Radicalization to violence and mobilization to engage in terrorist activities are complex processes. Along with many scholars, 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
INTRODUCTION

Not all extremists progress from words to deeds. 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 processes, 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 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 life.

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 stop based on a multitude of factors.

MOBILIZATION TO VIOLENCE (TERRORISM) RESEARCH

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 indicators 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.


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 months. 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).

The mobilization process for youth, especially young travellers, is a relatively minimalist undertaking. In extreme cases, it requires nothing but a passport, a plane ticket and a cover story.

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 jihadists 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 new. 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 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 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 mobilizers. 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” 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.

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.

11 See, for instance, Carola Garcia-Calvo, “There is no life without jihad and no jihad without hirah,” 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.


LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH INTO MOBILIZATION TO VIOLENCE

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.

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.

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.