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The Violent Dissident Republican Threat

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Background

Though often overlooked in recent years, terrorism related to Northern Ireland is still a possible threat to the UK. Since the signing of the Good Friday Peace Agreement in 1998, over 150 people have been killed as a result of security-related violence in the region.[1] A young journalist, Lyra McKee, became the latest fatality when she was shot and killed by violent dissident republicans (VDRs) during a riot in Derry in April.

On average between 15-40 shootings and bombings take place each year though media coverage of the incidents outside of Northern Ireland is very limited and wider awareness of the violence is low. In the 12 months up to March 2019, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) recorded 15 bombings and 38 security-related shootings in the province.[2] While there is no denying that the level of violence has declined massively compared to that seen before the Good Friday Agreement, it is still vital to realise that a variety of terrorist organisations remain active.

Real IRA to New IRA

In the 1990s, the major dissident group to emerge was the Real IRA in 1997. The Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) was built around a group of leading figures from the Provisional IRA who were either expelled or resigned in protest over the Peace Process. They and other dissidents rejected – and continue to reject – the Good Friday Agreement and what they view as a Sinn Fein sell-out. One of these figures was Mickey McKevitt, then the Quartermaster General for the PIRA, a very senior and operationally very important post within the organisation. Within weeks of leaving, McKevitt had established the Real IRA under his command and attracted a sizeable number of experienced former PIRA members into the ranks. The Real IRA initially attempted to launch and sustain an intense terrorist campaign within both Northern Ireland itself and on the mainland with a particular emphasis on London. The organisation however suffered a series of heavy setbacks and was forced to move to a much more restrained level of activity.

[1] https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/insidethe-psni/our-statistics/security-situation-statistics/2019/march/security-situation-statistics-tomarch-2019.pdf. 'Security-related' is the standard terminology for paramilitary-related violence. See: https://www.psni.police.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/ security-situation-statistics/. These deaths do not include people killed in the Republic of Ireland during this period

[2] https://www.psni.police.uk/globalassets/insidethe-psni/our-statistics/security-situation-statistics/2019/march/security-situation-statistics-tomarch-2019.pdf

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In 2012, some of the Real IRA merged with a number of smaller splinter groups to form the New IRA and this is now the major dissident group currently active. In 2016, a political party connected to the New IRA, Saoradh, was launched. Security sources report that (as with Sinn Fein and the PIRA in the 1980s) there is a strong overlap between the leadership of Saoradh and the New IRA. A few other VDR groups still exist – most notably Continuity IRA (CIRA) – which despite having a diminished capability are none the less lethal and still aspire to carry out attacks.

Understanding the Current Threat

While violence has been ongoing throughout the past two decades, 2019 witnessed a number of high profile incidents. In January 2019, a substantial car bomb was detonated in Derry's city centre targeting the courthouse building. In March, the New IRA claimed responsibility for a series of parcel bombs which had been sent to targets at Heathrow Airport, London City Airport, Waterloo train station and the University of Glasgow. Then in April, a young journalist, Lyra McKee, was shot dead after a New IRA gunman opened fire during a riot in Londonderry. McKee's killing attracted international attention and reignited wider awareness that a dissident threat still existed.

These and other attacks demonstrated that the dissidents possess and are able to use a range of weapons. The groups have access to firearms and ammunition and are also able to manufacture explosive devices: from small scale incendiary devices to much more powerful vehicle bombs. Estimates suggest that there are only about 40 active members in the New IRA though the group enjoys small pockets of wider community support. Three dissident republicans are currently elected to the district council of Derry and Strabane. In 2016, 3000 people attended a rally organised by the dissidents and even in the immediate aftermath of Lyra McKee's murder hundreds of supporters still attended Saoradh commemoration events in Belfast and Derry.

One of the main challenges that the dissidents face, however, is an intense intelligence and surveillance campaign against them. Substantial MI5 resources are deployed in Northern Ireland to help contain the dissident threat[3]7 and they are supported by the PSNI's Terrorism Investigation Unit and by the British Army's Special Reconnaissance Regiment. This has resulted in sustained pressure on dissident activities with a high number of plots disrupted. While the authorities have an excellent intelligence picture they have struggled to gain enough evidence to turn this into convictions. For example, of 176 people arrested for suspected terrorist offences in the 2017/18 financial year, just 13 were actually charged.

The Brexit factor?

Considerable attention has been focused on the question as to what role Brexit is playing with regard to dissident activities? Without question, dissident spokesmen are clear that the movement will try to exploit opportunities presented by Brexit, whether that takes the form of new recruits

[3] According to the 2017-2018 House of Commons Intelligence & Security Committee Annual Report, 22% of MI5's effort is allocated to Northern Ireland related terrorism: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/772726/HC1692_ISC_Annual_Report_2017_18.pdf

joining as a result of increasing frustration within nationalist communities in Northern Ireland, or taking advantage of fresh targets due to a potential return of border installations. Other public statements issued by the New IRA though have stressed that the violence will continue regardless of whether Brexit occurs or not.

Perhaps the most significant development in 2019 was the use of parcel bombs targeting locations in London and Glasgow. The devices were small and not particularly destructive, but this represented the New IRA's first attempt to conduct attacks in mainland Britain in its current campaign. Predictably, the small parcel devices received more media attention than the combined coverage given to the 15 bigger bombings which had occurred in Northern Ireland in the previous 12 months. As a result, the incentive for the dissidents to carry out future operations against targets in the mainland remains strong.

Conclusion

If they can, the New IRA will try to escalate their campaign of violence to as much as is practically possible. The killing of Lyra McKee provided a temporary check as the group looked to weather a public back-lash to the journalist's murder. The discovery of a car bomb targeting an off-duty police officer in early June illustrates this though was a short-lived respite. Heavy investment in intelligence operations has played a major role in limiting VDR activity over the last ten years. Whether the New IRA can exploit tensions around Brexit to build momentum for an escalated campaign of violence remains to be seen.



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