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Meeting the loyalist who had 'no problem killing Catholics'

By Andrea McKernon

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Andrea McKernon recalls a chilling meeting with Ihab Shoukri during a loyalist feud in 2002

Ihab Shoukri would kill Catholics without compunction telling me once he had "no problem killing Catholics".

His assertion was made during his fledgling days when he emerged as leader of the UDA's north Belfast 'brigade', after his 'brigadier' brother Andre was jailed.

He took over the reins in 2002 when the faction based in the Westland housing estate was in a struggle for supremacy with Johnny Adair.

I met the late 'brigadier' in a house in the loyalist estate in the midst of the turmoil.

The 1980s development is located between the Cavehill and Cliftonville roads.

About 20 of his associates were holed up in the house, including the late Eddie McClean, a veteran Shore Road loyalist.

The house was buzzing as the occupants within had just returned from a court hearing regarding Andre Shoukri.

They were walking from room to room, none seemed to have any work to go to and they were settled in the house, appearing to feel safe in numbers.

These were the faces seen many times accompanying one or two of the brothers to their many court and bail appearances.

I had been told the address of the house which was accessed through a back door, down steps and into a kitchen.

Ihab was seated at the table drinking coffee.

He had no real experience with the media and his responses to questions early in the interview were mostly guarded.

The Westland UDA boss seemed to be in good spirits and appeared to be enjoying their notoriety.

Jokes were made about Ihab's good looks and he assured me that he was the good-looking one between he and Andre.

I was asked if I wanted a coffee made by one of the men but I declined.

Ihab answered a few questions about his background.

He was a former pupil of Lagan College taking A-Levels.

This was the first surprise as it was the first integrated school in Northern Ireland designed to forge links between both communities.

His father Sam had been a sailor from Egypt and when the young Thab left school he had joined the Northern Ireland civil service.

But the unremarkable background made what he was about to say about Catholics all the more chilling.

I had asked him why young men like Daniel McColgan, murdered as he went to work in Rathcoole postal sorting office, and Gavin Brett, a Protestant 19-year-old gunned down as he spoke to his Catholic friends, were being killed as tensions within loyalism ignited.

"Well Johnny Adair has been running round killing Catholics," he said.

"Now don't get me wrong, I've no problem killing Catholics but the problem is every time Johnny Adair kills a Catholic, three or four of my men are off the streets."

His blatant sectarianism was raw. Killing Catholics was a means to an end in the game for top dog in the UDA.

Six years later, the top loyalist and older brother of Andre Shoukri would be dead.

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