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Inside the Kinahan cartel and their €1 billion empire

DRUG SMUGGLERS MONEY LAUNDERERS TERROR FUNDERS UNTOUCHABLES?



Christy Kinahan is the former Dublin taxi driver who heads the world's most dangerous international crime gang. But is the net closing in on him and his sons?
John Mooney reports

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Christopher Vincent is a business consultant of many faces. Online he likes to present himself as an expert in transport, logistics, communications, entertainment, oil and gas, and security. “Being in the game is not as important as staying ahead of it,” his now defunct website, Christopher-Vincent.com, advised prospective clients.

Little did visitors realise that behind the façade was the ruthless leader of one of the most powerful criminal organisations on the planet. Christopher Vincent is Christopher Vincent Kinahan, the 66-year-old founder of the Kinahan cartel — a man who has managed to stay ahead of the game at the apex of organised crime for decades.

That began to change in April last year when the US government listed Kinahan and his cartel as sanctioned entities. The Biden administration is offering a collective reward of \$15 million for information leading to the arrest of Christopher — known to associates as Christy — and his sons Daniel and Christopher Jr, both in their forties, who live in luxury with their families in the United Arab Emirates.

It’s hard to overstate the scale of Kinahan’s operation. He and his cartel control much of the cocaine imports into Europe, as well as arms smuggling and money laundering around the world. His clients include Mexican and Colombian drug cartels, the Lebanon-based Islamic militant group Hezbollah and Iran’s intelligence services. They have murdered rivals and even targeted the IRA. But it is the cartel’s ability to invest and launder money that sets it apart from other gangs. They have infected the international banking system like a virus, recruiting legions of professionals to wash illicit gains alongside legitimate investments in return for handsome commissions. This is no small feat. Three decades ago Kinahan was eking out a living forging cheques and driving a taxi around Dublin.

In Europe, organised crime gangs follow similar trajectories. They usually continue

From left: Christopher “Christy” Kinahan; his sons Christopher Jr and Daniel. Below: Christy was arrested in 2010 — and released

**HIS CLIENTS INCLUDE
MEXICAN AND
COLOMBIAN
DRUG CARTELS,
HEZBOLLAH AND
IRANIAN INTELLIGENCE**



to grow until their leaders are either killed and replaced, imprisoned, or the organisation transitions into a legitimate enterprise. Kinahan broke the mould. His organisation co-opted other gangs into a collective, a criminal franchise. Hydralike, this confederation displays a remarkable ability to adapt and regenerate, evolving as it expands. Now, with the US bounties hanging over them and international pressure on the UAE to give them up, there are signs that the cartel is cracking.

“The net is closing in on them. They are running out of time,” says Drew Harris, the garda commissioner in Dublin who is using a combination of diplomacy, old-fashioned policing and intelligence sharing with the Emiratis to pursue the gang.

Others are less sure. As someone who has spent more than a decade investigating Kinahan, I’ve come to view his story as not merely one of illicit enterprise; it’s an odyssey of power, learning and ruthless resourcefulness that appears to know no bounds. His stratospheric rise is not an accident: it was driven by greed, daring, the utilisation of violence and an ability to cultivate powerful friends in corrupt regimes and manipulate the international financial sector and the underworld. This is the inside story of how one man built a €1 billion criminal empire.

The birth of master criminal

Christy Kinahan is a paradox. Unlike other men who become involved in crime, he did not do so out of financial necessity or lack of opportunity. He became a criminal to obtain power and wealth. He is often assumed to be Irish but he’s British and travels on a British passport. He was born on March 23, 1957, in Ealing, west London, to Irish Catholic immigrants, Mary and Daniel Kinahan. His father was a labourer and the family moved back to Ireland — to Charleville Road in Phibsboro, a leafy Dublin suburb — when he was a boy.

You can hear English and Irish influences in his accent. He says “God bless” instead of goodbye. He’s trim, relatively young-looking, always immaculately groomed and has the demeanour of a mild-mannered man. He speaks in low tones — something that makes his interactions with those he wants to intimidate especially menacing. “I’m not looking for a fight with you,” he said in one voicemail played to me by a victim. “I thought you didn’t want to have an argument with me. So you see yourself as a mouse. Then that’s up to you. Keep ➤

Christy Kinahan in 1987. He was sentenced to six years in prison that year for drug possession



FEW KNEW THAT KINAHAN WAS RECRUITED AS AN INFORMER IN THE 1990S. HE PLAYED BOTH SIDES OF THE LAW

your energy levels up. Goodbye.” He’s also prone to violent outbursts.

He was educated by the Christian Brothers religious order at St Declan’s College on the Navan Road in Dublin, but was expelled for troublemaking. He next attended O’Connell School on North Richmond Street, where James Joyce was educated, and failed his leaving certificate (the equivalent of A-levels), though he passed English and geography.

He married his first wife, Jean Boylan, in St Catherine’s Church on Meath Street in November 1976. The couple had their first child, Daniel, the following June. Christopher Jr was born in September 1980.

The gardai, Ireland’s police force, first encountered him in the late 1970s when he was arrested for trying to steal a car. Kinahan quickly became involved in serious crime and was eventually caught with heroin during a raid on an apartment in Fairview, on Dublin’s northside, in September 1986. The following year he was sentenced to six years in prison and was released in March 1992 — but it wasn’t long before he was in trouble again.

Kinahan is a tactical thinker, a trait he honed in judo lessons in his teens. He quickly learnt how to play people on both sides of the law. Few outside the security and intelligence division of garda headquarters are aware that he became an informer in the 1990s. He was drawn into the role after being arrested for possession of drugs, providing the Garda National Drugs Unit (GNDU) with information on Dublin’s burgeoning Ecstasy trade that led to the arrest of his rivals. “Christy was very strategic in the information he provided,” one detective says.

Soon he was playing cat and mouse with the law. After being arrested for carrying stolen traveller’s cheques worth £16,000 in June 1993, he jumped bail and fled to Amsterdam. There he was caught by Dutch police with Ecstasy, cocaine and weapons — an episode that prompted the collapse of

his marriage to Jean. He was sentenced to four years’ prison in the Netherlands but was released after one. He was recaptured by the Irish authorities in October 1997, when he returned to Ireland to attend his father’s funeral, and was jailed for four years for the stolen cheques. By then he was an accomplished drug trafficker, supplying large shipments of cannabis, cocaine and Ecstasy to the Irish and British markets.

He was held on the maximum security wing at Portlaoise Prison alongside members of the IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). He avoided the IRA, who often murdered drug dealers, and never got involved in inter-gang conflicts. One former IRA prisoner recalls his calm demeanour when a riot broke out: “The criminals got together and started attacking the wardens. I remember watching Kinahan standing among them. There was hair and skin flying, chairs being flung around. Kinahan never flinched. He just stood there before he walked back to his cell. He always had this air about him. Every action he took was a strategy. He wasn’t intimidated. He struck me as a man who could read any situation.”

In later years Kinahan would forge alliances on both sides of the sectarian divide — with the INLA, whose members acted as enforcers for the cartel, but also the Ulster Volunteer Force, loyalist paramilitaries, who bought his drugs.

A changed man with a business plan

Kinahan was freed from Portlaoise in March 2001; the prison authorities still describe him as a model prisoner. He emerged a man transformed. He had obtained an arts degree in jail and learnt to speak Spanish, French and Dutch. His accent became polished and cultured. He began wearing suits, read books by the billionaire investor and philanthropist George Soros and cultivated an image of worldly competence.

“He came out of prison with a business plan — he was determined to be the biggest

drug dealer in Ireland,” says Craig Turner, deputy director of the UK’s National Crime Agency (NCA). “He learnt different languages so he could deal directly with South American cartels. He wanted to cut out the middlemen.” Turner adds wryly: “If he wasn’t running an international cocaine racket, he could have been the head of ICI.”

He moved to the UK, to Surrey, where he incorporated several companies and ran everything from tanning salons to car dealerships between 2001 and 2006, while travelling back and forth from Spain, Cyprus, Holland and Belgium. Behind the businesslike exterior he had become a force within the underworld, supported by a small army of gunmen, advisers and money launderers. Some of his illicit activities — namely drug dealing and horse-race fixing — came to the attention of the City of London police in 2005. Three years later he was considered a priority target by the Serious Organised Crime Agency (Soca), the forerunner of the NCA.

He entered the criminal super league around 2006, by which time his organisation had relocated to the Costa del Sol in Spain, the base of numerous international crime gangs, where he could consolidate his power. The scale of his wealth soon reached dizzying heights, then estimated at €500 million. His modus operandi was simple: he bought drugs directly from right-wing paramilitary groups and cartels in Colombia and sold them on to gangs in Europe and further afield. He would offer them money-laundering services, but also protect them should they come under threat. The profits were laundered through front companies and investment schemes in offshore tax havens such as the Cayman Islands.

The police seemed powerless to stop him. In Belgium the authorities uncovered a number of Cypriot firms that Kinahan had used to invest in properties, including a casino in Antwerp. The Spanish authorities made similar discoveries. It was just the ►

tip of the iceberg. The rise of his cartel precipitated Operation Shovel in 2006, a multi-agency operation involving the Irish, British, Dutch, Spanish and Belgian police. The gang was placed under covert surveillance in Spain.

By this time Kinahan had been joined by his two eldest sons. Their mother, Jean, had sent them to live with their father in their late teens as she could no longer control them. They hadn't had much of a relationship with him up till then but knew his reputation. "Daniel felt he had to emulate him," says someone who knew the family. "When they arrived in Spain and saw his wealth, that put an end to any prospect of them living normal lives. Their mother would not have wanted this life for them."

In May 2010 Operation Shovel came to a head and 32 people were arrested, including Kinahan and his sons. They were remanded in custody by the Spanish for a short time but later released. Kinahan was extradited to Belgium to serve an outstanding sentence imposed years earlier for money laundering, but in 2013 he was once again free and joined his sons on the Costa. The failure to disband the cartel made them stronger, more agile and more dangerous.

The son with links to Tyson Fury

Throughout his life Kinahan has always lived by the rule that true power rests in the shadows. He has never given an interview. Few outside his inner circle have heard his voice but his eldest son, Daniel, 46, has chosen to ignore such rules. In 2012 he became involved in the world of professional boxing when he opened a gym in Marbella with Martin Macklin, the former world title holder nicknamed "Mack the Knife".

Broad, stocky and balding prematurely, Daniel assumed a front-of-house role in the business, later named MTK Global. In the space of a few years he became one of the most influential figures in the sport, brokering fights for the likes of the heavyweight champion Tyson Fury, who until recently made no secret of their friendship. "I'm just after getting off the phone with Daniel Kinahan," said Fury on Instagram in 2020. "He just informed me that the biggest fight in British boxing history has just been agreed. Get up there, my boy! Big shout-out, Dan — he got this done. Literally, over the line; two-fight deal: Tyson Fury v Anthony Joshua next year." The fight never took place, but it became clear that not everyone in the sport seemed to care that Daniel had been named in the Irish courts in 2018 as a drug trafficker.

"Daniel Kinahan is to boxing what Pablo Escobar was to football. It's personally driven but as time went on he had to take a step back from MTK. His name is now toxic in the sport," says Turner at the National Crime Agency, who likens Daniel to the



Daniel Kinahan, left, with the boxer Tyson Fury in Dubai before sanctions were imposed last year. Right: the Burj Al Arab, where Daniel held his wedding

East End villains of the 1960s who wanted to associate themselves with film stars. "It's a kudos thing, isn't it?"

If Daniel has the swagger of a street dealer, his younger brother Christopher Jr, 43, is the polar opposite. Those who have encountered him describe him as a silent and more discerning type. "When the Kinahan brothers lived with their mother in Dublin's inner city, Daniel was always the one getting into trouble," says one detective who encountered him. "When gardai would raid their mother's flat, Daniel would explode, shout, scream and hurl abuse. Christopher Jr was different: he was always polite. He would step aside during searches. He was more like his mother."

There are other children: Christy Kinahan has had multiple relationships and fathered at least eight children with four women. His offspring range in age from 46 to young teenagers. Three of them live unassuming lives in Dublin. Like him, the women in his life have been complex characters. He married a Dutch woman called Jacqueline Kallenbach in Surrey in October 2001 but divorced her in 2007. She went on to marry Louis Hagemann, a serial killer serving life for the murder of a former girlfriend and her children. Kallenbach died last year.

Christy Kinahan's current partner is Neslihan Yildirim, a 48-year-old from Turkey who has Dutch residency rights. The couple have three children, having apparently married in an Islamic ceremony.

Violence as a tool

Violence has always been a strategic tool for the Kinahans. By employing lethal force, the cartel has established dominance over rivals and enforced loyalty within its



"DANIEL KINAHAN IS TO BOXING WHAT PABLO ESCOBAR WAS TO FOOTBALL. HIS NAME IS NOW TOXIC IN THE SPORT"

own ranks. The first known murder victim of the cartel was Raymond Salinger, a 40-year-old man who was shot dead as he sipped a pint at a bar in south Dublin in January 2003. Salinger had returned to Dublin having fled in 1986 after Christy Kinahan accused him of setting him up to be arrested with the heroin consignment found at Fairview. Those who investigated the murder believe Kinahan waited 17 years to get his revenge.

In February 2016 the Kinahans' use of extreme violence brought them to the attention of the world when the cartel went to war with a rival outfit on the streets of Dublin. The feud had its roots in the murder of Gary Hutch, a young criminal who was shot dead in 2015 by a swimming pool near Fuengirola on the Costa del Sol. A hitman sent by Hutch had tried to kill Daniel near Marbella and instead repeatedly shot the boxer Jamie Moore — who survived — in a case of mistaken identity. The Hutch gang agreed to pay €200,000 to Christy after meeting him at Madrid Airport to settle the dispute. They even let Daniel kneecap another member of the Hutch gang as a mark of respect. When matters settled down, the cartel had Gary Hutch murdered anyway. ►

When Daniel issued more threats the Hutch gang attempted to kill him again, this time in Ireland, planning to make it look like an IRA assassination. The hit team arrived in a Ford Transit van at the back gate of the Regency Hotel on Dublin's northside — where Daniel was present at a boxing weigh-in — at around 2.20pm on February 5, 2016. A dissident republican called Kevin Murray and another gunman dressed as a woman entered the Regency arm in arm, in an attempt to pass off as a couple. They made their way to the ballroom, where the weigh-in was taking place, and opened fire.

In the mayhem Daniel escaped through an emergency door with the duo in pursuit. Luck was on his side — he ran to the left; his assailants turned right and lost him. By the time three other gunmen emerged from the van — dressed as gardai and each carrying an AK-47 — Daniel was gone, but they killed David Byrne, one of his friends, as he lay on the floor.

Three days later Hutch's uncle Eddie was shot dead at his home in Dublin. Eighteen people were murdered in the feud. The Kinahan cartel sent gunmen to kill anyone who knew the Hutch gang, which held sway in Dublin's north inner city. No one was safe. When they couldn't kill a target, they burnt out their homes and cars.

In April a gunman walked up to Michael Barr, a member of the New IRA (formerly the Real IRA), at the Sunset House pub in Dublin. Barr was shot dead at point-blank range on the basis he might have supplied the AK-47s used in the Regency attack. Barr's murder was a first: the Kinahans had never targeted the IRA before.

Innocent people were also shot dead. Among them Trevor O'Neill, a 42-year-old Dubliner who died in Mallorca in August 2016. He had said hello to a man he met outside a supermarket. The man was a member of the Hutch gang.

The move to Dubai

Kinahan and his two sons relocated to Dubai in late 2016 for strategic, security and survival reasons. The move was transformative for the cartel and enabled it to evolve further. In the desert city they made powerful friends among the ruling elites and security services.

"They are really good at networking," says John O'Driscoll, a now retired garda assistant commissioner who led a succession of operations against the cartel. "People in that world seem to trust them. There are several major crime organisations operating in Dubai but they seem to be the most popular of them all."

They set up companies in the free-trade zone and built new lives. They already knew how to operate in the Middle East as they had established connections with Iran and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, using the latter's underground hawala banking system to move money around the world.



Gunmen dressed as gardai enter the Regency Hotel in Dublin and open fire in retaliation for the murder of Gary Hutch, below



Hawala banking, which has existed for hundreds of years in the Middle East and Asia, involves handing cash to a person in one country and then having a colleague dispense the same sum elsewhere.

Hezbollah is believed to have generated hundreds of millions of dollars in commission through its arrangement with the Kinahans, which it has in turn used to finance terrorism in Lebanon and Syria.

The first evidence of the Kinahans' relationship with Iran and Hezbollah emerged later in 2016 when the cartel was found to have provided an apartment in Dublin for Naoufal Fassih, a Dutch fugitive of Moroccan origin. Fassih was hiding there under a pseudonym. The Dutch were seeking him in connection with the murder of Mohammad Reza Kolahi Samadi, a 56-year-old Iranian sentenced to death by Tehran. Samadi had stood accused of planting a bomb at the Islamic Republic party's headquarters in Tehran in 1981,

killing 73 people, and was living under an assumed name in the Netherlands when he was shot outside his home. Dutch intelligence later concluded that Iran was responsible for the murder but had subcontracted the killing to Hezbollah, who in turn sought the cartel's help.

Iran is not the only hostile state the Kinahans have engaged with. There is credible evidence to suggest the cartel engaged with Russia's intelligence services when based on the Costa del Sol.

In Dubai Christy Kinahan reinvented himself as the consultant Chris Vincent and took up residence in a spacious apartment at the City Walk complex in the salubrious Al Wasl district with his Turkish wife and their children, who attended an international school around the corner.

To outsiders and the intelligence services, the Kinahans appeared to have settled down. Daniel married a Dublin woman called Caoimhe Robinson — their wedding took place at the illustrious Burj Al Arab hotel. Among the attendees were notable figures such as Raffaele Imperiale of Italy's Camorra crime group, Ridouan Taghi, a Dutch-Moroccan gangster, Richard Vega, a Chilean cocaine smuggler, and Edin Gacanin, a member of the Balkan mafia known as the Tito and Dino Cartel.

Daniel and his wife lived on the Palm Jumeirah archipelago, a constellation of mansions built in the shape of a palm tree for the ultra-wealthy. Daniel, who had two adult children from previous relationships, fathered more children with his new wife, who spent her days mall shopping and sunbathing. He lavished her with gifts including two apartments overlooking the city's marina. Christopher Jr lived in similar surroundings. Diplomatic efforts by the Irish government to have them expelled from the UAE proved futile.

Christy the conspiracy theorist

The official narrative circulated among their affiliates was that Christy Kinahan wished to retire and had handed over the reins to Daniel, but this was a lie. The truth, according to multiple people I interviewed, was that Daniel seized control. He could no longer tolerate his father's susceptibility to fits of anger, possibly brought on by pressure and stress. He also detested his father's growing inclination towards conspiracy theories and his love of Donald Trump. Christy had begun using the social media accounts of his associates to post his views on politics and fake news. During the Covid pandemic, he became an anti-vax troll.

"Chris became more prone to outbursts of anger," says one insider. "He might well have been a calm and measured man in the past but those days were gone. They could not stand the sight of each other. Daniel walked into a business conference in Dubai once and walked straight out ►

when he saw his father. He has become an embarrassment to the boys.”

For his part, Kinahan viewed his eldest son with disdain. “He looks on Daniel as someone lacking in sophistication,” says the insider. “The sons talk with hard Dublin accents. He’s embarrassed by them.” Christy had always faced a unique problem with Daniel, who was himself prone to irrational behaviour, possibly caused by a mixture of stress and cocaine use.

Around 2018 Christy had set his sights on leaving Dubai and building a new life in Zimbabwe. This served two purposes: it would distance him from his sons, but it would also make him relevant to the cartel again by establishing a new mechanism to launder money and expand operations in a region where the authorities were easily corrupted. It was from a compound on Princess Heights in Harare that “Chris Vincent” launched a new chapter in the cartel’s development while his wife home-schooled the children.

The Zimbabwe connection

Zimbabwe is a sanctioned state. In recent years its artisan gold industry has become synonymous with money laundering by international crime syndicates. These smuggle hard cash into Zimbabwe, where it is used to buy gold from small miners. The

gold is melted down and recast to mask its origin and sold to traders in Dubai. The cartel also began smuggling euros and sterling in second-hand cars, which they shipped to Beira in Mozambique and Walvis Bay in Namibia, where it was converted into US dollars and used to buy gold. They laundered tens of millions in various currencies using the system.

Christy also began wholesaling contraband cigarettes to criminals in South Africa. The sums involved were vast by all accounts. The profits were transferred to Dubai using the hawala system.

But this was only part of the business. Christy also attempted to buy a small fleet of aircraft from the Egyptian military on the pretext that it would offer air ambulance services in central Africa. Under the name Christopher Vincent he attended aviation conferences and tried to assume control of Nyasa Air Charters, a tiny airline in Malawi, and Crescents and Crosses, a Singapore entity purporting to offer logistical services to aid agencies in Africa. It was all a ruse. Some of the aircraft and their parts were destined for Iran, to circumvent sanctions there. He also explored purchasing aircraft in Venezuela from Russians.

Intriguingly, Christy pulled out of various aircraft deals at the last minute on the grounds he could not raise the finance,

which raised suspicions among sections of the intelligence community. Some believed Daniel had cut him off from the cartel’s cash, but others came to suspect he might now be working as an asset for a western intelligence service interested in mapping out Iran’s procurement of controlled technology. Whatever happened, Christy returned permanently to Dubai in 2020.

The global laundry

The sheer diversity of the businesses the Kinahans control is astonishing. The cartel has investments in everything from property in Dubai, restaurants, gold, shipping and renewables in front companies in Europe, Asia, South America, Africa and the Middle East.

Ownership of these entities is controlled through complex trust funds and holding companies registered in the Cayman Islands, British Virgin Islands, the Isle of Man, Dubai and Mauritius. Many of the businesses are run by “clean skin” frontmen on their behalf — among them, people from the Emirates, Hong Kong, Switzerland and Zimbabwe. They also invested in crypto.

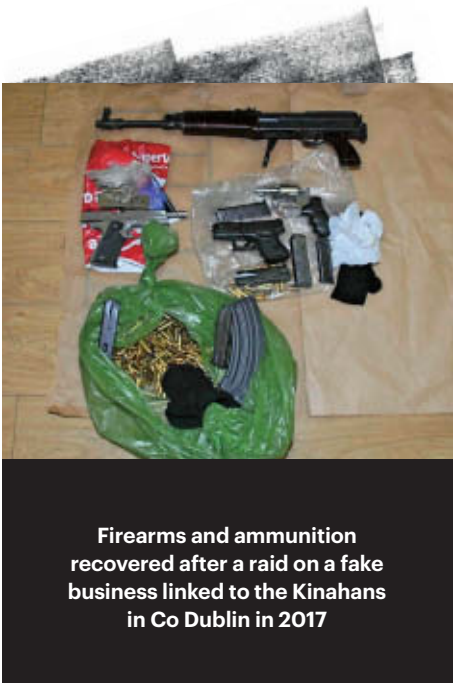
A financial adviser based in Bangkok whom I interviewed earlier this year said he was asked to invest £200 million held in Hong Kong, which represented

the laundered proceeds of property investments. The cartel — which dealt with him through a Swiss or Austrian middleman based in southeast Asia — initially approached him to invest £60 million in equities, bonds and funds that would be purchased and held through platforms in offshore tax havens. The figure soon ballooned. “Everything was to be administered by an accountant based in Hong Kong. I was essentially to be Kinahan’s investment adviser but only his accountant would be able to execute transactions,” said the adviser, who used the pseudonym Opel.

Opel explored investing in art, at one stage suggesting covertly trying to purchase a piece by Yayoi Kusama, the Japanese sculptor and installation artist. There was talk of another covert investment in a Banksy artwork. The conspiracy fell apart in 2022 when the Biden administration sanctioned the cartel and its leadership. The Kinahans were no longer just criminals but a threat to the world order through their financial support for Iranian-backed terrorism. The cartel now had the character traits of a narco-terrorist organisation.

The net closes in

After the US announced the bounties on the heads of Christy, Daniel and Christopher Jr, the men initially left their



Firearms and ammunition recovered after a raid on a fake business linked to the Kinahans in Co Dublin in 2017

homes in Dubai and went underground, travelling between Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Oman until they were assured of their safety by the local elites they had corrupted. The UAE announced it had frozen their assets, though it is difficult to assess what action was taken. There are diverging views on whether the cartel will survive the

international effort to disband it and bring its leaders to justice.

“The cartel is going to implode,” says the garda commissioner Drew Harris. “Their overall stock value has diminished. There are literally hundreds of law enforcement officers working on this.” Harris is urging members of the gang to “be pragmatic”, co-operate with the US and claim the bounties on offer. Right now, investigators are targeting those who manage the cartel’s vast wealth. “Not all of them are known to us,” Harris says. “A lot of the conversations with the police from Dubai are all about money flows and the laundering of money.”

Meanwhile the Kinahans are directing their empire from the desert city. Christy is once again working as a business consultant when time permits, taking his children to school each morning while his sons run the other aspects of the firm. Daniel oversees drug trafficking; Christopher Jr manages the legitimate investments.

Their fate may now be dependent on how long they can continue to pay bribes to their benefactors in the UAE. They could be murdered by their associates. Or they may relocate to somewhere like Russia to avoid extradition to the West. For now, the world’s most wanted family appear untouchable, so long as their presence in Dubai doesn’t become too much of an embarrassment ■

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