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Dissident Republicans Addicted To Criminality

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Real IRA

The so-called Real IRA (RIRA) has been in existence since 1997. Its core membership consists of former members of the Provisional IRA (PIRA) who were opposed to some aspects of the Anglo-Irish peace process. That was then. Twelve years later – eleven years after the botched RIRA bomb attack that killed 29 innocent civilians in Omagh in Co. Tyrone – the RIRA along with the Continuity IRA (CIRA) consist of a nucleus of hardened criminals whose ‘Republican’ pretensions are in the main a front for organised crime in the border area and in some inner city areas north and south of the border.

Whilst there are a small number of Republican political ‘die-hards’ within the RIRA and CIRA – who would claim that a ‘sovereign united 32 county Ireland’ is their ultimate objective - intelligence sources both north and south of the border believe that the foot-soldiers in these organisations are being manipulated in order to further the interests of organised crime within Ireland.

Speaking to the Irish Times yesterday, one intelligence source described some of the key players within these organisations as ‘former PIRA men who cannot return to their ordinary lives as unemployed plasterers and bricklayers’. Another source added, ‘These guys are addicted to the status that went with their roles as former PIRA active service members. Many senior RIRA and CIRA figures are simply gangsters who cannot give up the revenue streams that accrue to them from illegal fuel operations and other criminal activities located in border areas and elsewhere’.

Despite the rhetoric mobilised by the RIRA and CIRA around notions of a ‘United Ireland’ the primary goal of these organisations is to disrupt the normalisation of policing within Northern Ireland. As part of the peace dividend in Northern Ireland, normal community policing has been slowly but steadily extending to those border counties which were formerly ‘no-go’ areas for the RUC and British Army – such as Armagh, Fermanagh and south Tyrone. Hand in hand with these developments – the type of normal policing environment found throughout the remainder of the EU - the PSNI have only recently been properly poised to meaningfully target the criminal activities of former paramilitaries who style themselves as ‘dissident’ Republicans.

In order to thwart the efforts of the PSNI to investigate the tax affairs, criminal assets and proceeds of crime enjoyed by ‘disaffected’ Republicans, intelligence sources indicate that the RIRA and CIRA have stepped up their surveillance and attacks on members of the PSNI. These organisations have also been engaged in surveillance on members of An Garda Síochána south of the border who are involved in the investigation of organised crime. Attacks by these organisations on British soldiers – such as in Saturday’s attack at Massereene Barracks – places intense pressure on the security forces and are designed to divert PSNI resources away from the investigation of the highly lucrative areas of organised crime and racketeering. The targeting of British soldiers or members of the PSNI - and the invocation of Republican rhetoric thereafter - simply function to mask the baseline strategy of the RIRA and CIRA which is to prevent the normalisation of policing within Northern Ireland.

Attacks by these organisations which have led to deaths within the security forces and police in the last number of days confirm fears within the intelligence and security community that the RIRA and CIRA are strengthening in resolve somewhat. However, the command and control structures of the RIRA and CIRA remain fragmented and their logistical, operational and intelligence functions remain relatively under-developed. In Irish intelligence circles, the RIRA is referred to as 'Ri Ra', the Irish for chaotic or shambolic behaviour, such is the lack of professionalism and unified purpose within its ranks - normally the hallmarks of genuinely politically motivated terrorist groupings. Against this background of incompetence, there are fears in intelligence circles that following the two recent gun attacks, an over-confident RIRA might attempt to mount a botched car-bomb attack in the coming weeks which could result in a tragedy similar to that of Omagh.

The attacks mounted by the RIRA in recent days do not represent an attack on Britain's territorial claims within Ireland. Rather, they represent an attack on Irish society itself – on all parts of this island. The shootings are an assault on the value consensus reached by all those on this island who voted in favour of the Good Friday Agreement. In order to best confront this threat, politicians in Britain, Ireland and Northern Ireland must show unity and clear public leadership in defeating the twin threats posed by terrorism and organised crime.

This requires powerful symbolic gestures such as the attendance of the President's military Aide de Comp at the funeral of PSNI Constable Carroll. The Defence Forces should also be represented at the funerals of the British soldiers murdered in Antrim. In addition to these symbolic measures, concrete and robust policing measures must be adopted north and south of the border. In addition to targeting the so-called 'Republican' ambassadors of organised crime who have recently murdered three people in Northern Ireland, organised criminal gangs south of the border – who have brutally murdered and shot over twenty individuals over the past 12 months – need also to be targeted as a clear and imminent threat to the internal security of the state.

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