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IRA Arms Are Likely Stockpiled, Ready for Destruction

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Decommissioning

The Provisional IRA in its statement yesterday pledges to 'verifiably put its arms beyond use in a way which will further enhance public confidence and to conclude this as quickly as possible'. Given the size and dispersed nature of the IRA's arsenal, this task will likely prove a logistical challenge that will take at least several weeks to complete.

Over the last four decades, the IRA has taken delivery of a considerable number of consignments of weapons for its armed campaign. The main sources of IRA armament have traditionally been from republican sympathisers in the US and from other anti-establishment and terrorist sources in Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East including Libya and Lebanon.

A number of notable shipments of arms cargos, including the Marita Ann in 1984 – intercepted by the Irish Naval Service – and the Eksund in 1987 were seized by international authorities. These shipments, originating in the US and Libya, included thousands of small-arms including automatic pistols, assault rifles, medium and heavy machine guns – capable of taking down light aircraft and helicopters – along with at least one surface to air missile system. The range of weapons seized – encompassing the full spectrum of arms from assault weapons to light artillery - give some indication as to the possible full extent of the IRA's weapons inventory. Given that it is believed that at least three such shipments of arms successfully reached the IRA during the period 1985-1987, their inventory of weapons, towards the end of the 1980s was significant.

In addition to such weapons, the IRA is believed to possess approximately three tonnes of Semtex and a large quantity of detonators and home-made or improvised weapons such as the Mark 10 and Mark 17 mortar.

Unlike conventional armies however – motivated by a desire to deny the police and intelligence services any concrete evidence of the extent or whereabouts of their illegal arms dumps - the IRA did not keep a centralised written inventory of its weapons and ammunition. The location and contents of most IRA weapons dumps were committed to the memory of local active service units (ASUs) who in turn answered to the IRA's quartermaster. It is believed that the vast majority of these weapons caches – kept small and dispersed – are located in the Republic of Ireland.

Garda sources along with some republicans express the common view that not all of these weapons can now be traced. Many have been simply lost as older republican sympathisers died, bringing with them to the grave the secret of the location of some of the weapons. Some ASU members also have difficulty pinpointing the exact location of weapons hides through the limitations imposed on memory when disposing of weapons - often after dark and in stressful circumstances. Indeed, this failure of memory was a tragic feature of recent attempts to locate the bodies of those who were murdered and 'disappeared' during the troubles. Other weapons may also have been sequestered to new locations by dissident republicans – prominent among whom is a former IRA quartermaster.

With all of these factors in mind, a significant element of yesterday's IRA statement includes the sentence 'All IRA units have been ordered to dump arms'. This suggests that the IRA may have begun the process of assembling whatever remains of their dispersed stock of arms to pre-selected centralised sites for the purposes of disposal. Since the IRA officially ceased its activities at 4pm yesterday, it is likely that this work may already have taken place. How, for example, would it look if a supposedly disbanded ASU was intercepted en route to a decommissioning point in the coming days with a car-load of AK-47s or Semtex?

This being the case, the work of decommissioning would be greatly accelerated. The manner in which the weapons will be disposed of remains unclear. The formula of words around their disposal – to verifiably put its arms beyond use – does not explicitly imply outright destruction. Rather it suggests that the weapons will be stripped down to their constituent parts and fouled or compromised in some fashion. Most experts believe that the weapons will be disassembled and buried in concrete – with firing mechanisms and barrels buried separately. The stocks of Semtex could be disposed of safely and discreetly by burning – with one Kilo of Semtex taking approximately 45 seconds to burn.

The IRA statement emphasizes that it will conduct this process 'in a way which will further enhance confidence and to conclude this as quickly as possible'. Presumably, this means that the decommissioning process will involve not just the IICD and oversight by individuals such as General John de Chastelain but will also include the invitation of 'two independent witnesses from the Protestant and Catholic churches to testify to this'. The immediate test for the decommissioning process will be to expedite this procedure as quickly as possible and in the process obtain the services of two very credible church representatives. In the absence of photographic evidence of decommissioning and a clear inventory of arms – despite the presence of prominent churchmen – faith in the decommissioning process may yet pose quite a challenge for the more cynical in Irish and British society.