

THE SUNDAY TIMES



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Kinahan cartel bosses caught on camera in Dubai

Investigation uncovers gangsters living openly in UAE

John Mooney
Investigations Editor

Christopher Kinahan and his eldest son, Daniel – two of the most wanted criminals on the planet – have been caught on camera in the desert city of Dubai by a joint investigation between The Sunday Times and Bellingcat, the open-source investigative outlet.

The images represent the first verified sightings of the father and son's whereabouts since the imposition of a \$15 million bounty, shattering the cartel's longstanding claim of invisibility.

Our investigation found the fugitives living openly in the United Arab Emirates, which they still consider a safe haven from international law enforcement.

The images have astonished intelligence and police officers involved in the international effort to bring the gang to justice for their involvement in murder, drug trafficking and money laundering.

Despite being the subjects of a global manhunt, the Kinahans have avoided unwanted attention for years, operating with a level of discretion that earned them a reputation as ghosts among international law enforcement.

The images published today were captured at the 971 Fighting Championship, a mixed martial arts (MMA) event held at the Coca-Cola Arena in Dubai last June. They provide the most definitive evidence to date that Kinahan and his eldest son remain unfazed by the global sanctions designed to



Christy Kinahan was identified

cripple their €1.5 billion transnational crime organisation.

The two criminals were located after a high-quality photograph of Daniel Kinahan and Mounir Lazzez, a former UFC fighter, was published online. This prompted a forensic sweep of the arena's digital footprint, which placed the two men in a VIP section surrounded by figures from boxing, MMA, event management and organised crime.

Christy Kinahan was observed wearing a Panama hat and white trousers. He was seen covering his face with his hand throughout the event, including whenever photographers raised their cameras. Daniel, who wore a baseball cap and glasses, was seated nearby.

The investigation reveals the continued involvement of the Kinahans in professional combat sports, despite being frozen out of the international financial system.

Lazzez, a Tunisian who holds an Italian passport, is a prominent figure in the Middle Eastern

combat sports scene. After a stint in the UFC, he transitioned into promotion in Dubai. His 971 Fighting Championship often features fighters who are looking for a platform that does not carry the same regulatory baggage as the UFC.

Lazzez is a known associate of Daniel Kinahan, whom he has previously described as a close friend. He declined to comment.

The Kinahan organisation is one of the world's most formidable transnational criminal organisations. No longer a mere drugs cartel, the group has become a critical facilitator for pariah regimes and militant groups and controls much of the cocaine reaching Europe, acting as a gatekeeper for the multibillion-euro illicit trade that fuels gangland violence.

Yesterday, the image that led to the breakthrough in the search for Christy Kinahan was taken offline after the Kinahans and Lazzez were approached for comment.

The UAE said it took allegations of criminal activity extremely seriously. A spokesman stated that the authorities were co-operating on cases involving foreign nationals, in accordance with international commitments and the national legal framework for tackling illicit activity. Regarding the Kinahan organised crime group, he confirmed that the UAE had conducted investigations, resulting in the freezing of all relevant assets.

The Emirates will continue to pursue these inquiries.

Full story, page 9

RAIN OF FIRE



Smoke and flames fill the sky above Mehrabad airport in Tehran yesterday after the US and Israel continued their combined campaign of airstrikes on Iran. Full coverage, pages 6-7

Ministers set to help people hit by oil costs

Jennifer Bray Political Editor
Claire Scott Political Correspondent

A cost of living package for struggling households is back on the table after concern about the long-term effects of the war in the Middle East.

After months in which the government ruled out fresh one-off payments or energy credits, these are to be reconsidered after the price of oil rose from \$65 a barrel on February 27 to \$91 last Friday – a week in which Iran has been bombed by the United States and Israel, and Tehran retaliated with missile attacks on Tel Aviv and countries in the Persian Gulf.

Ministers had said measures introduced after Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in 2022 would not be repeated, but senior government sources said the situation had changed dramatically.

Two sources said that if energy prices continued to rise, a package would have to be introduced. One insider stressed it would be "nothing like" the 2022-23 cost of living package, worth €4.1 billion, that was intended to tackle the surge in energy prices and other costs.

While support in some form is likely, ministers will resist energy credits across the board. Any new measures "will be targeted", a source said.

Last Friday Micheál Martin said he was open to providing targeted measures to support vulnerable consumers if the Iran war led to a prolonged energy crisis. The taoiseach told Cork's 103FM: "We do accept that there is a lot of

Continued on page 2 ➔



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INVESTIGATION

Hiding in plain sight

EXCLUSIVE

Sporting a Panama hat, a blue polo shirt, white trousers and blue trainers, a grey-haired man sits unperturbed in the white VIP seats at the front of a crowd of 6,000 people at Dubai's Coca-Cola Arena.

He reclines for six hours watching bouts at the 971 Fighting Championship, an extreme form of mixed martial arts. He casually orders drinks from waiters and chats to guests around him.

For those watching closely his only observable precaution is that he subtly obscures his face whenever he spots photographers pointing cameras in his general direction. Nearby is a younger man, in glasses and a light blue baseball cap. He too carries on with few cares. He makes no effort to hide himself.

The two men are Christy and Daniel Kinahan, father and son, and two of the world's most wanted men, at the helm of one of the most powerful and dangerous criminal cartels. This is the first time they have been pictured in public for years.

They fled to Dubai in 2016 and disappeared in April 2022, shortly after the United States put \$5 million bounties on their heads and those of their closest lieutenants.

Now an investigation by The Sunday Times, in partnership with the open-source outlet Bellingcat, has obtained images of them living freely and out in public. If either man was concerned about the prospect of arrest and deportation in the United Arab Emirates, they certainly do not show it.

Lives of crime

Christy is the leader of the cartel that controls much of the cocaine brought into Europe, and global arms-smuggling and money-laundering operations.

Born to Irish immigrants in Ealing, west London, Christy Kinahan moved to Dublin as a boy. As a teenager in the 1970s he was a car thief; by the late Eighties he had become involved in the city's heroin trade, and served stints in Portlaoise, a maximum-security prison. After doing time among IRA fighters and gangland killers he emerged with a polished accent and a transformed persona.

Leaving Ireland for London and then the Continent, he reinvented himself as a businessman and formidable force in the international underworld. It was into this world, and a palatial mansion on the Spanish coast, that his sons Daniel and Christopher Jr moved when they reached their teens to join his operation.

The Kinahans cartel's clientele reads like a who's who of international pariahs, including Mexican and Colombian cartels, the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and Iranian intelligence services. The Kinahans are helping Russia to evade international sanctions by shipping crude oil around the globe for the Kremlin. They have reputedly amassed a fortune of \$1.5 billion. Christy has received counter-surveillance training, adopted aliases and made a career of evading tracking and monitoring.

Today's investigation shows he and his 48-year-old son enjoy a VIP lifestyle in Dubai, despite the UAE's insistence that it has taken robust action against the gang.

The Emiratis claim to have frozen €200 million in assets in UAE-registered businesses and mapped the organisation's front companies and proxies. However, the Kinahans' continued ability to operate suggests these enforcement efforts have yet to strike a decisive blow.

How we tracked them down

Our investigation did not find the Kinahans through traditional human sources but through open-source journalism, using an AI-powered facial recognition search. By uploading a social media photo of Daniel Kinahan's known associates and family members, we were able to scour billions of publicly available images. It led to the discovery of a high-resolution professional photograph of Daniel at the fighting event.

The breakthrough allowed our team to narrow its focus and we obtained six hours of video which had been made by TrillerTV, a livestreaming service.

Forensic digital techniques were used to locate Daniel and Christy Kinahan among the crowd of 6,000. It took months of work. After possible matches were found, we cross-referenced the images with other footage and imagery, allowing us to match up Christy Kinahan's Panama hat, for example, with a similar-looking hat that featured in a family member's social media post from months earlier.

We then used forensic software to sharpen low-resolution frames. Instagram was also searched for videos of the Kinahans, which yielded more results.

The criminals were inadvertently captured on camera by spectators filming bouts at the event. Christy Kinahan was repeatedly seen in the VIP section, positioned adjacent to the ring where models circled the canvas between rounds.

The final confirmation came from people who knew the Kinahan patriarch personally or had investigated his activities. "It's him 100 per cent. He's put a little weight on around his face but he's getting on now. He always looked after himself but age is catching up with him," one source said. "He is after all nearly 70."

Although Christy Kinahan obscured his face in the official TrillerTV stream, social media video showed hair colour, length and physical mannerisms consistent with the cartel boss. He remained in his seat for most of the event, providing

The Kinahans are the world's most wanted gangsters – we have tracked them down

Pictures unearthed using forensic digital techniques show the cartel's leaders at a martial arts match in Dubai, living without fear of arrest, writes *John Mooney*



seen with various boxers. Lazzez is also captured on film talking to Christy, sitting next to him during the first round of one of the bouts, at one point tapping the older man familiarly on the arm.

The Kinahans moved from Costa del Sol to the UAE in late 2016 for their own protection. They had gone to war with rival criminals in Dublin after an attempt was made on Daniel's life at a boxing weigh-in at the Regency Hotel; 18 people were killed in the resulting bloodshed. They were fearful of being killed themselves, but their move to Dubai was driven by more: they also feared arrest as a result of police operations in Ireland, the UK and mainland Europe.

Polyglot 'businessman'
In Dubai, Christy Kinahan reinvented

himself as a consultant named Chris Vincent, taking up residence in the Al Wasl district with his Turkish wife, Neslihan Yildirim. He established companies in the free-trade zone and began a new life posing as a businessman with purported investments in north and south America, southeast Asia, central Asia, Africa and China. Kinahan is reportedly able to converse in Russian, Spanish, French, Belgian Dutch and Arabic.

Daniel married Caoimhe Robinson, from Dublin, at Dubai's Burj Al Arab hotel. The guest list was a rogue's gallery: Raffaele Imperiale of the Italian Camorra; Ridouan Taghi, the Dutch-Moroccan gangster; Richard Vega, a Chilean cocaine smuggler; and Edin Gacanin of the Balkan "Tito and Dino" cartel. Together, they formed what law enforce-

ment would come to term a super cartel, a network that once controlled a vast portion of Europe's cocaine trade.

Daniel's subsequent attempt to white-wash his reputation involved reinventing himself as a boxing promoter through MTK Global, formerly known as MGM.

He emerged as one of the most influential powerbrokers in boxing, arranging bouts for fighters including the heavy-weight champion Tyson Fury, who until recently spoke openly of their friendship. "I've just got off the phone with Daniel Kinahan," Fury said on Instagram in 2020. "He's just told me that the biggest fight in British boxing history has been agreed. Big shout-out, Dan, he got this done. Two-fight deal: Tyson Fury v Anthony Joshua next year."

The contest never materialised. Yet his prominence underlined a broader indifference in parts of the sport, despite the fact that Daniel Kinahan had been identified in the Irish High Court in 2018 as a senior figure in organised crime and a prolific drug trafficker. MTK closed after US officials moved against the Kinahans.

Questions persist about how the two men can operate so freely in the Emirates without protection from the ruling elites, even as their involvement in global organised crime is exposed.

In September, the crash of a light aircraft in Brazil carrying 200kg of "SpaceX-branded" cocaine resulted in the death of an Australian pilot and pulled back the curtain on the cartel's associates in Africa and Europe.

US court records, published last year by The Sunday Times, show that the Drug Enforcement Administration infiltrated a narcotics network tied to the family, providing the first clear evidence of the group operating directly in north America and highlighting expansion into methamphetamine and fentanyl trafficking.



Christy Kinahan, left, and, top, in a Panama hat, watching a fight in Dubai. His son Daniel was also in the crowd, above, in baseball cap next to former UFC fighter Mounir Lazzez

“He always looks after himself but age is catching up with him

the longest continuous footage of the cartel leader ever made public. It is a stark departure for Christy, who typically operates like a ghost.

Out of the shadows

While Christy and Daniel did not openly mingle at the event, they did appear to greet each other midway during a performance by the rapper Lloyd Banks. As Daniel's seat lay empty, a man in a baseball cap and light trousers matching his attire was seen moving along the front row to embrace Christy. It was a rare, public display of affection among a criminal dynasty.

When the Kinahans and their allies initially went to ground in the UAE, the security services tasked with locating them suspected they might have fled to a neighbouring country, or perhaps disappeared into central or southeast Asia. Then they resurfaced in Dubai months later. It was widely assumed they were keeping a low profile, moving between safe houses and hotels under different aliases.

But these images show they are not operating from the shadows; they are living openly, making little effort to conceal their identities. While Daniel looks older now – he has gained some weight and his stubble has turned grey – he remains unmistakable from previous pictures.

These images were captured weeks after the UAE extradited a close associate to Ireland to face charges of murder and directing a criminal organisation.

Friends in high places

The 971 Fighting Championship featured 14 bouts over six hours. Its founder, Mounir Lazzez, a former UFC fighter known professionally as “the Sniper” has been an outspoken supporter of Daniel Kinahan, thanking him in a televised post-fight speech in Las Vegas days after US sanctions were announced. Lazzez has publicly described Kinahan as a good friend, brother and adviser.

Lazzez is pictured alongside Daniel, who, before his disappearance, had been



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