

THE SUNDAY TIMES



‘Apparently in Ireland you can kill your wife and make a profit’
Georgia Lillis



News

Top 100 bestsellers



Culture

Risk of attack by extremists is ‘substantial’

Garda commissioner raises level of terror threat after increase in far-right plots to kill leading politicians

John Mooney

The garda commissioner has increased the threat level posed by violent political extremists from moderate to substantial, meaning that an attack is likely following an upsurge in threats to kill members of the government and opposition parties by far-right extremists. The Department of Justice was informed of the development in a confidential letter sent to Helen McEntee from Drew Harris following consultations with his officers in the garda's crime and security intelligence service. Any change in the threat level status is sensitive as it could have economic and political consequences. Garda Headquarters is the national agency responsible for setting the threat level posed by terrorist, extremist and subversive groups in the state. The force now considers far-right extremism to pose a more serious threat than international jihadist terrorism and violent dissident republicanism given its rapid spread across the country and its ability to attract support from people from all walks of life, who are often recruited on social media platforms. The movement's ability to encourage people to engage in spontaneous rioting, organise arson attacks and issue death threats on social media, often using their own names, is likely to ensure it remains a serious chal-

lenge to policing in the decade ahead. The intelligence services have already compromised plans to kill politicians and thwarted countless arson attacks on planned refugee accommodation centres. Gardai have even monitored extremists discussing plans to assassinate Leo Varadkar, the former taoiseach. The commissioner is said to have taken the "difficult decision" to upgrade the threat status having considered multiple issues and reports on the scale of the problem, including recent threats made to kill politicians but also the outbreak of rioting on the streets of Belfast which led to anti-immigrant campaigners from both protestant, catholic and non-religious backgrounds uniting. The reassessment by the garda commissioner is now expected to result in the government having to adopt specific measures to confront the problem, considered by many to be an evolving form of terrorism in many parts of Europe. Far-right extremists have already murdered politicians in Europe. Walter Lübcke, a regional Christian Democrat governor in Germany, was shot at close range by an extremist in 2019. Lübcke had backed Angela Merkel's welcome for nearly a million migrants and refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria. In 2016, Jo Cox, the British MP, was murdered by Thomas Mair, a reclusive neo-Nazi, a week before the Brexit referendum.

"It's only a matter of time before an elected representative is killed or seriously injured by an extremist," said one security source familiar with the issue. "They are continually discussing how to assassinate politicians on messaging apps and are actively trying to acquire weapons. It is difficult to overstate how unhinged some of them are. "Increasing the threat status is not a decision that a garda commissioner takes lightly. He was left with no alternative given the intelligence picture that is emerging. All the warning lights are flashing." Security sources say the reassessment is likely to lead to additional protection being offered to members of the cabinet, opposition leaders, government buildings and possibly the judiciary. It may also lead to an increase in financial grants being made available to politicians to buy portable panic alarms and install security features in their homes and places of work. A garda spokesman said the overall national threat level was still considered to be moderate but declined to comment on the increase in the threat level posed by violent political extremists. "Any change to the threat level from a specific subcategory and/or group is communicated by the commissioner directly to the minister for justice," the spokesman said.

Harris warned of attack threat, page 7

RIDING HIGH



Michael Pender, on Hearton du Bois Halleux, competes in the Dublin Horse Show Puissance at the RDS Arena. The prize pot for the Grand Prix, which takes place today, is €500,000. Family affair, page 3

Boy, 16, in court over stabbing of army padre

Cillian Sherlock

A teenager said to have a "radical Islamist mindset" has appeared in court charged with stabbing an army chaplain in Co Galway. The 16-year-old boy, who cannot be named because he is a juvenile, was charged with assaulting Fr Paul Murphy at Renmore Barracks on Thursday. Fr Murphy, in his fifties, was attacked at 10.35pm and taken to University Hospital Galway where he is recovering from multiple stab wounds after surgery. The boy appeared before the Children's Court in Galway yesterday and was charged with assault causing harm. Detective Sergeant Paul McNulty said the attack was "frenzied". Early analysis of seized devices showed content supporting the Islamic State terrorist group. Garda Conor Breen, of Galway Garda Station, told the court that the accused was arrested on Thursday and charged late on Friday night. Breen said that the boy made no reply to the charge under caution. The boy's solicitor, Jack Donohue, applied for bail on his behalf. McNulty said that the state was objecting to bail over what he described as an "indiscriminate, unprovoked and frenzied" attack. There was a "genuine fear" that the accused may interfere with potential witnesses, who are mainly army personnel. Describing the stabbing as a "random, sinister and unprovoked" incident, he added there

Continued on page 4 →



OFF TO COLLEGE

UP TO €400 OFF LAPTOPS

NEWS

Garda commissioner pointed to the possibility of an upsurge in violence after the Israel-Hamas war began last year

John Mooney

Long before Fr Paul Murphy was stabbed as he went through the gates of Renmore Barracks in Galway, Drew Harris had warned of the possibility of a lone-wolf attack happening on Irish soil.

In November, the garda commissioner and the GNIS, the force's national intelligence service, began to assess the threat arising from the outbreak of war between Hamas and Israel.

At the time Harris was clear-sighted about the chance of contagion from the unfolding tragedy in Gaza and how people might be influenced by that. It could, he believed, radicalise certain types of people in novel ways.

His fears, previously considered a remote possibility, have been brought back into sharp focus by the events of Thursday night.

One theory being explored by the security services is that the 16-year-old suspect was self-radicalised, a process in which people who are drawn to violence view extremist material online.

Separately, both jihadist and right-wing extremists churn out propaganda to encourage others around the world to engage in violence.

Much of this material, which depicts stomach-churning violence and gory scenes, encourages a small number of people to consider attacks on targets that symbolise western largesse or power.

Yet very few people who watch it go on to engage in terrorism, said Moïgn Khawaja, an assistant professor and expert on jihadist groups at Dublin City University.

"Generally speaking, most people who become radicalised preach their message to others and hope to radicalise others in their own networks," he said. "They try to find someone to do their bidding."

Khawaja said that such radicalisation was a process that usually followed a significant change in a person's life.

"People try to cope with their problems by engaging in an identity transformation and they embrace a new ideology. We usually find they are trying to reinvent themselves and create a new identity," said Khawaja, who has spent years studying the phenomenon.

"The virtual world is perfect for this. People can meet others online who know nothing about them. You don't have to have physical contact with someone to be close to them or part of their community, it can all happen online."

Identifying people who become immersed in the virtual world of online extremism, be it jihadism or right-wing extremism, is near impossible – as is stopping their attacks.

There are few opportunities for intelligence agencies to identify potential extremists online or to distinguish between extremists who spread hate and those who are willing to go on to the streets and kill.

Once again this topic highlights the need for proper policing of social media platforms.

Working out whether people who type in keywords about bombmaking, for example, actually pose a physical threat is also hampered by the garda's limited resources.

Advances in encryption and the use



Harris warned how Ireland faced terror attack risk

Drew Harris, the garda commissioner, recently raised the threat level. Helen McEntee, the justice minister, opted not to make the alert public



“Only a very few people who watch extremist videos online go on to engage in terrorism”

well as a planned assault on the Swedish parliament in Stockholm.

It is these kinds of attack that cause concern for Harris and garda headquarters. "What we would be concerned about across Europe is those individuals who are socialised towards some of these terrorist groupings, be it Hamas, Hezbollah or Daesh ISKP , and then be motivated in terms of an attack," Harris told The Sunday Times.

"Some of these attacks are very difficult to interdict because there is a minimal amount of planning, just an individual who is literally armed with a knife. It's one individual only but the conspiracy relates to internet traffic, so that's of huge concern."

Experts insist that the defeat of jihadists on the battlefield does not end their battle to spread extreme Islamist views.

"Ideology does not vanish overnight because you have killed a bunch of militants and disrupted their caliphate project," said Michael Weiss, the co-author of *Isis: Inside the Army of Terror*.

"Just because they lost terrain in Syria and Iraq doesn't mean they are not continuing as an insurgency. Jihadists are still trying to radicalise people around the world. It started in the Nineties in the Balkans with images of Serbs brutalising Bosnian Muslims. This was well before the advent of digital media.

"It is designed to stoke emotions and make people want to do something about it. If you are sitting in Iran, in Rafah or in Syria, you want people in the West to take it out on their own society," Weiss said.

From the garda's perspective, the immediate risk posed by "lone wolf" attackers raises concern about the potential of jihadist groups in faraway places to incite and inspire attacks in Ireland, in much the same way as right-wing extremists. There is also the potential that such attacks will encourage the growth of far-right extremism, now considered a form of domestic terrorism. This further complicates policing efforts.

Harris now considers the threat posed by far-right and anti-immigration groups to be substantial, so much so that in recent weeks he raised the threat level from moderate to substantial.

Helen McEntee, the justice minister, opted not to tell the public about this but the commissioner's decision suggests that the problem of politically inspired violence is unlikely to diminish any time soon.

Tax burden 'a barrier to senior garda role'

John Mooney

Senior gardai have made a last-ditch effort to try to stop the Policing Authority from appointing a candidate to lead Ireland's intelligence service by making a direct approach to the justice minister, claiming they are being discriminated against on the basis they cannot apply for the role without facing a €100,000 tax burden.

Helen McEntee, the justice minister, received a confidential letter from six assistant commissioners who have spent their entire careers in the gardai on Friday afternoon, urging her to halt the competition to appoint a new deputy garda commissioner to oversee Ireland's national security.

The officers have urged McEntee to provide them with assurances the tax anomaly will be resolved so they can apply for the position, according to departmental sources. The letter said the issue was having a detrimental impact on the force. The assistant commissioners said efforts should be made to inform all potential candidates about the conclusions of a review by the finance department on whether the anomaly would be corrected.

McEntee previously gave an undertaking that the competition would not proceed, but the position was readvertised last month and the closing date for applications is Thursday.

The Department of Finance has yet to clarify if the anomaly will be corrected

in budget 2024, which has led gardai at the highest ranks of the force to privately conclude the government intends to appoint an external candidate to become the next garda commissioner when Drew Harris retires next year. As yet, no assistant commissioner who has spent their career in the force has applied for the position as they will automatically incur a tax bill in excess of €100,000 upon their retirement.

The role of deputy commissioner is by far the most sensitive in the force. The holder is responsible for protecting the government, civil service and the public from hostile states such as Russia. They are also responsible for overseeing counterintelligence and anti-terrorist operations.

Michael McDowell, a former justice minister and senator, urged McEntee to resolve the issue. "Whether this is constitutional or not to tax pensions in this way is an open question. If this has the effect that people outside the state would not be affected when applying for a job, where people in the state would be, it's plain common sense that the competition should not happen," he said.

Aodhán Ó Riordáin, the Labour Party MEP, said: "What is happening is intolerable."

The Department of Justice said tax issues were a matter for the minister for finance. A spokesman did not answer questions about whether McEntee would intervene.

Conor Brady, page 15

THE
iX3

Discover more

Fuel economy and CO₂ results for the BMW iX3: CO₂ emissions: 0 g/km. Electric range: 460 - 470 km (WLTP). The electric range figure shown is the WLTP figure after the battery had been fully charged to 100%. The iX1 is a battery electric vehicle requiring mains electricity for charging. Figures shown are for comparability purposes. These figures may not reflect real life driving results, which will depend upon a number of factors including the starting charge of the battery, accessories fitted (post registration), variations in weather, driving styles and vehicle load. Model shown not Ireland specification.