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Deconstructing Violent Dissident Republicanism

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Nimmons Consulting, London, July 2018

Northern Ireland Related Terrorism (NIRT) plays a continuing role in contemporary security debates. With centuries of historical context, challenges such as post-BREXIT border security, faltering political institutions in Northern Ireland, aspirations of dissident republican terrorist groups, loyalist paramilitarism and criminality are present dangers (McDonald, 2018). Twenty years on from the signing of the Belfast Agreement, the settlement shows signs of fragility and fatigue. In evaluating a key aspect of the threat from NIRT, a critical assessment of dissident republican terrorist capability is presented. This begins by situating republican violence in its historical context, exploring the importance of narrative and nationalist romanticism in the cyclical patterns of past conflict. Next, threats to state and non-state actors as well as to economic welfare, social cohesion and political institutions within Northern Ireland and abroad are considered. The threat landscape is geographically diverse, and the threat profiles, lethality and modus operandi of violent dissidents is

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considered in the context of Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and UK mainland. Having outlined the principle threats, selected countermeasures are thematically assessed. The UK counterterrorism strategy CONTEST (HM Government, 2018) is used for thematic structure. Counter-radicalisation, covert intelligence, community policing and criminal justice are the categories used to group, compare and contrast countermeasures by aim, approach and effectiveness. Areas where Northern Ireland counter-terrorism strategy derogates from CONTEST are highlighted and discussed.

Dissident republican terrorist groups such as the Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA) (Frampton, 2011, p. 243) and Real IRA (RIRA) emerged in the mid to late 1990s in reaction to Sinn Fein and Provisional IRA (PIRA) engagement in the Northern Ireland peace process (Morrison, 2013, pp. 1-14). Schisms, large and small have played a significant role in the republican movement. Cycles of violence can be traced through the 1798 rebellion of the United Irishmen, the Fenian rising of 1867, the Easter Rising of 1916 (Coogan, 2000, p. 6), through the partition of Ireland (Noonan, 2014, pp. 186-228) and the Irish Civil War (1922-23) (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Violent actions continued through WW2, into the mid-1950s and the IRA's border



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campaign (Treacy, 2014, pp. 9-26). As the Northern Ireland troubles worsened in the late 1960's and early 1970's, the IRA fragmented again into PIRA and the Official IRA (OIRA). Groups such as the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), Irish Peoples Liberation Organisation (IPLO) also emerged through splits, feuds, ideological and personality differences. Political splintering followed a similar path, the emergence of the Workers Party, Republican Sinn Fein and latterly Saoradh (Taylor, 2018) providing examples. As republican leadership transitions from the era of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, there is potential for resurgent violence through splinter groups and spoilers. In constructing an understanding of threats from violent republican dissidents it is helpful to assess their capabilities and modus operandi and nature of risks posed.

The capabilities of terrorist organisations are built on ideology and narrative, operational experience and expertise, funding, weapons, recruitment, the ability to control space (through physical force, fear or coercion) and tradecraft such as intelligence and counterintelligence (Hoffman, 2006, pp. 229-256). The dangers posed by a terrorist organisation may suddenly rise with the acquisition of weaponry, a new cadre of bloodthirsty recruits or access to critical intelligence (Cronin, 2011,



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pp. 18-19). Terrorists are adept at exploiting inter-communal tension and seizing the initiative at times of transition or political stalemate. The contemporary dissident movement, founded by prolific members of PIRA, brought with them technical know-how and equipment. The virulence of their threat may have dampened, but the hiatus in power-sharing and uncertainties over post-BREXIT border arrangements appears to be encouraging dissident terrorist ambitions.

In Northern Ireland, dissident republicans have attacked members of the British armed forces (BBC News, 2011), officers of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and prison service (BBC News, 2012), (Little, 2016). Their modus operandi includes shootings, booby trap car bombs and urban ambush using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and small arms (Belfast Telegraph, 2018b). The threat to Roman Catholic police officers is particularly high, as dissidents seek to undermine recruitment into and acceptability of the PSNI (Sky News, 2017). Street disturbances, such as low-level rioting is a tactic employed to draw security services into pre-planned attacks and ambush (Belfast Telegraph, 2018c). Fuelling conflict between republican youth and the PSNI is a key objective and portrayed in the dissident narrative is the continued delegitimization and demonization of policing. In



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attempting to undermine the Northern Ireland state and peace process, dissidents resist security normalisation and seek to supplant legitimate policing with their own brand of violent community control. They pose threats to state security through infiltration and subversion of the official security apparatus. The case of Royal Marine and dissident terrorist bomb maker Ciaran Maxwell (Swann, 2017) highlights the potentially catastrophic mix of competence, motivation and opportunity. Attacks on fixed security infrastructure such as court buildings and police stations are known tactics. Any hard border controls necessitated by BREXIT raises questions about acceptability to local communities and the opportunity for violent dissidents to target customs posts or border checkpoints.

Threats posed to state actors in the Republic of Ireland differs. Direct targeting of the Irish Army or police service (An Garda Síochána) seems less plausible, although the involvement of dissidents in the criminal underworld in Dublin could well bring them into direct conflict with Irish state security. Gangland killings, feuds, counterfeiting, drugs, racketeering, robberies, intimidation and general criminality are features of dissident activities in the Irish Republic. As such, the threat profile can additionally be categorised as that of motivated, armed and feared organised criminals. The



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resurgence of groups such as the New INLA (Foy, 2017) in the Republic of Ireland raises concerns about what might eventually be ‘exported north’.

The threat to state actors on mainland Great Britain (GB) appears lower than that in Northern Ireland. Dissident republicans are often ‘well-known’ to the security forces, lay and professional security analysts and even the media. It is likely that they find it difficult to operate and mount operations outside Northern Ireland due to significant levels of surveillance and monitoring by the PSNI, MI5 and others. That said, the threat from NIRT to mainland GB was raised from moderate to substantial in 2016, signalling a “strong possibility of future attack” (Butler, 2016), before being downgraded again in March 2018 (BBC News, 2018). The value of attacks on mainland GB is considered higher by dissident terrorists, as they believe it showcases their abilities and generates more prime-time news coverage. Although the key terrorist threat to mainland GB is currently from Islamist terrorism, Northern and Southern Ireland are likely more exposed to threats from violent republican dissidents and some remnants of loyalist paramilitaries. Dissidents have attempted to launch remote attacks from N. Ireland, posting letter bombs to military recruitment



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offices in England (Williamson, 2013). Their ability to recruit from within the Irish diaspora in GB and abroad should not be discounted.

Beyond uniformed officers and state institutions, dissidents have threatened political representatives in Northern Ireland. It is perhaps telling that few credible attacks against Sinn Fein and former PIRA colleagues have been mounted. The fear of retribution or community backlash may have been too high a barrier to seriously countenance it. However, with recent (perhaps mostly symbolic) attacks on high profile republicans including Gerry Adams and Bobby Story (Page, 2018), questions are raised as to the allegiances and motives of the perpetrators as well as their growing audacity. As, historically with PIRA, the most sustained threat from dissidents is to republican and nationalist communities within Northern Ireland, in which they seek to assert social control through intimidation, punishment beatings and shootings. Tearing at the fabric of social coherence, exacerbating sectarian tensions and de-stabilising interface areas (Irish News, 2018) are all tactics inherited from their predecessors.

The fluidity and fragmentation of the dissident movement introduces tracking challenges. CIRA has had numerous internal divisions as has RIRA. Óglaigh na



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hÉireann, Saoirse na hÉireann the Irish Republican Liberation Army (IRLA), Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD) and more recently the New IRA, New INLA and the resurgent Irish Republican Movement (IRM) (Belfast Telegraph, 2018a) have emerged. Capabilities of the splinter groups are arguably low, however the potential for feuding or escalation of attacks to assert dominance cannot be discounted. In Northern Ireland, dissident activities have centred around Londonderry (Simpson, 2018), pockets of North and West Belfast and West Tyrone. Dissidents have also been active in the Republic of Ireland, particularly in Limerick, Cork (Roche, 2017) and in the Dublin underworld (Murtagh, 2016). Tracking their activities across Ireland requires co-operation between the UK and Irish intelligence, security and police services.

Having briefly explored the threat profile of dissident republicanism it is next helpful to evaluate counterterrorism strategies and compare and contrast their efficacy (Horgan, 2013, pp. 155-175). The UK counterterrorism strategy CONTEST and its four sub-strategies PREVENT, PREPARE, PROTECT and PURSUE provide useful foci. Counter radicalisation, covert intelligence, community policing and criminal justice efforts are briefly explored and juxtaposed within the CONTEST framework.



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In the counterextremism and counter-radicalisation objectives of PREVENT, education, referrals, protection of the vulnerable, counter-narratives, youth engagement, community outreach and community policing partnerships are important policy keys. PREVENT and PREVENT Duty are not however mandated in N. Ireland, raising important definitional and conceptual questions about the nature of domestic related terrorism and international terrorism (Versi, 2017). Combatting online radicalisation and the glorification of terrorism is important to neutralise dissident republican propaganda (Nalton, Ramsey and Taylor, 2011). Social mobility and the deconstruction of the mythology of repression and ghettoization must be set against investment, social services, education and economic development. Peace building and community relations initiatives can be contrasted with other responses such as covert intelligence or lethal force operations, the latter having greater prevalence in the 'war model' of counter-terrorism. Segregation of terrorist offenders continues in N. Ireland and protecting non-paramilitary prisoners from radicalisation and intimidation within the carceral system is vital (Moriarty, 2017).

Under PREPARE, armed policing, intelligence sharing, co-ordination of counter-terrorism and organised crime efforts between the PSNI and Garda through the



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Border Policing Strategy (PSNI, 2016) are salient. The tension between developing covert intelligence and handling human agents contrasts with trust building demanded in PREVENT-like initiatives, through community policing and community partnerships. Capacity building and resilience is an important preparatory objective, to ensure that attacks by dissidents do not provoke a loyalist backlash (McAuley, 2011). Proscription of terrorist organisations and fit for purpose legislative frameworks are essential criminal justice measures, necessitating co-ordination across jurisdictions. BREXIT introduces potential complexities, particularly in terms of border security and extradition. With the 'reconstruction' of policing in N. Ireland since 2001, counter-terrorism expertise and widening skills gaps have also become recognised challenges within the PSNI (Lynch, 2011).

Under PROTECT, target hardening, controlling access to chemicals and bomb making material, raising public awareness and defending critical infrastructure is relevant. Counter-radicalisation efforts can help protect individuals from extremist influence. Intelligence development through covert sources, community policing and prison intelligence may both compared in terms of aim and contrasted in terms of intrusion and trust.



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Under PURSUE, all-source intelligence, interdiction of weapons, funds, drugs and other criminal enterprise to detect and disrupt terrorist activity is relevant. Community policing plays an important role in intelligence development, tracing materials and persons of interest, understanding criminal and terrorist networks (Rea and Masefield, 2014, pp. 177-221). Covert intelligence again enriches the picture, but tensions can be created between these contrasting models. Criminal justice responses, such as long custodial sentencing can be contrasted with other restorative justice approaches for lower-category offending. Right realism versus liberal conceptualisations of criminal justice further add to debates about the merits of punitive sentencing and the risks of exacerbating community grievances or mythologizing prisoner suffering.

In conclusion, although limited in number, dissident republican terrorists continue to pose a threat, particularly to state security personnel in Northern Ireland and as a force in the criminal underworld in the Irish Republic. Splits and shifting allegiances, fluid leadership structures and membership adds complexity to the challenge of tackling their activities. Mainstream republican support for the Northern Ireland peace process and PSNI seems to constrain the operational freedom of violent



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dissidents. They are now more likely to be 'shut down' by the communities in which they attempt to hide and draw support, although at times they seem emboldened. Access to weaponry, funding and support is limited compared with PIRA capability in the 1980s when funding from Irish America and Libyan sponsorship greatly amplified lethality. The ability of dissidents to continue operating, despite lacking coherent political direction or influence is both a mark of their tenacity and irrationality. The use of CIRA or INLA brands in the criminal underworld of Dublin may simply be an expedient way to intimidate potential rivals. The dissident narrative that they are the true guardians of the 1916 Proclamation of Irish Freedom may appear bizarre, but it has some resonance, and in the historical cycle of republican violence it may yet prove to have greater significance. As the republican movement enters a period of transition from the era of McGuinness and Adams, others are waiting in the wings seemingly eager to re-ignite the flames of separatist violence. BREXIT and stalled power sharing, although unlikely in themselves to be tipping points, add degrees of complexity to an already complex security landscape.



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