

Securitas Intelligence Unit

Unrest in Northern Ireland

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Priority Intelligence

- Unrest has flared in Northern Ireland in recent weeks, in what has been described as “the worst violence in years,” with clashes between protestors and police, including the use of petrol bombs and fireworks.
- The violence has been blamed on the Northern Ireland protocol of the Brexit agreement, and allegations of ‘two-tier policing’ following Police Service Northern Ireland’s (PSNI) decision not to prosecute attendees at the funeral of Bobby Storey, a former member of the IRA, for breaking COVID-19 restrictions.
- Intelligence indicates that criminal and paramilitary elements are fuelling unrest, following recent police operations against paramilitary groups known to be involved with organised crime.
- Unionists have temporarily postponed protest related activity following the death of Prince Philip, but have stated plans to continue opposition after a period of mourning,
- The SIU assess with HIGH confidence that tensions will increase in Northern Ireland in the imminent future, with protests likely to occur following the funeral of Prince Philip, and as Unionist Marching Season gets underway through April to August, with a heightened flashpoint of risk during July.

Background

Brexit tensions

Tensions in Northern Ireland have been building since the Northern Ireland Protocol was implemented post-Brexit, which allowed Northern Ireland to remain in the EU single market and customs union. However, this has meant that products entering Northern Ireland from Great Britain are subject to import procedures at Northern Ireland ports. Some Unionists have argued this has eroded Northern Ireland’s constitutional position in the UK.

Last month, Northern Ireland loyalist paramilitary groups announced they would temporarily withdraw their support for the 1998 peace agreement due to concerns over Brexit.

The groups pledged “peaceful and democratic” opposition. However, following the announcement, the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC), which represents views of the UVF, UDA and Red Hand Commando, sent letters to EU, Ireland and UK officials warning, “please do not underestimate the strength of feeling on this issue right across the unionist family”.

SIU Comment: The UVF, UDA and Red Hand Commandos are loyalist paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, who were originally established to combat Irish republicanism. The three groups stated in 2018 that they were ‘turning away’ from crime, however they remain on the UK’s list of Proscribed Terrorist Organisations. **End.**

Police controversy

Unionist discontent simmered after it was announced in March that the PSNI would not prosecute attendees at the funeral of Bobby Storey, a former member of the IRA, in June 2020, during a period when COVID-19 restrictions prevented public gatherings. Over 2,000 people attended the funeral, including Deputy First Minister Michelle O’Neill and other Sinn Féin politicians.

First Minister Arlene Foster called on PSNI’s chief constable to resign after the decision not to prosecute was announced, and officials have warned the PSNI need to reconnect communities and build and restore trust. This has further fuelled accusations of ‘two-tier policing’ in Northern Ireland: one system for the general public, and one system for republicans.



Situation in detail

Violence first erupted on 29 March in a Unionist area of Londonderry. Since then, there have been protests, counter-protests and rioting in areas across Northern Ireland, including Ballymena, Belfast, Derry, and Newtownabbey.

Clashes between protestors and police have escalated to violence, with bricks, fireworks and petrol bombs thrown at police officers – at least 88 police officers have been injured so far, according to a PSNI statement.

Both Nationalists and Unionists have accused each other of inciting the violence, and both sides have been involved in attacks on police. A number of ‘undeclared’ marches have taken place in the affected communities, which has further heightened tensions.



Whilst no group or party has claimed responsibility or endorsed the violence, there are suggestions that some of the violence may be linked to police operations targeting the South East Antrim Ulster Defence Association (UDA), a paramilitary group known to be involved in organised crime. The UDA is among a number of illegal groups represented politically by the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC). On 3 March the LCC announced that Unionist paramilitaries were temporarily withdrawing their support for the Good Friday peace deal (see Brexit tensions above).



Intelligence Assessment

Unrest and criminal activity (demonstrations, protests, trespass, vandalism, criminal damage and arson)				
Threat type:	Security	Operations	Brand & reputation	THREAT LEVEL
Severity:	4 – SUBSTANTIAL	3 - MODERATE	3 - MODERATE	3 - MODERATE

The SIU assesses with **HIGH CONFIDENCE** that there is a significant likelihood of further violent protest in the coming weeks.

Tensions in Northern Ireland have been building for some time over the border issues presented by Brexit, with recent graffiti on walls at Northern Ireland ports describing staff working there as "targets".

Discontent on social media, particularly amongst Unionist communities has increased in recent months, and the PSNI’s recent decision not to prosecute several senior Sinn Fein members for breaking lockdown rules in June 2020 is likely to have been a key flashpoint in the initial violence.

It should be noted that despite the majority wearing masks to conceal their identity, many reports from the scene have noted the relatively young demographic of the protestors, with children as young as 12-14 being involved in throwing petrol bombs and missiles, and the possibility exists that those on the ground are simply looking to cause general disorder and unrest due to frustrations with lockdown and Brexit, and that this is being exploited by those with sectarian agendas.

Whilst the death of the Duke of Edinburgh late last week led Unionists to call a temporary halt to protests as a mark of respect, it remains highly likely that disruption will resume in the near future, particularly with the imminent arrival of ‘marching season’, which typically begins in late April / early May through until August.

While protests to date have not seen any serious injuries or fatalities, due to the violent nature of the protests, it is considered that any further demonstrations are likely to have an ever-increasing likelihood of serious injury and/or death and any loss of life is highly likely to result in a significant escalation in violence.

The SIU assesses that the most likely course of action (MLCOA) is an increase in sectarian tension, protest activity and associated violence over the coming weeks, as already simmering tensions are unlikely to be eased by the imminent arrival of the often emotionally-charged marching season.

However, considering the strength of feeling and the concerns that some of these protests may be driven or exploited by paramilitary and/or organised crime groups, it is the SIU’s assessment that the most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) could see significant and widespread violence, including attacks on police and / or civilians. Republican paramilitary groups have in the past carried out terrorist attacks on targets both in Northern Ireland and in the UK, and with the recent easing of COVID-19 restrictions, this provides extremists greater targeting opportunities at a time when motivation is at a high.

Intelligence Cut Off Date (ICOD):	1300hrs, 16 April 2021.
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INCIDENT THREAT LEVELS	
5 – CRITICAL	Critical threat of disruption. Review and respond if required.
4 – SUBSTANTIAL	Substantial threat of disruption. Consider taking appropriate action.
3 – MODERATE	Moderate threat of disruption. Maintain awareness, consider precautions.
2 – MINOR	Minor threat of disruption. Be advised.
1 - LIMITED	Limited threat of disruption. For awareness.