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Author: Daniel J. Haverty Jr.

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Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
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Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.



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‘Positive Neutrality’: Revisiting Libyan Support of the Provisional IRA in the 1980s

DANIEL J. HAVERTY JR.

Daniel J. Haverty Jr. received his B.A. in Political Science from the College of the Holy Cross in the United States, and is currently a M.A. candidate in International Relations at the University College Cork in the Republic of Ireland. His research interests include modern North American and European political and social history, with emphases on Britain, Ireland and the United States. His master’s dissertation focuses on the role of the Anglo-Irish relationship in the 1990s Northern Ireland peace process.

The Provisional IRA’s campaign against the British state in Northern Ireland (1969–1998) attracted a wide range of attention from the Third World, especially from the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Under the leadership of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan government sent enormous supplies of weapons to the Provisional IRA in the middle of the 1980s. This article examines the events surrounding the Libyan government’s support of the Provisional IRA and assesses its long-term impact on both the republican movement and the conflict itself. The changing power dynamic within the republican movement and the consequent ascendance of Sinn Féin in the late 1980s and early 1990s proved vital to the burgeoning peace process that followed. The injection of Libyan weapons into Northern Ireland was a crucial part of those developments. By focusing on Libya’s role in this particular phase of the conflict, this article emphasises its transformational consequences and argues that the Libyan dimension must be considered integral in order to properly assess the critical changes that occurred in Northern Ireland in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Introduction

After the 1 September 1969 military coup in Libya, the newly-established Libyan Arab Jamahiriya saw itself as a vanguard—not just of the Arab world, but of the entire Third World. Its interventionist foreign policy—rare at the time for a post-colonial state—and its vehement anti-imperial character brought it into frequent conflict with the United States and the United Kingdom. After a major diplomatic fallout with the UK in the mid-1980s, the Libyan government began covertly sending aid to the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), both in a show of solidarity for its armed struggle against Britain, but also in an attempt to destabilise the UK internally. This article will examine the origins and immediate causes of Libyan support for the Provisional IRA in the 1980s, and then will demonstrate that the injection of Libyan arms into Northern Ireland had several important consequences for the conflict and the subsequent peace process. The arms were used by politically-oriented republicans in the Sinn Féin leadership

to convince militant republicans to agree to abandon abstention from the Irish parliament Dáil Éireann, permitting republicans to pursue a political strategy in conjunction with the armed campaign. Unfortunately for the military wing, Libyan support ended abruptly after the British and Irish governments seized an enormous supply of Libyan arms from the *Eksund* in 1987, and it was discovered that Libyan-supplied weapons were used in the Enniskillen bombing—arguably the most significant and highly publicised atrocity of the entire conflict. Thus, at the same time as Sinn Féin was initiating its entrance into constitutional politics, the Provisional IRA's support network began to crumble, causing it to gradually cede its position of predominance within the republican movement. This was a pivotal outcome of the Libyan arms shipments which is largely neglected in the existing literature. Libyan support of the Provisional IRA in the 1980s—though brief—fundamentally changed the direction of the conflict because it facilitated Sinn Féin's entrance into constitutional politics in 1986, and then inadvertently brought the forces of state down upon the Provisional IRA after 1987, helping to accelerate the ascendance of Sinn Féin over the Provisional IRA within the republican movement by the early 1990s. This article will begin with a review of the established historiography of the Libya-Provisional IRA relationship in order to highlight the limitations of the previous scholarship. It will then detail the specific events surrounding Libyan involvement in Northern Ireland, before finally analysing the consequences of Libyan support for the republican movement internally and within Northern Ireland.

Historiography

The established historiography has a tendency to misrepresent the importance of the Libyan arms shipments and therefore fails to appreciate their long-term consequences. Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick discuss the contents of the shipments in detail, as well as the consequent intensification of Provisional IRA violence in the years that immediately followed.¹ Additionally, they rightly observe that the horrors of the Enniskillen bombing dealt a devastating blow to the republican movement. But Mallie and McKittrick do not address that the use of the explosive Semtex imported from Libya facilitated the destruction caused at Enniskillen, thereby failing to establish the necessary link between Libyan weapons and the overwhelming emotional response that followed their deployment. Moreover, they do not discuss the events leading up to and including Sinn Féin's decision to drop abstention in 1986—a development crucial to the early stages of the peace process—and thereby overlook the use of Libyan arms as propaganda tools to convince militant republicans that the armed campaign would continue.

¹ Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick, *Endgame in Northern Ireland* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), 61.

In his comprehensive study of the history of Sinn Féin, Brian Feeney provides a detailed discussion of the Libyan arms shipments, and also recognises the end of abstention in 1986 as a monumental shift within the republican movement. Unfortunately, he glances over the enormous efforts made by Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness to convince militant republicans to accept that policy change, curtly stating that “the northern leaders had placated IRA opponents,”² but providing no insight into what that process entailed. By omitting any discussion of Adams’ and McGuinness’ skilful use of Libyan weapons to that end, Feeney fails to appreciate that the end of abstention required a bargain-like arrangement—the Provisional IRA only permitted the change in policy because it was assured that its armed campaign would continue.

Similarly, Tim Pat Coogan acknowledges that Libyan arms helped to intensify Provisional IRA violence, but he also misses the important role they played in the transformation of the internal dynamics of the republican movement. When discussing the end of abstention in 1986, he says only that “Sinn Féin leaders successfully initiated and carried through a process of dialogue within the movement, which...resulted in their taking control of Sinn Féin, even to the extent of dropping the abstention policy, without any bloodshed.”³ Moreover, Coogan rightly considers the *Eksund* seizure and the Enniskillen bombing significant events which jointly affected the direction of the conflict from 1987 onwards, but he does not establish the necessary link between them. It was not a coincidence that both events occurred within weeks of one another; the horrifying new capabilities of the Provisional IRA displayed at Enniskillen were possible precisely *because* it now had access to highly-advanced, Libyan-supplied weaponry. Failing to acknowledge that the Enniskillen bombing and the *Eksund* seizure were inextricably linked fails to appreciate the entirety of the international dimension, especially the developments borne out of those events.

Indeed, Richard English links Libyan arms to the end of abstention, stating that “armed with Gaddafi’s guns...[the Sinn Féin leadership] could confidently proclaim that the war would continue, with electoralism complementing rather than eclipsing physical-force republicanism.”⁴ Upon closer examination, however, English’s observation misrepresents the internal composition of the republican movement in this period, and therefore misses the crucial internal changes that resulted from the Libyan arms shipments. “With the arms dumps full of weapons,” he continues, “who could charge that the republican movement was moving away from the armed struggle?”⁵ In other words, the knowledge of Libyan arms was sufficient enough to keep the militants from questioning the political leadership and allowed Sinn Féin to advance its agenda without hindrance. It implies that

² Brian Feeney, *Sinn Féin: A Hundred Turbulent Years* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2002), 331.

³ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles* (London: Hutchinson, 1995), 330.

⁴ Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London: Macmillan, 2003), 250.

⁵ *Ibid.*

the job of Adams and McGuinness was only to *placate* their counterparts, rather than to actively *persuade* them. But if the task before the Sinn Féin leadership was simply to quiet the military wing, it minimises the position of the Provisional IRA within the republican movement at the time. In fact, the Provisional IRA was still predominant in the mid-1980s, and it effectively had the power to accept or reject policy proposals originating in Sinn Féin. The Libyan arms, then, were not convenient devices used by Sinn Féin to quiet the military wing, but propaganda tools used to propel the party's political strategy and place it on a near-equal footing with the armed campaign, while simultaneously convincing—however disingenuously—the Provisional IRA that the move did not signify a change in the balance of power.

Jonathan Tonge details the Libyan arms shipments extensively, but he only considers their consequences from a military perspective. He correctly observes that the arms gave the Provisional IRA a brief capacity to inflict devastating damage, and that the seizure of the *Eksund* “decimated the capacity of the IRA.”⁶ Unsurprisingly, then, he calls the arms shipments an “overall failure”⁷ because ultimately the Provisional IRA was unable to launch a renewed campaign and force a complete British withdrawal. True, from the military's standpoint, characterising the arms shipments as a failure carries weight. But it does not appreciate the diversity of use of the arms, especially their political function. Although it is inaccurate to say that politically-oriented republicans were opposed to the escalation of violence, it is certainly true that they were primarily interested in using Libyan arms to achieve specific political objectives. Thus, it is necessary to avoid the binary ‘success/failure’ paradigm if one is to appreciate that, from the beginning, the arms served different purposes for different factions, and although the military wing probably considered them an overall failure, the political wing likely perceived them somewhat of a success.

The established historiography of the Provisional IRA must be broadened and placed in an appropriate international context in order to recognise that the consequences of Libyan support in the 1980s far outlasted the end of Libya's direct involvement in 1987. It should be noted that Ed Moloney and Brendan O'Brien have each discussed the Libyan arms shipments in the richness and detail that they warrant, but they too stop short of reaching the ultimate conclusion that the direct and indirect consequences of Libyan involvement in Northern Ireland were critical factors in shifting the balance of power within the republican movement. Sinn Féin—already interested in entering constitutional politics by this time—used Libyan weapons to convince militant republicans to consent to the abandonment of abstention and allow elected Sinn Féin representatives to enter Dáil Éireann. It was a major development that signalled that the republican movement was adopt-

⁶ Jonathan Tonge, *Northern Ireland* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 55.

⁷ *Ibid.*

ing a more political approach to its broader campaign—a change that necessarily resulted in the aggrandisement of Sinn Féin within the movement. The overwhelmingly negative public reaction to the Enniskillen bombing, as well as the Irish and British security crackdown on the Provisional IRA after the discovery of the *Eksund* cargo, demonstrates that one of the important indirect consequences of Libyan intervention was that it ultimately helped to stifle and reverse much of the operational improvement the Provisional IRA had made in the mid-to-late 1980s. The use of Libyan arms affected both wings of the republican movement differently and, therefore, a proper re-examination of Libyan involvement is necessary in order to understand its full impact on the conflict in Northern Ireland. The existing scholarship typically exhibits one of the following three shortcomings: 1) it practically ignores the role of Libyan arms, thus divorcing the conflict from its international dimension; 2) it grossly undervalues the role of the arms which fails to appreciate the international dimension in its entirety; or 3) it assigns proper value to its short-term effects but fails to recognise its long-term *transformational* consequences. This article challenges the established historiography and demonstrates that the arrival of Libyan weapons into Northern Ireland shifted the balance of power within the republican movement which, itself, helped create the conditions necessary for peace in the early 1990s.

Libyan Involvement in Northern Ireland

Popular dissatisfaction with Libya's pro-Western regime mounted until 1969, when a cohort of junior military officers ousted King Idris I and his government in a bloodless coup on 1 September. The officers established the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) to undertake governmental administration, and placed a twenty-seven-year-old colonel—Muammar Gaddafi—at its head. Weeks after the coup, an RCC member specified the officers' motivations and identified their opponents: "the Libyan people...considered the pre-revolutionary *status quo* as corrupt, reactionary, backward, [and] practically at the beck and call of the foreign British and American forces."⁸ The new leaders had twin objectives; they sought to undo and remove the foreign influence of Western powers from Libya as well as to revive a sense of Arab national consciousness.⁹ Libya's relations with the West never recovered after the military's seizure of power in 1969, especially as the state cultivated a closer relationship with the Soviet Union than it did with the United States or the United Kingdom. Within days of the coup, the Soviet Union offered diplomatic recognition to the new regime and started sending it rounds of

⁸ "The Libyan Revolution in the Words of its Leaders," *Middle East Journal* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1970): 205.

⁹ John Wright, *Libya: A Modern History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 134.

economic and military aid.¹⁰ British and American policymakers concluded that its socialist leanings, its anti-colonial character, and its close relations with the Soviet Union were evidence that it was moving into the Soviet sphere, and relations between Libya and the West sunk to a low-point in the 1970s.¹¹ They worsened considerably after the ascent of Conservative Margaret Thatcher as British Prime Minister in 1979 and the election of Republican Ronald Reagan as US President in 1980. Reagan—backed by Thatcher—increased pressure on Libya substantially, all while accusing the government of being a Soviet puppet regime and advocating leadership change.¹²

Libya's relationship with the UK crumbled further in the middle of the decade. On 17 April 1984, an operative working for the Libyan People's Bureau in London (the Libyan Embassy) shot and killed Police Constable Yvonne Fletcher.¹³ Libya claimed that the shots were intended for anti-government protestors demonstrating outside, but London was not convinced, and it responded five days later by expelling every Libyan diplomat from the country.¹⁴ Gaddafi reacted to the British expulsion by similarly ordering the expulsion of British diplomats from Libya, sparking a major diplomatic standoff between the two states.¹⁵ In the midst of the crisis, a speaker on the "Voice of the Arab Homeland"—a prominent Arab nationalist radio service based in Cairo—openly flirted with the idea of supporting the Provisional IRA in response to the events in April:

The People's committees [the collection of local governing bodies in Libya] will form an alliance with the secret IRA in view of the fact that it champions the cause of liberating Ireland and liberating the Irish nation from the tyranny of British colonialism...if Britain tries to use any means to pressurise and oppress Libyan Arabs

¹⁰ Ronald Bruce St. John, "The Soviet Penetration of Libya," *The World Today* 38, no. 4 (April 1982): 133.

¹¹ For an overview of Libya's position in a global Cold War context, see: *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume II: Crises and Détente*, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹² Ronald Bruce St. John, "Terrorism and Libyan Foreign Policy, 1981–1986," *The World Today* 42, no. 7 (July 1986): 113.

¹³ Alan Hamilton, Stewart Tendler and John Witherow, "London Embassy Shots Kill Policewoman," *The Times*, April 18, 1984, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/archive/article/1984-04-18/1/3.html?region=global#start%3D1981-01-01%26end%3D1985-01-01%26terms%3DYvonne%20Fletcher%26back%3D/tto/archive/find/Yvonne+Fletcher/w:1981-01-01%7E1985-01-01/1%26next%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Yvonne+Fletcher/w:1981-01-01%7E1985-01-01/2>.

¹⁴ Henry Stanhope, "Libyans Given Week to Leave Britain," *The Times*, April 23, 1984, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/archive/article/1984-04-23/1/2.html?region=global#start%3D1984-04-17%26end%3D1984-12-31%26terms%3DLibya%26back%3D/tto/archive/find/Libya/w:1984-04-17%7E1984-12-31/o:date/3%26prev%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Libya/w:1984-04-17%7E1984-12-31/o:date/22%26next%3D/tto/archive/frame/goto/Libya/w:1984-04-17%7E1984-12-31/o:date/24>.

¹⁵ "1984: Libyan Embassy Siege Ends," *BCC News*, April 27, 1984, http://news.bbc.co.uk/on-thisday/hi/dates/stories/april/27/newsid_2502000/2502565.stm.

the revolutionary committees will enable the IRA to do whatever it wishes in Britain and to retaliate twice as strongly.¹⁶

Anglo-Libyan relations continued to worsen until 15 April 1986 when—in response to the killing of two American soldiers in West Berlin—Reagan “launched a series of strikes against the headquarters, terrorist facilities, and military assets that support Muammar Gaddafi’s subversive activities” in Libya.¹⁷ Thatcher offered her full support to the United States, permitting American F-111 jets carrying out the bombing to use airfields in Upper Heyford, Oxfordshire for the operation.¹⁸ The bombers ravaged select targets in Benghazi and Tripoli. In the capital, Gaddafi watched his palace crumble under the weight of American missiles and, although he managed to escape with his life, his fifteen-month-old daughter Hana and fifteen other civilians were killed.¹⁹

The bombing was roundly condemned as a blatant act of aggression. In November, the United Nations General Assembly passed resolution 38/41 which explicitly “[condemned] the military attack perpetrated against the Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya on 15 April 1986, which constitutes a violation of the Charter of the United Nations and of international law,” and implicitly condemned the United Kingdom’s involvement by “[calling] upon all States to refrain from extending any assistance or facilities for perpetrating acts of aggression against the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.”²⁰ Thatcher justified her country’s support by accusing Libya of shipping arms to the Provisional IRA, citing a discovery by the Irish police force Garda Síochána the previous January of a huge cache of Provisional IRA weapons in counties Sligo and Roscommon stored in boxes mysteriously labelled “Libyan Armed Forces.”²¹ Despite her defence, Northern republicans were unequivocal in their denunciation. Gerry Adams—President of Sinn Féin—called Reagan a “maniacal warmonger” and accused the United States of committing “an act of international terrorism.”²² Danny Morrison—a prominent figure in the

¹⁶ *Voice of the Arab Homeland*, Tripoli, Libya, April 22, 1984, quoted in: Brendan O’Brien, *The Long War: The IRA and Sinn Féin, 1985 to Today* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 1993), 138.

¹⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the U.S. Air Strike Against Libya” (1986), in *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 286.

¹⁸ Tony Geraghty, *The Irish War: The Hidden Conflict between the IRA and British Intelligence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 181.

¹⁹ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974–2008* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 224.

²⁰ General Assembly resolution 41/38, *Declaration of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity on the aerial and naval military attack against the Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya by the present United States Administration in April 1986*, A/RES/41/38 (20 November 1986), <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/41/a41r038.htm>.

²¹ Fergus Pyle, “Thatcher firm on support of US despite criticism,” *The Irish Times*, April 16, 1986, <https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1986/0416/Pg006.html#Ar00611:37FA8A3AEA9D3959783B498B>.

²² Jim Cusack, “SDLP, DUP and Sinn Féin critical,” *The Irish Times*, April 16, 1986, <https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1986/0416/Pg006.html#Ar00611:37FA8A3AEA9>

Provisional IRA—added that “the Libyan people...the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the IRA are not the terrorists. The real terrorists are the governments of Britain and the United States.”²³ In addition to Gaddafi’s identification with the Provisional IRA’s struggle for national liberation, the deterioration of diplomatic relations with the UK after 1984 convinced him of the need to send arms to Northern Ireland in order to destabilise the region and force the British government to direct its focus and its resources to its internal problems. The 1986 bombing of Libya further served to validate that decision.

According to O’Brien’s research, Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) sources indicate that the first contacts made between the Provisional IRA and Libya that decade occurred as early as 1981,²⁴ in the midst of the republican hunger strikes in the Maze Prison—by which, it should be noted, Gaddafi is said to have been deeply impressed.²⁵ One of the core tenets of Gaddafi’s brand of Arab nationalism was the concept of *jihad*—a fundamental responsibility in the Islamic tradition. It roughly translates into English as “struggle” and is broadly defined as the duty of all Muslims to preserve and defend their faith and belief in God against unbelievers.²⁶ Gaddafi broadened its application considerably, believing that, not only should it be employed within Libya and the Middle East against their internal enemies, but throughout the world in support of anti-imperialist national liberation struggles against the traditional great powers. In an interview with *al-Abram* shortly after the 1 September coup, Gaddafi specified that “the foreign policy of my country in the revolutionary era is, in brief, positive neutrality, non-alignment, and support for all liberation causes and for freedom in the whole world.”²⁷ The Provisional IRA’s armed struggle against Britain overlapped with Gaddafi’s extreme Third World anti-imperialism in several fundamental ways. Both the Provisional IRA and the RCC aimed to (re-)establish a sense of nationhood—inter alia based in a sense of religious identity—and which was at least partly influenced by socialist strains of thought.²⁸ Crucially, they both identified the UK as an aggressor and therefore as a primary target of their campaigns. These overlaps provided the outlet through which Gaddafi could apply his broad definition of *jihad* to Northern Ireland when relations with the UK broke down completely in the mid-1980s.²⁹

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²³ Geraghty, *The Irish War*, 182.

²⁴ O’Brien, *The Long War*, 138.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ For an analysis of the traditional meaning of *jihad* and its modern political applications, see: Bassam Tibi, *Political Islam, World Politics and Europe: Democratic Peace and Euro-Islam versus Global Jihad* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 41–66.

²⁷ “The Libyan Revolution in the Words of its Leaders,” 212.

²⁸ Ronald Bruce St. John, “The Ideology of Muammar al-Qadhafi: Theory and Practice,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15, no. 4 (November 1983): 477–8.

²⁹ For a discussion of the ideological factors that motivated Libyan support of global terrorist organisations including the Provisional IRA, see: Ronald Bruce St. John, “Terrorism and Libyan Foreign Policy, 1981–1986,” 111–5.

Negotiations between the two sides took time to materialise, but by 1984 the Libyan government had agreed to covertly funnel enormous supplies of weapons into Northern Ireland. It agreed to send approximately 240 tonnes of weapons—a supply that included surface-to-air missiles (SAM), rocket-propelled grenades, heavy-duty machine guns, Semtex explosives, 2,000 AK-47 rifles, and about 2,000,000 rounds of ammunition.³⁰ The Provisional IRA commissioned a county Wexford man, Adrian Hopkins, to shuttle the weapons. Hopkins had no known republican links, but he had extensive shipping experience, owing to the few years he spent as the owner of a small holiday boating company, Bray Travel, before it went bankrupt in 1980.³¹ Hopkins was an ideal candidate because he owned a swathe of private property on the south-eastern coast of Ireland and, more importantly, he still owned a seventy-foot fishing boat christened *Casmara*—later changed to *Kula*. On transport missions, Hopkins sailed with a small contingent of Provisional IRA volunteers to Malta. There they met Libyan representatives chosen by their government to transfer the arms. The weapons were swiftly moved into the boat and hidden before Hopkins reversed the boat's course and returned to Ireland.

The first shipment arrived in Wexford in August 1985, carrying a cargo that included seventy AK-47 rifles, several Taurus pistols, and seven RPG rockets.³² The next shipment—which arrived in October of that year—carried “100 AK-47s, ten machine guns and seventy boxes of ammunition.”³³ The third shipment was undoubtedly the largest and it was the prize that republicans had longed for; the first instalment contained fourteen tonnes of weapons and ammunition—including four SAMs—and was accompanied by a second instalment two months later that contained eighty tonnes total, including one tonne of Semtex explosive and another supply of SAMs.³⁴ Upon arriving in Wexford, the arms were moved to various dump spots located throughout the Republic, and then stored in purpose-built bunkers in counties Limerick, Longford, Galway, and several other places.³⁵ The Provisional IRA successfully smuggled the first three shipments through its makeshift Wexford port, but the fourth shipment—which contained about twice the materiel of the first three combined—was intercepted on 30 October 1987 by French customs authorities in the Mediterranean. Although there were initial doubts that the arms were indeed destined for Northern Ireland, all of the passengers on board the *Eksund*—the vessel which transported the fourth arms shipment—were later found to be Irish citizens, and three of them possessed “passports

³⁰ Ronald Bruce St. John, “Terrorism and Libyan Foreign Policy, 1981–1986,” 129.

³¹ “Captain is Bray Travel Founder,” *The Irish Times*, November 2, 1986, <https://www.irish-times.com/newspaper/archive/1987/1102/Pg011.html#Ar01105>.

³² Peter Taylor, *Behind the Mask: The IRA and Sinn Féin* (New York: TV Books, 1997), 323.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Geraghty, *The Irish War*, 182.

³⁵ O'Brien, *The Long War*, 131.

linked to the IRA.”³⁶ The entire sequence changed the direction of the conflict. The arms provided the Provisional IRA with a powerful new set of weapons with which to unleash a devastating wave of violence on the public, but also provided politically-oriented republicans with a useful tool to change long-standing policy. The interception of the *Eksund* forced Britain and Ireland to change their approach to the conflict, precipitating a major enhancement of their security strategies.

Consequences

The Republican Movement

The arms imports occurred at a particularly important moment in the history of Sinn Féin. The party belongs to the modern Irish nationalist tradition which itself dates its origins to the middle of the nineteenth century. Irish nationalism composed of two main strands which fundamentally differed on the legitimacy of the use of violence. Constitutional nationalists believed in using the established governmental institutions to achieve their objectives by nonviolent means, while republicans rejected political institutions entirely, and sought instead to realise their aspirations through armed insurrection. Although armed uprisings were frequent occurrences for much of the nineteenth century, constitutional nationalism reigned as the dominant form of Irish nationalism until the Easter Rising in 1916. The strength of Irish nationalism shifted back to the constitutionalists after the end of the War of Independence and the establishment of the Free State and Northern Ireland in 1922, but nonetheless, republicans continued to hold on to the belief in an ‘unfinished revolution.’ Throughout the middle of the twentieth century, the IRA waged multiple, small-scale insurrections in a series of doomed attempts to unite Northern Ireland with the Free State/Republic. Those successive failures, however, ultimately forced it to choose a decidedly more non-violent, constitutional route in the early 1960s. The outbreak of open violence between Northern Ireland’s Protestant and Catholic communities in 1969 factionalised the IRA and facilitated the establishment of the younger, traditionalist, and more militant Provisional IRA. The emergence of the Provisional IRA abruptly shifted nationalist politics away from constitutional social reform and back towards militant republicanism.

Between 1926 and 1981, Sinn Féin was little more than a support organisation for the (Provisional) IRA, providing public representation but being subject to the dictates of the IRA Army Council.³⁷ Sinn Féin’s status changed dramatically after 1981, when republican prisoners in the Maze Prison went on hunger strike to agitate for the return of political status. Ten hunger strikers starved themselves to death in a highly publicised showdown with Margaret Thatcher, causing an uproar

³⁶ “Passports Linked to IRA,” *The Irish Times*, November 3, 1987, <https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1987/1103/Pg011.html#Ar01106>.

³⁷ Feeney, *Sinn Féin: A Hundred Turbulent Years*, 272.

in Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic, and throughout the world. As mentioned, the hunger strikers' stand against Thatcher left an impression on Muammar Gaddafi, compelling him to open contacts with the Provisional IRA that year.³⁸ More importantly for the internal politics of Northern Ireland, the hunger strikes generated a surge of energy and sympathy for republicanism, and Sinn Féin tested its renewed popularity by contesting the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-election caused by the death of Frank Maguire MP in the early days of the hunger strike. Bobby Sands—the lead hunger striker—stood for and won the election by a margin of 30,492 to 29,046, sending shockwaves through the British, Irish, and Northern Ireland political establishments.³⁹ Unfortunately for republicans, Sands' victory was not enough to convince Thatcher to concede the prisoners' demands, and he eventually succumbed to starvation in May 1981. His death sparked riots and unrest across Northern Ireland and—in addition to the deaths of the nine other hunger strikers—led directly to a boost in support for the Provisional IRA and Sinn Féin. Republicans saw their electoral support increase substantially—thirty-six republicans were elected councillors in 1981, two Sinn Féin candidates won seats in Dáil Éireann that same year, and five Sinn Féin candidates won seats in the 1982 Northern Ireland Assembly elections.⁴⁰

Reacting to the impressive performance of republican candidates in 1981, Danny Morrison asked his now-famous question at Sinn Féin's 1981 annual conference in November: "will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in one hand and the Armalite in the other, we take power in Ireland?"⁴¹ The question posited a new strategy for the republican movement: the Provisional IRA would continue to wage its armed struggle against the security forces, but simultaneously, Sinn Féin would pressurise the British government constitutionally by contesting elections. Moreover, it revealed a broader shift occurring within the republican movement at the time; republicans were increasingly moving away from strict adherence to the armed struggle and towards a greater emphasis on constitutional politics. In the five years between 1981 and 1986, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness mounted an internal campaign to entice the Provisional IRA leadership and the rank-and-file to approve the end of abstention from Dáil Éireann.⁴² Abstention was central to the republican strategy and had been a core principle since the founding of Sinn Féin in 1905, so those republicans who favoured its abandonment understood the near insurmountability of the challenge they faced. Adams

³⁸ O'Brien, *The Long War*, 138.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁴¹ John A. Hannigan, "The Armalite and the Ballot Box: Dilemmas of Strategy and Ideology in the Provisional IRA," *Social Problems* 33, no. 1 (October 1985): 34.

⁴² In traditional republican doctrine, the 1921 Treaty that ended the war of independence was unacceptable because it did not confer full independence on the Irish nation. Therefore, traditionalist republicans recognise *neither* the Northern Ireland Parliament/Assembly *nor* the Republic of Ireland's Dáil Éireann as legitimate institutions, and have traditionally refused to participate in both.

and McGuinness knew that the only way to convince militant republicans to agree to abandon abstention was to guarantee them that the armed campaign would continue unaffected.⁴³ They used the Libyan arms shipments in 1985–6 to that end.⁴⁴

The importation of huge supplies of weapons from Libya indicated to volunteers that, despite the move towards political participation, the republican leadership was continuing to plan and arm for the struggle. Indeed, the sheer sophistication of the Libyan weapons provided the Provisional IRA with previously unmatched capabilities, and that fact convinced militant republicans that the leadership would not squander a new opportunity to win militarily. It was physical proof of the most convincing type that the armed campaign would not go the way of abstention, and it helped compel volunteers to trust the leadership and to support the monumental change in policy. The piece of tactical propaganda that the Libyan arms provided Adams and McGuinness helped them tip the scale in their favour, and at Sinn Féin's 1986 annual conference, delegates voted in favour of a resolution calling for the end of abstention from Dáil Éireann. The so-called 'ballot box and Armalite strategy' partly freed Sinn Féin from the constraints of the militant wing, allowing it to develop a viable political strategy inextricably linked to, but fundamentally distinct from the armed struggle. It was a major change within the republican movement; it legitimised Sinn Féin's political vision and at least implicitly legitimised its plan for a political solution. It gave both nationalists in Northern Ireland—who might have been sympathetic to republican objectives but opposed to the Provisional IRA's tactics—and republicans already involved in the movement—who might have been funnelled into the military wing simply because of its power and influence—a new political vehicle through which to direct their energies and resources. The change conferred legitimacy and authority on Sinn Féin, empowering it within the republican movement—and within Northern Ireland society more broadly—and helping to set the foundation for later moves towards peace.

The arms shipments were ironically used as tools by politically-oriented republicans to change decades of republican strategy with minimal internal disruption, but their primary purpose, of course, was for use by the Provisional IRA. By the early 1980s, the armed campaign had nearly ground to a halt.⁴⁵ London's policy of 'Ulsterisation' had effectively localised the conflict and removed British-born soldiers from the line of fire, severely reducing the Provisional IRA's capacity to inflict maximum emotional distress on the British public. Indeed, republican violence itself declined steadily from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, and 1984 saw the fewest killings than in any other year of the conflict to that point.⁴⁶ The

⁴³ Feeney, *Sinn Féin: A Hundred Turbulent Years*, 326.

⁴⁴ David Sharrock and Mark Devenport, *Man of War, Man of Peace: The Unauthorised Biography of Gerry Adams* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 244.

⁴⁵ Feeney, *Sinn Féin: A Hundred Turbulent Years*, 326.

⁴⁶ Feeney, *Sinn Féin: A Hundred Turbulent Years*, 326.

republican leadership recognised that the armed campaign was dulling. After the 1981 hunger strikes rejuvenated the movement, the leadership started planning for a major escalation of violence. In what was affectionately called the 'Tet offensive'—itself a show of solidarity with the Vietnamese national struggle—the Provisional IRA planned to unleash a barrage of violent attacks against the British presence in Northern Ireland in order to create a massive 'no-go' area and force a British withdrawal by the end of the decade.⁴⁷ Libyan arms were vital to the successful implementation of the 'Tet offensive.' The arms, it was hoped, would dramatically enhance the Provisional IRA's military capabilities and give it the capacity to inflict damage on British Army and RUC installations, personnel, and vehicles to an unprecedented degree. That would in turn overwhelm both state forces and loyalist paramilitaries and force a political settlement in the republicans' favour.

Despite the loss of the *Eksund*, republican violence in Northern Ireland increased sharply after the arrival of Libyan arms. The RUC reported that there was "a 50 percent increase in deaths caused by terrorist activity" in 1987, primarily committed by the Provisional IRA.⁴⁸ Libyan arms played a prominent role in that sharp escalation of violence. In 1990, *The Irish Times* reported that weapons imported from Libya—particularly Semtex—had been involved in "most" of the "230 [conflict-related deaths] in the North since the arrival of the first shipment of arms from Libya."⁴⁹ Semtex was one of the most destructive weapons with which Libya supplied the Provisional IRA during the period. It is a highly explosive plastic substance which, importantly for insurgents, is odourless and extremely difficult to detect.⁵⁰ It was produced in the Soviet-aligned Czechoslovakia during much of the Cold War, and after the military coup in Libya in 1969, it was exported in enormous quantities to Gaddafi's government. Indeed, traces of Semtex were discovered in the debris of numerous Provisional IRA bombings in the late 1980s, and it was later discovered in the rubble of one of the most publicised, dramatic, and significant killings of the entire conflict—the Enniskillen bombing.⁵¹

The bombing occurred on 8 November 1987. As throngs of people—mostly Protestants—gathered near the cenotaph in Enniskillen, county Fermanagh for the annual Remembrance Day commemorations, a bomb planted by the Provisional IRA detonated nearby, killing twelve people and wounding a further sixty-three. Without the use of Semtex from Libya, it is unlikely that the attack would have

⁴⁷ Tonge, *Northern Ireland*, 55.

⁴⁸ Arwel Ellis Owen, *The Anglo-Irish Agreement: The First Three Years* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), 170.

⁴⁹ "Libyan Weapons Transformed the IRA campaign," *The Irish Times*, July 28, 1990, <https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1990/0728/Pg002.html#Ar00200>.

⁵⁰ "Semtex," in *Weapons of Mass Destruction: An Encyclopedia of Worldwide Policy, Technology, and History*, eds. Jeffrey A. Larsen, Eric A. Croddy and James J. Wirtz, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2005), 256.

⁵¹ "The 38-Year Connection between Irish Republicans and Gaddafi," *BBC News*, February 23, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-12539372>.

caused as much death and damage as it did. It was one of the most destructive single attacks of the entire conflict to that point—ostensibly a victory for the Provisional IRA—but the international response was so critical that it forced the Provisional IRA leadership to issue a statement expressing remorse for the killings, and admitting that its intended targets were the security forces scheduled to parade later in the day.⁵² Nonetheless, the international condemnation was fierce and total. Even those who were generally sympathetic to the republican movement (i.e. Irish Americans) denounced the bombing. The backlash was so harsh and so damaging to republican objectives that Gerry Adams publicly warned Sinn Féin to “be careful” and expressed privately that another attack of that nature could “undermine the validity of the armed struggle.”⁵³ Additionally, the barbarity of the bombing seemed to motivate those individuals who were interested in bringing a peaceful resolution to the conflict to increase and coordinate their efforts. Months after the bombing, Gerry Adams began meeting secretly with John Hume—long-time leader of the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party—in order to begin formulating a pan-nationalist plan for peace. In addition to the incorporation of the Irish government, the creation of a pan-nationalist front later proved vital to uplifting Sinn Féin to the political mainstream and isolating the militant republicans.

External Reactions

When the British and Irish governments first suspected that Adrian Hopkins’ boats were engaged in illegal activity, they suspected only illicit drug smuggling. The arms smugglers had slipped past the British and Irish intelligence apparatuses virtually undetected, so, when the *Eksund* was intercepted in October 1987 and the contents of its cargo revealed, the Irish and British governments were jubilant. The FBI had recently sealed off an arms supply route from Irish America, and it appeared that Dublin and London had closed another one, levelling a serious blow to the Provisional IRA’s paramilitary capabilities.⁵⁴ Their brief triumph was crushed, however, after they discovered that the *Eksund* delivery was the fourth arms shipment from Libya, and that republicans had already successfully smuggled three previous shipments into Ireland which, combined, contained about twice the materiel that the fourth shipment did. The revelation was a major intelligence failure that was deeply embarrassing to both governments and threatened to harm the credibility of their security structures.⁵⁵ The intelligence failure alone was enough to cause them to enhance security measures, but more urgently, the realisation that a massive quantity of highly sophisticated military-grade weaponry was stored

⁵² Taylor, *Behind the Mask*, 324.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁵⁵ O’Brien, *The Long War*, 137.

somewhere in Ireland forced both governments to change their tactics and employ a more concentrated effort to defeat the Provisional IRA.

At a special meeting of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference⁵⁶ shortly after the capture of the *Eksund*, the two governments planned and agreed to implement Operation Mallard. The Irish government agreed to “[commit] 7,500 Garda and Irish army troops to co-operate with the RUC and British army troops” to conduct a major security sweep in both the Republic and Northern Ireland.⁵⁷ Publicly, it appeared that Operation Mallard was a response to the carnage inflicted by republicans in the Enniskillen bombing in November, and although Enniskillen was certainly a factor, the primary reason for the security sweep was the governments’ need to seize the hidden stores of Libyan arms.⁵⁸ The operation initiated a debilitating crackdown on republicans. In a 23 November press conference, Irish Minister for Justice Gerry Collins called it “the most comprehensive search operation ever mounted by the security forces of this state.”⁵⁹ Forty people were immediately arrested in the North—including Martin McGuinness—and four bunkers were discovered in counties Galway, Wicklow and Cork.⁶⁰ Additionally, the Garda reported that it had confiscated huge stores of weapons in counties Sligo and Roscommon, and later seized over one hundred rifles in county Donegal.⁶¹ The RUC disclosed that it had seized “247 weapons, 18,000 rounds of ammunition and 13,000 lb of explosives.”⁶² Neither the British nor the Irish governments ever captured the entirety of the Libyan arms supply, but Operation Mallard was a major victory for state forces and a punishing blow to the republican armed campaign. It removed much of the Provisional IRA’s newfound capacity to inflict unprecedented damage, but also kept it under close watch for the remainder of the conflict, eliminating its ability to wage the armed struggle to the degree that republicans had envisioned when the Libyan arms first arrived.

In addition to Operation Mallard, the revelation of Libyan arms smuggling helped force another major change in the Republic’s Northern strategy. For most of the twentieth century, the southern Irish state had frequently been accused of

⁵⁶ The Intergovernmental Conference was established by the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) in order to coordinate Northern policy between Britain and Ireland. It was later disestablished by the Good Friday Agreement (1998), but it was an important development in the peace process because it officially incorporated the ‘Irish dimension’ for the first time and facilitated unprecedented cooperation between London and Dublin in regards to Northern Ireland. For an assessment of the impact of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, see Arthur Aughey, and Cathy Gormley-Heenan, “The Anglo-Irish Agreement: 25 Years On,” *The Political Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (July 2011): 389–97.

⁵⁷ Owen, *The Anglo-Irish Agreement*, 165.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Arms Landings Threaten State, Says Collins,” *The Irish Times*, November 24, 1987, <https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1987/1124/Pg004.html#Ar00406>.

⁶⁰ Owen, *The Anglo-Irish Agreement*, 169.

⁶¹ “Libyan Weapons Transformed the IRA Campaign,” *The Irish Times*, July 28, 1990, <https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1990/0728/Pg002.html#Ar00200>.

⁶² Owen, *The Anglo-Irish Agreement*, 169.

acting as a safe haven for the IRA, much to the annoyance of Irish officials. The discovery seemed to confirm decades of accusations and helped to convince officials in the Republic of the need to strengthen the Extradition Act—an older security measure which allowed the Dublin government to extradite suspected IRA volunteers to the United Kingdom in order to stand trial there.⁶³ In a speech to Dáil Éireann on 1 December 1987, Minister for Foreign Affairs Brian Lenihan justified his support of the Extradition (Amendment) Bill by warning that “the capture of the *Eksund* and its cargo shows the extent of the danger and the conspiracy we are all faced with.”⁶⁴ Numerous other TDs (Teachtaí Dála, members of the Dáil) specified the capture of the *Eksund* as one of the primary reasons for their support of the amendment. Furthermore, several TDs also cited the Enniskillen bombing as a reason for their support, expressing open disgust at the Provisional IRA’s apparent disregard for innocent human life. Collectively, it was the fear of Libyan support of the Provisional IRA, the appreciation of the damage that this support could cause, and the realisation that republicans had in their possession highly-advanced modern weaponry that motivated Irish politicians to strengthen the Extradition Act. The amendment ultimately passed Dáil Éireann on 1 December with seventy-eight votes in favour, twenty-six votes against, and sixty-two abstentions.⁶⁵ The new legislation streamlined the extradition process, making it substantially easier for Dublin to move suspected terrorists to the United Kingdom, and ultimately broke the back of the Provisional IRA’s vital support network in the Republic.

The British government responded to the discovery of Semtex in the wreckage of the Enniskillen bombing by intensifying its pressure on the Libyan government. But Gaddafi was unwilling to suffer diplomatic consequences on the global stage in order to stand behind the Provisional IRA. Additionally, Libyan officials expressed disgust at the Provisional IRA’s use of Libyan weapons to kill civilians indiscriminately and, shortly after the events of 1987, it decided to cut off all aid to the organisation.⁶⁶ The consequence was, ironically, the outcome that the British and Irish governments had thought they had achieved with the capture of the *Eksund* in October—the closure of the Provisional IRA’s last international arms supply route. The end of Libyan support, the Irish and British security crackdowns, and the international reaction to the Enniskillen bombing all combined to deal a devastating blow to the Provisional IRA’s campaign. Ultimately, the ‘Tet offensive’ was brief and proved counterproductive, and the immense pressure placed on the Provisional IRA by the late 1980s severely restricted its paramilitary

⁶³ Denis Coghlan, “Government Gives Go-Ahead to Extradition Act,” *The Irish Times*, November 14, 1987, <https://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1987/1114/Pg001.html#Ar00100>.

⁶⁴ “Extradition (Amendment) Bill, 1987: Second Stage (Resumed),” *Dáil Éireann Debate* 376, no. 1 (December 1 1987): 5, <http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail1987120100005?opendocument>.

⁶⁵ Owen, *The Anglo-Irish Agreement*, 167.

⁶⁶ Geraghty, *The Irish War*, 184.

capabilities and therefore its power within the republican movement just as Sinn Féin was emerging as a viable political force. Those changing fortunes effectively transferred the strength of the republican movement away from the armed faction and towards the political wing.

Conclusion

Even before the arrival of Libyan arms, the 1980s were an important transitional period for the republican movement. Sinn Féin in particular evolved from an IRA support group into a highly-organised political party in a relatively short period of time. Despite Sinn Féin's rise, however, the Provisional IRA had not conceded its position of predominance within the republican movement, and at no point in the 1980s was it secondary to Sinn Féin. But the importation of Libyan weapons proved to be a transformational experience for the republican movement and, ultimately, the conflict in Northern Ireland itself. Politically-oriented republicans used the Libyan weapons as a tool to persuade their counterparts to abandon one of the core principles of Irish republicanism—a crucial development for the movement that signalled a shift away from the armed struggle and towards a political strategy. It was a key development that the previous literature on the conflict tends to miss. Neither Mallie and McKittrick, Feeney, Coogan, nor Tonge acknowledge this crucial role played by the Libyan arms, without which Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness could not have avoided a debilitating republican split in 1986—had they even proceeded with the policy change at all. Despite the end of abstention, the armed struggle retained its importance and the Provisional IRA continued to wage its campaign against the British state. But the seizure of the *Eksund* cargo in October 1987, the bombing of Enniskillen a month later, and the collective reactions to both of those events were major turning points for the Provisional IRA. Libya completely abandoned it, cutting off its last international weapons supply route; and the Irish and British governments cracked down, seizing much of its arsenal and restraining its support network in the Republic. The consequences of those reactions severely damaged the Provisional IRA's ability to wage an effective guerrilla campaign, and by the early 1990s—less than a decade after it was at its operational height—it found itself losing the reins of the republican movement to Sinn Féin.

Simultaneously, the destruction caused by the Enniskillen bombing in particular prompted a renewed push for peace, helping to initiate the beginning of the secret meetings between Gerry Adams and John Hume. The existing literature tends to overlook the use of Libyan-supplied Semtex in the Enniskillen bombing. Without it, it is unlikely that the Provisional IRA could have unleashed the level of death and destruction that it did and, consequently, the overwhelming international, public, and internal reactions which helped to spark moves towards peace might

have been muted. Sinn Féin's legitimacy gradually rose as its leaders publicly expressed a willingness to end the armed campaign and to pursue their objectives by nonviolent means. The 1993 Downing Street Declaration⁶⁷ was a major peace initiative because it demonstrated to republicans that the route chosen by Sinn Féin could and would deliver substantive results. The end of the broadcasting ban on Sinn Féin speakers in the Republic, and US President Bill Clinton's granting of a travel visa to Gerry Adams conferred national and international legitimacy on Sinn Féin and the wider republican movement, lifting both to unforeseen heights.

The Provisional IRA, though, never recovered from its late 1980s setbacks, and it was clear by the early 1990s that it had lost irretrievable ground to Sinn Féin. The Downing Street Declaration placed the onus squarely on the IRA Army Council—either it could continue to wage an armed campaign which had lost virtually all of its support and much of its effectiveness by that point, or it could support Sinn Féin's pursuit of the unprecedented opportunity to achieve republican objectives by peaceful means. The Army Council finally announced the complete cessation of hostilities on 31 August 1994, which was followed less than two months later by a loyalist ceasefire. Although the Provisional IRA's ceasefire was temporarily broken in 1996–7, it paved the way for the beginning of peace talks which, ultimately, delivered the momentous Good Friday Agreement in 1998, ending the conflict and ushering in an era of peaceful reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

Libyan involvement in Northern Ireland in the 1980s was a major component to the latter stages of the conflict. It indirectly helped to change the Provisional IRA-Sinn Féin power dynamic, unintentionally nudging the focal point and strength of the republican movement away from the former and towards the latter. That shift centralised Sinn Féin's political strategy and marginalised the militant republicans, moving the conflict considerably closer to a peaceful resolution. Although the existing literature generally acknowledges an important role played by the Libyan government, it fails to appreciate its full impact. The lack of attention given to the Libyan arms imports divorces the conflict from its international dimension, treating the Libyan intervention as an influence which only temporarily affected the conflict, rather than as a force which had profound consequences for the future development of the republican movement. It is not this article's intent to argue that Libya under Colonel Muammar Gaddafi helped bring peace to Northern Ireland—the Libyan government had no desire to see peace there and, conversely, sought to intensify the conflict for its own selfish interests. Still, Libyan involve-

⁶⁷ The Downing Street Declaration was a joint-statement issued by British Prime Minister John Major and Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) Albert Reynolds in December 1993, in which the two committed their respective governments to support the right of self-determination for the people of Northern Ireland. Importantly, Major also declared that the British government had “no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland,” a major concession which challenged decades of republican understanding of the British presence in Ireland and indicated that the British would be willing to withdraw if an adequate political settlement was formulated.

ment played a major role in the conflict in the 1980s, and it is this article's intent to demonstrate that in order to understand the complexity of the Northern Ireland peace process, one must accept that the Libyan dimension was a key component that fundamentally changed the direction of the conflict and helped set the foundation for the process that eventually brought peace in 1998.

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