent organization (McGarry and O'Leary 2004, 282). While the PIRA was technically committed to disarming, few believed they were actually doing so. One member of the British army told the *Guardian*, confidentially, that in 2000 "the IRA's capability is higher now than it was two years ago," before decommissioning even began (Richards 2001, 80). This is significant because had the PIRA fully disarmed then perhaps this would have given the RIRA an operational advantage. Yet, the opposite is true, and the PIRA was committed to undercutting the growth of the RIRA. This was something they had always done; as Silke (1999, 59) notes, "[a]llowing existing rival republican groups to expand or, more seriously, allowing entirely new groups to emerge posed a serious threat to PIRA supremacy in nationalist areas." This helps to explain why, in 1998, "members of the RIRA received a 'knock on the door' from the Provisionals who informed them, in no uncertain terms that if they 'stepped out of line again, [they would be] shot' (Frenett and Smith 2012, 389). But it was not only words that the PIRA directed against the RIRA, either: in 2000 the PIRA shot and killed the RIRA's local commander in Belfast, Joe O'Connor (Frenett and Smith 2012, 389). Thus, there is little evidence that the RIRA's relationship with its parent group was any better than the INLA's or that it somehow made for a more conducive operating environment.

[32] And when the dominant organization shifted from the OIRA to the PIRA, the PIRA initially gave them support. This eventually changed with the PIRA calling for them to disband.

Third, and finally, one cannot separate armed groups from the sociopolitical environments in which they operate. Maybe conditions were simply more hospitable for the RIRA than for the INLA. The opposite, however, seems to be true. For one, the INLA was able to grow larger than the RIRA, suggesting somewhat greater public support. INLA membership eventually reached nearly eight hundred while membership for the RIRA never reached more than 150 (*Parliamentary Debates, Official Report* 2005), 200 (*Northern Ireland: The Real IRA's Capabilities* 2006); or perhaps "several hundred" at most (Sturcke 2009). Public opinion had also shifted over time from somewhat supportive or neutral of the armed campaign in the 1970s to largely against it in the early 2000s (Hayes and McAllister 2001, 913–14). For the RIRA, public opinion further shifted against them following the Omagh bombing in 1998, resulting in outright public hostility (Neumann 2005). Tonge (2012, 226) also notes—in an article tellingly titled "No-One Likes Us; We Don't Care"—that, around this time, Ireland had largely united in opposition to the armed campaign. Likewise, international public opinion had also shifted against Republican militants and specifically the RIRA. Following September 11, the US government declared the RIRA a terrorist organization, prohibited fundraising for the relatives of Irish dissident prisoners, and shut down the RIRA's websites. These were meaningful changes that meant that "[r]epublicans outside the mainstream could no longer look toward America for substantial funding." (Tonge 2004, 675). Taken together, the loss of local and intentional support meant conditions for the RIRA were more inhospitable than they had been for organizations that came before (Frampton 2012).

In sum, although the RIRA and the INLA certainly experienced distinct operating conditions, their divergent trajectories cannot be explained by the external environment. Instead, they seem better explained by the internal dynamics that can be traced back to their initial formation.

Conclusions

In this article, I argue against the idea of a uniform trajectory among militant splinter groups—those groups breaking away from preexisting armed organizations to become independent. Rather, I show how breakaway groups are strongly shaped by the internal politics underlying their formation. These political dynamics affect whether individuals depart with the splinter or stay behind with the parent, and as such they are causally linked to the internal composition of both groups. Specifically, when disagreements are numerous and splinters carve out broad organizational niches, they attract a heterogeneous mix of dissidents that bode poorly for group survival. Smaller niches will appeal to a more homogeneous subset of members, instilling cohesion and fostering cooperation. In the early, difficult days facing new armed groups, this can be critical.

The experiences of the INLA and the RIRA bear out this expectation. Although both broke away when their parents adopted ceasefires, they subsequently diverged in meaningful ways. This highlights the limited utility in studying organizational schisms solely from the perspective of external events. Rather, what provides greater insights are the contemporaneous debates within these organizations. The RIRA solely took issue with the PIRA's disarmament and de-escalation, and as a result they attracted a hard-line, cohesive core of disaffected members. The resultant internal unity allowed them to decentralize, create a shadow council, and become more resilient. On the other hand, the INLA emerged when both strategic and ideological differences came to a head, although the trigger was—as with the RIRA—a ceasefire. Hard-line elements wanted to resume violence and undermine negotiations, while more socialist members wanted to steer the group toward achieving their leftist, political aims. These competing elements were ardently at odds, prompting disagreements, infighting, and futile attempts to exert control via organizational hierarchy.

These findings have important implications. Broadly, they demonstrate how we can learn about and anticipate the behavior of armed groups by studying their organizational dynamics. While significant advances have already been made in this regard (for example: Crenshaw 1985; Horowitz 2010; Shapiro 2013), researchers should continue looking for ways to integrate insights from other fields, like organizational studies and sociology, and from research on business firms and political parties. And more specifically, these findings show how organizational niches shape patterns of recruitment, civilian support, and, consequently, internal dynamics. While I show how this produces variation among breakaway groups, it also has implications for new organizations forming from the ground-up, for established groups looking to broaden their appeal and change their objectives, and even for nonviolent organizations that develop radical flanks. Niches can also be measured in other ways to shed light on different dynamics.[33]

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that fragmenting militant groups merely for the sake of breaking them apart is an inherently uncertain strategy. As history shows, some splits can produce new organizations that are more capable, more threatening, and more elusive than their predecessors. The theory outlined above suggests that splits occurring over a variety of disagreements may leave groups worse off as they attract a less cohesive band of recruits. It would therefore be wise to avoid unidimensional strategies that galvanize militants along a single dimension, like solely repressive or conciliatory actions. Instead, greater instability could be created by combining both repression and conciliation while simultaneously sewing discord among group leaders. Policy practitioners should also consider what debates already exist within armed groups and how their interventions might foment a split along these lines.[34]

Of course, more work on this topic is needed. For instance, some parents organizations will fade away after a split, essentially being defeated by their organizational schism. While my research suggests an explanation, additional testing is needed. Likewise, while I focus on how internal disagreements affect survivability, these disputes have implications for other outcomes as well, ranging from a group's behavior and tactical selection to the odds it eventually fights against its parent. Since this competition can lead to intense violence, increased levels of civilian victimization, and the spoiling of peace processes, understanding why this happens in some cases and not others is critical.

Ultimately, this research adds evidence to a growing consensus that how and why militants form is significant and that internal dynamics strongly shape outward behavior. Rather than being purely interchangeable, unitary actors, militant groups are perpetually influenced and differentiated by some of their earliest actions. In addition, understanding where armed groups come from, including their organizational lineage, is ripe for further research. Armed

[33] Dingley (2001), for instance, notes that the PIRA represented both urban and rural constituents who often held very different views.

[34] In other research, I find that specific types of disagreements—e.g., over strategy, ideology, and leadership—also have ramifications for emerging groups (Perkoski 2015).

groups exhibit latent connections—familial links forged by splintering, merging, and membership migration—that can help explain patterns of tactical diffusion, cooperation and conflict, and other strategic choices. Recognizing and further investigating these links is critical as research progresses.

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