

*This is an ICSR Insight by Dr. Martyn Frampton, Associate Fellow of ICSR and Lecturer in Modern History at Queen Mary, University of London.*

In the last week, dissident Irish republicans have shown their potency and violent intent with the murder of PC Ronan Kerr, a Catholic officer in the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the planting of a 500lb on a motorway in the town of Newry, near the Irish border.

Dissident Irish republicans are nowhere near as strong as the Provisional IRA was during its peak. However, it is clear that these groups continue to pose a serious threat to life (particularly to members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland) and retain the capacity to cause large explosions, certainly in Northern Ireland, and perhaps also in mainland Britain. Evidence suggests that their ambitions and activities are increasing.

### **Increasing number of attacks**

Since the March 2009 murder of two British soldiers and a policeman by the dissidents, various groups have been operating at a tempo which reflects their growing confidence and capabilities. Even before the murder of PC Kerr, dissidents have been responsible for the following incidents:

- The wounding of a woman in east Belfast by an under car bomb
- A 400lb bomb partially exploding at the HQ of the Policing Board in Belfast
- The serious maiming of Police Constable Peadar Heffron
- Repeated gun and bomb attacks on police stations and patrols in rural areas such as Crossmaglen, Newtonhamilton, Bessbrook and Keady in South Armagh
- The detonation of a 250lb car bomb outside Newry courthouse
- The murder of Kieran Doherty in Derry
- A 50lb car bomb that exploded outside the regional HQ of MI5 in Belfast
- Organised, sectarian rioting in Belfast
- One 200lb car bomb that narrowly failed to detonate outside a Co. Tyrone police station (Aughnacloy); and another that *did* explode outside Strand road police station in Derry
- Booby-trap bombs left under the cars of a serving police officer (Kilkeel) and an army major (Bangor) in Co. Down, and another that targeted a civilian security worker in Co. Tyrone (Cookstown)
- The partial detonation of a bomb outside a school in Lurgan, Co. Armagh, which injured three children
- A 200lb car bomb that exploded outside the Ulster Bank in Derry
- A bomb attack on the 'City of Culture' offices in Derry
- An attempted 'double tap' bomb attack on police officers in North Belfast, which was only aborted at the last moment due to the presence of a civilian woman

In addition to this, there have been a significant number of lesser attacks demonstrating dissident republican activity, including pipe bombs, hoax alerts, as well as punishment beatings and shootings in 'republican communities' of Northern Ireland.

### **Oglaigh na hEireann (ONH) are the leading dissident group at this moment**

The death of PC Kerr is thought to be the work of Oglaigh na hEireann (ONH) – the newest organisational manifestation of dissident Irish republicanism. It emerged in 2005–6, the successor to one faction of the Real IRA (after that group had split in 2002 amidst bitter disputes on future strategy).

Its leaders are reported to be former senior members of the Real IRA (RIRA). This fact may well explain the use of Semtex in the Omagh attack last Saturday. The man credited with forming the Real IRA is Michael McKevitt, alleged to have been a quartermaster within the Provisional IRA (and currently serving a twenty year sentence in Ireland for directing terrorism).

### **Use of Semtex may be a sign of 'the Libya legacy' rather than new stockpiles**

The history of the dissidents over the last thirteen years shows the difficulty faced by groups seeking to import new weapons into Northern Ireland, with a number of plots foiled by the security services.

However, when Michael McKevitt and others left the Provisionals, many within the security services believe that they took stocks of weaponry and explosives with them, including materials acquired from Col. Gaddafi's Libya, such as Semtex. The recent attack is therefore likely to be an enduring legacy of the Provisional IRA's Libyan 'link up'.

This is not the first time that dissidents have used Semtex. As early as 1999 it was clear that some of this had made its way into their hands; and previous attacks have deployed the substance (see, for example, an August 2008 attack in Co. Fermanagh).

### **Aim of ONH and other militant dissidents is to prevent normalisation**

Groups like ONH are committed to the prosecution of an intermittent campaign that thwarts the 'normalisation' of life in Northern Ireland. The peace process, for them, is meaningless. The fact that they followed the murder of Ronan Kerr with the planting of a 500lb car bomb on the main Dublin-Belfast motorway indicates their contempt for the universal condemnation of the murder.

In November 2010, in a newspaper interview, they declared 'Oglaigh na hEireann will decide when and where it attacks... Nothing is beyond our reach.... We have no desire to replicate or be a morph of the Provisional IRA. They failed... We think that a war will create the conditions for credible dialogue aimed at British withdrawal.'

To download Dr. Frampton's recent ICSR Report on the Return of the Militants, please click [here](#)

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