
The Militarization of Youth in Violently Divided Societies

Observations on Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and South Africa.

Marie Smyth

The ability of both state and non-state actors to engage in armed conflict depends largely on their ability to recruit. As conflicts continue over time, armed groups rely on a continuing supply of young recruits. Recent studies have focused on the lack of compliance with age limits on recruitment, as set by international law, and the exploitation of children as child soldiers. Arguably more important, however, is the contribution of young combatants to the political dynamics of conflict, particularly the relationship between the military leadership and young combatants.

Little attention has been paid to the role of young combatants in peace processes and settlements. Analysts have focused on less relevant individualistic factors, such as the psychological profile of a particular leader, in an attempt to assess the leader's reliability or trustworthiness. However, an armed group's ability to control its young soldiers is central to the ability of that group's political and military leaders to uphold agreements and implement cease-fires.

Marie Smyth is Senior Fellow in the Jennings Randolph Program at the U.S. Institute of Peace and is on the academic staff at the University of Ulster and teaches at Smith College. She also serves on several boards and committees in Northern Ireland.

Young Combatants and Society: Options for Young Combatants.

The role that young people play in conflict depends on whether they can legitimately join an official, state-endorsed military organization. In some societies, young people, particularly young males, can enlist in the military. In those societies, conscription or enlistment is often characterized as a step that will “build character.” In some cases, conscription or enlistment is also advocated as a solution to the common adolescent problems of rebellion, misbehavior, or indolence.

On the other hand, in societies where there is widespread resentment of official, state-endorsed military forces—such as the Nationalist community in Northern Ireland, the Palestinian communities in the Middle East, and townships in Apartheid South Africa—there appear to be two main ways for young people, predominantly males, to participate in broad insurgent movements.

First, youth who are not formally recruited into insurgent militias or armies participate in political conflict by joining protest movements and popular insurgencies. As civilians, they attack state forces, riot, and engage in street violence. In all three locations—Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and South Africa—young people play informal roles as street fighters within broad insurgent movements. These young people manifest the collective resentment of their communities by engaging in street battles and throwing rocks, Molotov cocktails, and other missiles at their common enemies.

The second way that young people, again predominantly male, are drawn into political conflict is through recruitment into insurgent militias or armies. Unlike some societies, such as Sierra

Leone, where militias actually kidnap and forcibly conscript children, non-state actors in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and South Africa rely on the willingness—in some cases eagerness—of youth to participate in armed conflict. In all three locations, insurgent militias successfully recruit large numbers of young males.

A Complex Relationship: Young Combatants and Their Families.

The relationship between adults and young combatants within these insurgent communities is complex. Mainstream media coverage propagates the assumption that parents coach their children to take up arms, throw petrol bombs, or become suicide bombers. Adult community members generally tolerate the involvement of their youth in armed conflict. Occasionally they even actively support it. For example, young people who fought in the South African Defense Units described how their guns were bought by money contributed by each household in their township.¹ Communities often see the youth’s militancy as a part of its defense against outside threats; thus, it is an articulation of the community’s interests. However, while adults in these communities may collectively condone youth rioting or participating in street disturbances aimed at the enemies of the community, few parents support or encourage their own children to become directly involved.

Many children routinely go to great lengths to conceal their involvement from their parents. Young people in all three cases described how they covertly engaged in military training with non-state groups and lied to their families about their whereabouts. Combatants describe climbing out of windows after

nightfall,² or formulating alibis to keep their parents in ignorance of their membership in armed groups or militias.³ At one level, this concealment can be seen as adolescent defiance of parents' wishes. However, at another level, it reflects the young combatants' desire to keep their parents from worrying about their safety.

The youth in these three regions found concealment was necessary for two reasons. First, security concerns precluded disclosure. Second, the young people

the local regiment, the Royal Irish Rangers. Military conscription in Israel currently ensures that all young people over the age of eighteen, except those exempted for religious reasons, serve two or three years in the Israeli army. As a result of conscription, young whites in South Africa followed a mainstream path and joined the state security forces. This military training of white South African youth served as a vital part of the Apartheid state's defense.

Enlistment is advocated as a solution to the common adolescent problems of rebellion, misbehavior, and indolence.

anticipated that their parents would have attempted to prevent them from participating. In the case of young Palestinians, they also feared for their family's safety given Israel's policy of carrying out reprisals on the families of Palestinian combatants. It was common in these three locations for families to discover a son's involvement in armed activity or his membership in an armed group only after his death or arrest.⁴

Official Military Organizations.

The experience of youth in Northern Ireland, the Palestinian communities, and South Africa, sharply contrasts with that of youth in societies where enlistment in or conscription by an official, state-endorsed military organization is possible. These legitimate paths are available to the Unionist youth in Northern Ireland, the Israeli youth, or, in the past, the white South African youth. Considerable numbers of young people from the Unionist community in Northern Ireland volunteer to join the British Army, particularly

In all three dominant societies, youth have the option of building a career with the state security forces. This career opportunity provides youth motivated by patriotism or concerned about terrorism with an approved and conventional outlet to take up arms in defense of their community or country.

A career path with the military or police also provides youth from these dominant societies with a legitimate route to achieving status and power within their society.⁵ Young people lawfully take up arms and assume authority over civilians, particularly civilians from "suspect" communities. When serving as military or police, youth that recently graduated from high school can demand compliance from a civilian who is many years their senior. In addition, youth culture incorporates notions of "coolness." All youth strive to belong to the "coolest" military regiments or police units.⁶ Finally, societal rituals, such as parades and ceremonies, mark the attainment of higher status by new recruits, and parents

describe their pride in having their offspring serve their country.⁷

Young Unionists, Israelis, and white South Africans have other routes into military roles besides conscription or voluntary enlistment in state forces. In Northern Ireland, these same young

and the declaration of the “War on Terrorism,” right wing militant groups are not perceived as constituting the same threat as the anti-state militias consisting of young Palestinians or Irish Nationalists. The peace process in Northern Ireland, specifically the state’s

Insurgent communities have developed parallel, alternative processes of celebrating and honoring their youth by endorsing their actions through their culture of resistance to the state.

people can join organizations of dubious legality within their communities, namely Loyalist militias such as the Ulster Volunteer Force or the Ulster Defense Association. Israeli youth in settler communities can join armed, militant gangs. Young White South Africans could become involved in white militias such as the *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* (AWB). In Northern Ireland and South Africa, there is evidence of some dual membership in the official state security forces and non-state militias or paramilitary groups. In Northern Ireland, for example, the criminal conviction of two members of the local British Army’s Ulster Defense Regiment for the murder of three Catholics in 1975, and the subsequent criminal conviction of other members for handing over security files to Loyalist paramilitaries, illustrate the links between Loyalists and the security forces in Northern Ireland.⁸

Certainly, a state’s attitude towards pro-state militias, or in the case of Israel, settler youth activities, is quite distinct from its attitude towards insurgent or anti-state militias, which the state regards as major threats. Particularly since 9/11

differential treatment of the armed groups on each side, illustrates this difference in the perceived level of threat. As a prerequisite for political progress, the state demanded that the Irish Republican Army disband and decommission their weapons. Notwithstanding continued Loyalist killings, there is no such pressure for the Loyalist paramilitary groups to disband or decommission. Even in South Africa today, the state and society regard right wing violence as marginally threatening. Thus, not all youth involvement in political violence is equally problematic.

Access to the legitimate right to bear arms depends on being born into the “right” community. In some cases, communities view youth participation in political violence as opportune, whether that participation occurs through an insurgent movement or in support of the sovereign state. For example, Israelis view anti-Palestinian violence on the part of young settlers as delinquent rather than politically motivated. Municipal workers are deployed to engage in diversionary work with these youth. The government does not reverse territorial incursions

and extensions of settlements into Palestinian territory by young settlers. Thus, the government lends legitimacy to the young settlers' actions by allowing the young settlers' extensions of settlement to contribute to its own territorial expansion. States often overlook illegal or violent youth activity in popular insurgencies or pro-state militias. In condoning the behavior, the state renders it quasi-legitimate. Thus, the status that results from being celebrated as a legal defender of one's community is available to some young people and their families and not to others through an accident of birth.

Insurgent Military Organizations.

Insurgent communities have developed parallel, alternative processes of celebrating and honoring their youth by endorsing their actions through their culture of resistance to the state. Children socialized within this culture choose their childhood heroes and adolescent icons from an array of local martyrs and heroes. One child in Belfast's Loyalist Shankill Road declared that he wanted to be an prisoner when he grew up, illustrating how, in his community, combatants who had been imprisoned were regarded as people of high status. Similarly, in the Middle East, posters bearing the pictures of young people who had died as suicide bombers adorn many walls. In a globalized world of reality television where fame is valued for itself, being known and recognized is a route to status.

Socioeconomic and political factors limit the ability of youth in these communities to achieve meaningful status. Burgeoning youth populations, due to relatively high birth rates, characterize the demographics of all three populations—Northern Irish Nationalist,

Palestinian, and Black South African. In addition, many of the political movements currently or recently associated with armed insurgence are located within communities characterized by socioeconomic deprivation.

Some of these factors, such as deprivation, surveillance, and military occupation, affect the dominant communities—Northern Ireland's Unionist communities, Israeli communities, and white South African communities—to varying extents. What distinguishes the Northern Irish Nationalist, Palestinian, and Black South African experience is the sense of being permanently trapped in a subordinate position. These youth have no legitimate alternative route to status or achievement that is compatible with the community's identity and political aspirations.

Furthermore, the political position of the community ensures that young people not only experience obstacles to the achievement of status for themselves, they also witness their parents' failure. In all three cases, young people routinely witness the subjugation of their parents, particularly their fathers, to military surveillance and control. The witnessing of parental humiliation and subjugation creates a particular dynamic between the generations.⁹ Younger generations criticize the older generation's political methods as too conservative, because the older generation fails to resolve the problems facing the community. Young people attribute the failure of their community's cause to the political ineffectiveness of their parents' generation as much as to the superior power or ruthlessness of their opponents. Consequently, young people tend to adopt more radical, combative, militaristic positions than their elders.¹⁰

Within insurgent communities, the community often relies on militarized youth as the first line of defense. Young street fighters outside of these insurgent groups comprise part of the armory of their community. These young petrol bombers, rock throwers, and rioters do not necessarily belong to any militia. Their role is to sustain the backdrop of popular agitation. The militias' operations occur against the backdrop of popular agitation, contributing to a sense of legitimacy for their actions.

Participation in street fighting provides these youth with enhanced political status within the community. It can also be an important introduction into adult paramilitary roles. Youth participation in combat is a feature of all three regions examined here. Not only do young people participate as combatants in political violence, but they also tend to be disproportionately represented among fatalities. Despite their role in hostilities, however, young people are rarely involved in peace negotiations.

Recognizing Young Combatants During Peace Negotiations.

The exclusion of youth and the disregard for their role in a conflict has important implications for the viability of any agreement reached. Political negotiations and peace agreements are based on implicit assumptions about the ability of the signatories to ensure the compliance of their followers. Yet, on the streets of Northern Ireland after the peace agreement, political leaders have unsuccessfully pleaded with young rioters and street fighters to desist from violence. Similarly, the Palestinian Authority and individual Palestinian leaders would have difficulty ensuring the compliance of young Palestinians with any agreement to

cease hostilities. This difficulty arguably reflects the nature of youth militancy and the characteristics of involvement in popular resistance more than it reflects the credibility of any political authority. This has significant implications for those trying to understand the nature of cease-fires as well as the complexities of unilateral and bilateral policing and enforcement of such cease-fires.

There has been a tendency, particularly evident with regard to the role of Republicans in Northern Ireland and Palestinians in the Middle East, to overestimate the cohesion and hegemony within the political group while overlooking factionalism and inner tensions. The political dynamics within these movements is influenced by the challenge that younger activists routinely pose to political leaders. Younger people within political groups make their own assessments and political judgments about any political "deals" carried out by their leadership. This in turn impacts peace negotiations and the implementation of agreements within peace processes. To add to the difficulties, formal settlements seldom acknowledge the role of young people in the political or military processes leading up to settlement. Moreover, formal settlements rarely ever include a subsequent provision for their role in peace processes. Only in South Africa has there been some kind of acknowledgement of their role in the fight for liberation, as manifested in the new constitution's forward thinking provisions for children's rights. At the same time, however, there is substantial dissatisfaction in some quarters in South Africa with the provision for former combatants.

Internal contests within communities affected by war, such as factional competition or generational conflict, acquire

renewed strength during transitional periods from conflict to peace." Issues that were present prior to the peace process, such as youth's criminal and "anti-social" behavior and localized

Consequently, South African society contains a cohort of disenfranchised former combatants who harbor anger at the government and their former comrades for failing to compensate them for their

Despite their role in hostilities, young people are rarely involved in peace negotiations.

efforts by paramilitary groups to "police" such behavior, acquire a new significance because of their potential to compromise the internal cohesion of parties to peace agreements.

In addition, post settlement failure of demobilization, particularly the failure to demobilize and integrate young combatants, as is the case in South Africa, leaves young street fighters and former combatants without a place in the new society. As their formal education is often interrupted at a young age due to military engagement, the only skills these young combatants' possess are often military-related. Therefore, they are seldom equipped to enter the workforce, even if jobs are available, which often they are not. Former combatants without any employment prospects, living in dire poverty, have described being offered money to carry out killings or operations on behalf of criminals in their community.¹² Some resist. Many succumb, making the transition from political to criminal violence.

In South Africa, the reintegration of substantial numbers of former combatants into the police or army was unsuccessful. Therefore, many live in poverty, marginalized, alienated from former colleagues who successfully integrated into the state security forces or who obtained positions in the government.

role in the liberation struggle. Disenfranchisement represents a substantial political failure with the potential to endanger peace and security in the communities that have suffered most under Apartheid.

Parallels exist elsewhere. Successive reports on violence in North Belfast identify street violence—so-called "recreational rioting" by young people—as a key component of conflict in this area. The problem of youth violence has the "potential to destabilize other parts of Belfast and Northern Ireland."¹³

Conclusions. Youth who perceive themselves to have been involved in combat, either as street fighters or as members of militias, and are not involved in peace negotiations, are likely to be disaffected as a result. To improve the success rate of peace deals, leaders must mitigate these problems of disaffection and, ultimately, gangsterism. To start mitigating disaffection and gangsterism, it is first necessary to identify and remedy the ways in which peace processes tend to politically disenfranchise former youth combatants.

The capacity of political and military leaders of insurgent movements to marshal and lead their followers is pivotal to the successful negotiation and implementation of peace settlements. The suc-

cess of a peace process is predicated on these political and military leaders' ability to command the loyalty of *all* their followers, especially of those youth involved in militias. The inability of leaders to contain and manage violence can ultimately cause cease-fires to break down and jeopardize peace processes.

NOTES

1 Former combatant in Defence Unit, interview by author, tape recording, Katlehong, South Africa, 3 September 2002.

2 Ibid.

3 Former combatant in Ulster Volunteer Force, interview by author, tape recording, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 12 August 2002.

4 Mother of suicide bomber, interview by author, tape recording, Ramallah, Palestine, February 2003.

5 Former Israeli Army Officer, interview by author, tape recording, Washington, DC, 10 March 2003.

6 Ibid.

7 Mother of Israeli conscript, interview by author, field notes, Tel Aviv, Israel, 19 January 2003.

8 Sydney Elliott and W.D. Flackes, *Northern Ireland: A Political Directory, 1968-1999* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1999).

9 Dr. Eyad El Sarraj, Director of Psychiatry, Gaza

Community Mental Health Project, interview with author, Gaza, Palestine, 16 January 2003.

10 See M. Smyth and M. Scott, *The YouthQuest 2000 Survey: Young People's Experiences and View of Life in Northern Ireland* (Derry: INCORE and the United Nations University and the University of Ulster, 2000).

11 Examples of factional competition include the conflict between the Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress in South Africa or the feud between the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Association in Northern Ireland.

12 Former MK Commander, interview by author, tape recording, Cape Town, South Africa, 10 September 2002.

13 R. Adams, J. Dunlop, and B. Toner, *Report of the North Belfast Community Action Team* (Belfast: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2002).