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MOBILIZATION TO VIOLENCE (TERRORISM) RESEARCH

key findings

Canada

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PREFACE

Radicalization to violence and mobilization to engage in terrorist activities are complex processes. Along with many scholars¹, experts, journalists, politicians and members of the general public, intelligence analysts of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS or the Service) have been examining these issues for the past several years. In light of the terrorist attacks in Ottawa and Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu in 2014 and the waves of foreign fighters who left Canada for Syria and Iraq, the Service updated and enhanced its analysis and understanding of the process of escalation to terrorism and al-Qaeda/Daesh-inspired violence.

In this document, the Service will outline selected findings from research it has conducted over the past three years. The purpose of this document is not to answer questions such as what are the causes of terrorism and radicalization and how these phenomena can be prevented. Although these questions are important, this document is intended as an analysis of the process of mobilization to terrorist activity. It explores not *why* a person becomes radicalized, but rather *how* the person mobilizes to engage in terrorism.

By providing IMV's unique analytical expertise, the Service is contributing to the advancement of academic knowledge on the threats posed by individuals seeking to commit an attack in Canada or by extremist travellers. This type of collaboration is an excellent example of how the Service is working to raise public understanding of its role in protecting Canada's national security interests.

—Michael Peirce
Assistant Director Intelligence

¹ The findings cited in this research note are not meant to be exhaustive of the field, but rather highlight some of the research that has shaped the thinking of CSIS analysts.

INTRODUCTION

Not all extremists progress from words to deeds². Many people can espouse extremist ideas but never undertake extremist activities. Intelligence and law enforcement agencies grapple with the issue of how to determine whether a person has both the intent and the capability to physically transition from thought to action or to mobilize to violence.

Mobilization to violence indicators, framed as an evidence-based approach, help to differentiate the “talker” from the “walker”. They cover a wide range of activities and behaviours. Broadly speaking, they address travel preparations for extremist purposes, changes in training and physical fitness routines, financial preparations, indicators of concealment or deceit, as well as final preparations and getting affairs in order behaviours.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RADICALIZATION AND MOBILIZATION TO VIOLENCE

Radicalization and mobilization are distinct but often intertwined processes³, and the relationship between them is unique to each individual. Radicalization is a highly individualized process through which a person becomes convinced that violence is a legitimate (and eventually individually obligated) means to advance their ideological cause or beliefs. It is influenced by factors such as personal history, peer pressure, grievances, charismatic ideologues and international events.

The mobilization process consists of concrete and observable actions an individual engages in while preparing to conduct a terrorism offence. This includes efforts to build their capacity/abilities, overcome financial obstacles and take tangible preparatory steps to action.

Mobilization is the process by which a radicalized individual moves from an extremist intent to preparatory steps to engage in terrorist activity such as an attack, travel for extremist purposes or facilitating

² For an academic example of a similar finding, see James Khalil, “Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous: How to Place the Key Disjuncture Between Attitudes and Behaviors at the Heart of Our Research into Political Violence,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37:2 (2014) 198–211.

³ Manni Crone makes the argument that extremist ideology is not necessarily a precondition for violence and also highlights that extremist groups attract people for different reasons: some are attracted by ideology, but others are drawn to violence and action. Manni Crone, “Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body,” *International Affairs*, 92:3 (2016) 587–604.

the terrorist activity of someone else. The mobilization process consists of a notable shift in the pattern of behaviour that a person exhibits in their daily life⁴.

These two processes—radicalization and mobilization to violence—are not linear. In other words, the course of an individual’s radicalization or mobilization can start, slow, accelerate or even stop⁵ based on a multitude of factors.

MOBILIZATION TO VIOLENCE (TERRORISM) RESEARCH⁶

A large body of academic and intelligence literature has demonstrated that there is no single terrorist profile and that one cannot detect the next terrorist by looking at characteristics such as age, gender or socio-economic background. Instead, Service analysts look for an individual’s specific threat-related activities in order to assess not only the intent but also the capability, preparation and planning. Ultimately, Service analysts aim to develop a set of truly diagnostic indicators⁷ that can be used to assess whether someone is mobilizing to violence.

For example, in an attack planning scenario, indicators of mobilization to violence may include purchasing supplies, reconnoitering a target or recording a martyrdom video. It is important to note that a low-tech terrorist attack may require nothing more than a knife or a car. This type of attack is especially difficult to anticipate, but indicators are often present, even in the simplest of terrorist attacks.

A person preparing to mobilize to violence may also wish to conceal their activities from authorities or from the people around them. In that case, indicators of concealment and deceit could appear. For example, the person may use software to encrypt their communications, invent a cover story to justify their departure from Canada or create an alter ego on social media.

Indicators of mobilization to violence must be used in combination and in context; they help refine the intent and capability of an extremist individual.

⁴ For other studies on the diversity of behaviors of individuals involved in terrorism, see for example John Horgan, Neil Shortland, Suzette Abbasciano and Shaun Walsh, “Actions Speak Louder than Words: A Behavioral Analysis of 183 Individuals Convicted for Terrorist Offenses in the United States from 1995 to 2012,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 2016.

⁵ For an analysis on how individuals disengage from terrorist activity, see Mary Beth Altier, Emma Leonard Boyle, Neil D. Shortland and John G. Horgan, “Why They Leave: An Analysis of Terrorist Disengagement Events from Eighty-Seven Autobiographical Accounts,” *Security Studies*, 26:2 (2017) 305–332.

⁶ CSIS defines a mobilizer as someone who travelled for extremist purposes, conducted a terrorist attack or plotted an attack, or facilitated these activities.

⁷ “Indicators are a classic technique used to provide early warning of some future event or validate what is being observed.” Richards J. Heuer Jr. and Randolph H. Pherson, *Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis*, Second Edition (Thousand Oaks, California: CQ Press, an imprint of SAGE publications, 2015), p. 135. Diagnostic indicators are indicators that are most often present in the lead up to successful mobilization to violence.

CANADIAN MOBILIZATION TRENDS

The following strategic findings are based on the review of approximately 100 individuals who mobilized to violence in Canada. While these individuals engaged in a variety of activities such as travel, attack plots or facilitation, the large majority of Canadian mobilizers included in the research are individuals who travelled overseas for extremist purposes, such as joining Daesh.

SPEED OF MOBILIZATION TO VIOLENCE

It is often said that the time between radicalization and escalation to terrorist action is becoming shorter and that little time elapses between the decision to act and the act itself (this phenomena is often described as “flash to bang” or “fast-track radicalization to violence”).

The speed of mobilization is calculated based on the number of days between the end of mobilization and the date of the first observed indicator. If an extremist traveller left Canada for Syria on March 15, bought the plane ticket on February 15 and applied for a passport on January 15, mobilization took two months.

The Service’s analysis showed that the speed of mobilization to violence takes an average of 12 months⁸. In other words, in Canada, cases of spontaneous mobilization (five days or fewer) exist but are rare.

The first indicator of mobilization to be observed is often a change in the individual’s physical training routine. It is followed by the financial activities necessary to mobilize, such as maxing out a credit card or putting personal belongings up for sale in order to raise money for the intended activity. In some instances, it includes getting rid of personal belongings prior to an attack or travel attempt. As the individual’s mobilization progresses, their related activities become more focused. In the final months, the indicators relate to getting personal affairs in order (such as repaying debts, writing wills or giving away worldly possessions) and activities that are vital to the success of the mobilization (such as buying a plane ticket).

⁸ For similar academic studies on measuring radicalization/mobilization timelines, see for example: Jytte Klausen, A Behavioral Study of the Radicalization Trajectories of American “Homegrown” Al Qaeda-Inspired Terrorist Offenders (publicly available through the Office of Justice Programs, National Criminal Justice Reference Service), November 2016; and Paul Gill, John Horgan, Emily Corner and James Silver, “Indicators of Lone Actor Violent Events: The Problems of Low Base Rates and Long Observational Periods,” *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 3:3-4 (2016) 165–173.

The Service’s research has shown that indicators do tend to appear in clusters and follow a logical sequence of progression, but this process is highly individualized, meaning that what is logical and sequential for one person may not necessarily be the case for another person⁹. Indicators of mobilization must also be considered in an extremist context. Without a clear intent to engage in terrorist activity, behaviours such as plane ticket purchases or writing a will do not indicate mobilization to violence.

That being said, the speed of mobilization varies depending on the age of the individual. The Service’s analysis found that young adults (under 21 years of age) and minors mobilize more quickly than adults. The mobilization process for youth, especially young travellers, is a relatively minimalist endeavour. In extreme cases, it requires nothing but a passport, a plane ticket and a cover story for the travel. Young adults and minors generally have fewer obstacles to overcome in their process of mobilization and they also tend to mobilize to violence in groups, which can also help them overcome any existing obstacles quickly by pooling resources and expertise.

YOUTH, FEMALE AND GROUP MOBILIZATION

The Service’s findings also show that 80% of the youth and young adults under the age of 20 mobilize in groups of two or more. Young women in particular rarely mobilize alone¹⁰. Furthermore, friendships and romantic attachments also seem to be extremely important in their mobilization process.

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Minors and young adults also tend to exhibit behaviours typical of this age bracket (selling off a video game console as opposed to a car for an adult) and face special obstacles during mobilization, including inaccessible passports or limited financial means due to a lack of employment income or difficulties in obtaining a credit card or a loan. They must therefore devise solutions or ploys to overcome these obstacles and parental vigilance.

⁹ This finding is in contrast to some academic research on the subject. See, for example, Bart Schuurman and Quirine Eijkman, “Indicators of terrorist intent and capability: Tools for threat assessment,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 8:3 (2015) 215–231.
¹⁰ Some academic research has also found this to be true. See, for example, Audrey Alexander, *Cruel Intentions: female jihadis in America* (Washington: Program on Extremism, George Washington University, 2016).

The Service's analysis indicates that group mobilization has a tendency to be a faster process. Members of the group help each other overcome obstacles to mobilization: a person may give money to another member of the group and share items such as luggage or cell phones. It is also important to note that group mobilization can make it harder to individually spot indicators of mobilization to violence. In a group scenario, there may be individuals with various areas of expertise or resources, that when added together, the group as a whole possesses the capability to engage in terrorist activities, however each individual on their own does not.

The phenomenon of Western females mobilizing to violence (i.e. engaging in extremist travel, domestic or foreign attack plotting, or facilitation activities) is not new¹¹. In Canada, the Service's analysis found that female mobilizers constitute 20% of mobilizers, a proportion which is growing over time. Women and girls almost never acted alone, either mobilizing through a group, dyad or with notable third-party facilitation. Women mobilized for a full range of extremist intentions, not just to support male fighters.

OBSTACLES AND FLUIDITY OF PATHWAYS

Extremist travellers or plotters may encounter obstacles during their mobilization to violence. For example, an extremist may begin the mobilization process with the main goal of leaving Canada to join an overseas extremist group. However, during the mobilization, the person may have their passport seized by authorities. Thus deprived

Advanced research on mobilization to violence is part of the Government of Canada's and CSIS's efforts to cope with the threat posed by extremist prevented from travelling.

of their ability to travel legally, the extremist may decide to abandon their travel plans in favour of committing a terrorist attack on Canadian soil. Similarly, an extremist may embark on their mobilization intending to commit an attack in Canada, but may change their mind and decide to leave Canada for extremist purposes if they encounter obstacles or difficulties in building an explosive device. Such a change of direction may be swift and sudden, because the mobilizing individual becomes frustrated by the obstacles they encounter. This sudden change of course often gives a mobilization

¹¹ See, for instance, Carola Garcia-Calvo, 'There is no life without jihad and no jihad without hijrah': the jihadist mobilisation of women in Spain, 2014-16 (Zurich, Switzerland: Center for Security Studies, ETH Zürich, Elcano Royal Institute of International and Strategic Studies), ARI 34/2017, April 2017.

the appearance of spontaneity; it is referred to as "fluidity of pathways," where the term "pathways" refers to the preferred path of mobilization (travel, attack or facilitation).

IMPACT OF CRIMINALITY ON MOBILIZATION TO VIOLENCE

Many academic and research studies indicate that criminality is becoming a significant factor among terrorist mobilizers¹². According to the Service's analysis, 27% of Canadian mobilizers had criminal histories, a proportion that has not grown over time. Individuals with violent criminal histories were not found to be more likely to mobilize to terrorism. Moreover, the type of criminal offence did not correlate to a particular mobilization pathway (e.g., travel, domestic plotting or terrorist facilitation).

There was, on average, a four year gap between a mobilizer's last reported criminal activity and their mobilization to violence. This suggests that, within Canada, mobilizers make a clear transition between criminal and extremist activities. This finding stands in stark contrast to academic literature describing the extremist environment in Europe, where criminal and extremist activities are described as increasingly related—or even completely symbiotic.

BYSTANDERS AND MOBILIZATION TO VIOLENCE

The Service's research is partially derived from research which shows that many extremist mobilizers demonstrate signs of observable "leakage"¹³ and that other people—bystanders—generally knew about an individual's grievance or intent. Leakage is the detectable range of activities and behaviours that individuals who are mobilizing display to those around them. These activities are often unavoidable in the course of planning a terrorist attack or preparing for extremist travel. The Service's findings corroborate such academic findings: Canadian mobilizers demonstrated observable "leakage," which puts bystanders in a position to identify their impending mobilization to violence.

¹² See Robin Simcox, *We Will Conquer Your Rome: A Study of Islamic State Terror Plots in the West* (London: The Henry Jackson Society, Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism, 2015); Edwin Bakker, *Jihadist Terrorists in Europe: their characteristics and the circumstances in which they joined jihad: an exploratory study* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2006); Sam Mullins, "Parallels Between Crime and Terrorism: A Social Psychological Perspective," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32:9 (2009); Rajan Basra, Peter R. Neumann and Claudia Brunner, *Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus* (London: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2016).

¹³ Paul Gill, *Lone-Actor Terrorists: A Behavioural Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2015).

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH INTO MOBILIZATION TO VIOLENCE¹⁴

Indicators of mobilization to violence are not meant to serve as a predictive model of behaviour nor as a profiling template. Moreover, the specific number of indicators an extremist demonstrates is not an accurate means of gauging the likelihood that that individual will carry out an act of terrorism. In other words, the presence of one or more indicators is not a guarantee that an extremist will escalate to action. Instead, the presence of the indicators in the context of an extremist intent suggests that an individual may mobilize to violence and, depending on the indicators present, may also suggest a pathway (travel, facilitation or attack). The Service's analysis has also demonstrated that individuals can, and do, stop their mobilization process of their own volition. This means that even when some of the most diagnostic indicators are present, we must remain cognizant of the fact that the individual may not proceed to terrorist activity.

There is no magic number of indicators where mobilization to violence can be predicted with zero margin of error. Other factors, such as mental health or personal catalysts, must also be considered as they may slow or accelerate mobilization. Outside factors, peer-group pressure or propaganda may also shift the mobilization process.

There is no magic number of indicators where mobilization to violence can be predicted with zero margin of error.

Despite these limitations, the Service has a high level of confidence in the findings of this research and its utility in providing a better understanding of the distinction between radicalization and mobilization, as well as the mobilization to violence process. Each step of this analytical project has been peer-reviewed by methodologists within and outside the Service and structured analytical techniques were used to limit the impact of bias. This research highlights that indicators of mobilization to violence and terrorism are helpful in assessing behaviours and activities that may be precursors to terrorism.

¹⁴ The mandate of the Service only allows for the collection of information or intelligence respecting activities that may, on reasonable grounds, be suspected of constituting threats to the security of Canada. For that reason, while developing diagnostic indicators, analysts were not able to establish a true control group and compare the indicators with those of the general population (i.e., individuals who had travelled for work, pleasure, charitable reasons, etc. or provided financial or logistical assistance to others for legitimate and lawful purposes).

CONCLUSION

Terrorists rarely lack imagination in coming up with new ideas for achieving their ends, which means that indicators that are important today may not be important tomorrow. The selected research findings presented here will therefore need to evolve and require ongoing refinement. Indeed, the Service is undertaking, on an ongoing basis, continued research and analysis into antecedent behaviours of terrorist activity to better inform our investigations, partner agencies, the government and the public on current and emerging trends linked to terrorism and al-Qaeda /Daesh-inspired violence.

There is no simple, definitive response to issues related to radicalization to violence and mobilization to terrorism. By sharing the content of this document with the public, the Service hopes to contribute to the advancement of knowledge on the threats posed by individuals seeking to commit an attack in Canada or by extremist travellers.