

CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE STUDIES VANCOUVER

FREEDOM CONVOY 2022

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Briefing Note

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PURPOSE STATEMENT

This briefing note explores the characteristics of the Freedom Convoy movement as a Violent Transnational Social Movement (VTSM) and the movement's use of soft violence to normalize anti-normative, extremist rhetoric which arguably threatens the cohesion of Canadian society. The interests of the movement are evidently much wider than truck driver vaccines. The choice of visual symbols and flags used by large numbers of the protestors clearly indicate the width of identity based interests reflected by participants in the movement. The Freedom Convoy movement could potentially escalate into kinetic violence and further soft violence, as demonstrators have allegedly made verbal threats to violence, advocated for "civil war", and circulated hostile rhetoric against other identities that they deem threatens their own (Philips, 2022). Various overt extremist networks have gravitated towards the movement, using it as a means to legitimize their own cause whilst expanding their support base. Through the development of their own cultural cues and Mass Identity Manipulations (Moskalenko, 2021), they have arguably insinuated tribal bonds, entrenched their identity as superior, and encouraged other extremist groups to do the same. The segmentary, reticulate, transnational, and polycentric characteristics of the Freedom Convoy movement arguably present it as a VTSM that poses a threat to national security in ways that embolden extremist rhetoric and legitimize anti-normative views, which have the potential for engendering further discord and social and economic disruption. Further, the participants in the protests were overwhelmingly identity exclusive to one race and the organizers of the event are overwhelmingly associated with far right movements (Preston, 2022).

THE SECURITY PROBLEM

The Freedom Convoy movement has arguably morphed into a network of extremist segments that share common identitarian grievances whilst promoting a multitude of segmented beliefs and agendas. Various individuals and groups that have expressed extremist sentiments have reportedly gravitated towards the movement by presenting support and promising attendance following the establishment of the Freedom Convoy's GoFundMe page on January 14th (Zimonjic et al., 2022). Plans to hang politicians and vandalize Parliament prior to the arrival of the Freedom Convoy have been reported on the Freedom Convoy 2022 Facebook page (Cousins, 2022; Zimonjic et al., 2022). The movement continues to attract various extremists into a singular yet decentralized movement reflecting polycentricity, reticulation, segmentation, and increasing difficulty to contain (Cousins, 2022; Kelshall, 2019; Zimonjic et al., 2022).

The inclination to hostility, disruption, and extremism has spread across borders with parallel movements in Europe, Australia, and Israel (Freedom Convoy Europe, n.d.; Israel Convoy for Freedom 2022, n.d.; 2022 Official Convoy to Canberra, n.d.). In the days leading up to their arrival in Ottawa, the Freedom Convoy

movement allegedly sought to establish a transnational influence by rallying calls from truckers across Canada and the U.S. to participate in the movement, as well as stirring calls to replicate the U.S. Capitol insurrection (Cousins, 2022; McGregor, 2022). Australian supporters fundraised and initiated a convoy of their own, raising around 8,105,200 AUD with the contribution of 1.7K donors. Over the course of two days, the Freedom Convoy movement in Israel attracted 18.07K members to join (Israel Convoy for Freedom 2022, n.d.). CBC analysis of donors shows self-identified foreign donors coming from the US, Australia, England or Poland (Thompson & Rocha, 2022), demonstrating the transnational attractions of both monetary and ideational support that continue to amplify their perceived grievances and legitimize their extremist motivations. The heightened hostilities and social unrest may also increase the probability for counter-protests that could exacerbate polarization and violence.

The Freedom Convoy movement has reticulated support globally and across a spectrum of segmentary interests and demonstrates a rapid rate of uptake in extremist ideology and motivations. With many extremist networks voicing support and some starting their own convoy movements, various actors have served as a source of legitimacy and validation to each of their perceived grievances. With an additive effect of social media echo chambers and algorithmic proclivity, there has been rapidly increasing means to which they network and consolidate their agenda.

KEY EVENTS

1. On December 21st, 2021, the Freedom Convoy movement arguably departed from simply representing a trucker's protest of vaccine mandates into divisive, anti-normative, anti-democratic rhetoric. One of the organizers reportedly published its Memorandum of Understanding that called for the elected Federal government to resign from their positions if they do not adhere to the mandate's instructions, which included the repeal of all COVID-19 based restrictions and vaccine mandates. This rhetoric is undemocratic and promotes the normalization of anti-normative behaviour by threatening democratically elected officials who have signed Canada's science-based legislation regarding Covid-19 restrictions into law (Canada-unity, 2022b). This MOU was published weeks before the convoy.
2. On January 28th, 2022, leaders of two political parties either met with the participants and/or voiced support for the movement. This reflects normalization of anti-normative behaviour, anti-science rhetoric and potentially disrupts civil discourse, democracy, and the institutions that support those values. Established political party leadership involvement possibly strengthened the movement's case of setting a precedent for future anti-normative, anti-democratic and anti-social behaviour, while possibly providing legitimacy to the movement through the support of these mainstream political parties (Boisvert, 2022; Kelshall, 2019; O'Toole, 2022a; O'Toole, 2022b).
3. On January 29th, 2022, participants of the Freedom Convoy threatened the organizers of an event held in remembrance of the anniversary of the 2017 Quebec City Mosque shooting, resulting in its cancellation. The extent of the Convoy's escalation in soft-violence by the Islamophobic segment of the Convoy represents a clear departure in rhetoric away from the public mandate of the Convoy towards extremist, identity-based assertions of superiority and dominance. Moreover, this event creates a precedent for normalizing anti-normative behaviour and threatens Canada's social fabric by undermining Canada's pluralistic liberal values (Globe Staff and Wire Services, 2022).

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BACKGROUND

On January 15, 2022, the Federal Government of Canada instituted an industry-wide vaccine mandate for trucker's which was met in response by a "Freedom Convoy" of trucker's organized to depart from Vancouver, BC, on January 22, with the intention of traveling to Ottawa to protest the mandate (Meissner, 2022; Stelter, 2022). While this response may seem like a relatively peaceful protest to the vaccine mandate, the emergence of extremist symbology and violent online rhetoric consisting of participants accusing the federal government of supposed tyranny while exhibiting VTSM characteristics arguably point to the convoy posing a national security concern as a violent movement, which threatens the cohesion of Canadian societal fabric (Canadian Anti-Hate Network, 2022; LeBel, 2022; Stelter, 2022).

The movement's leadership has associations with extremist groups and figures with a GoFundMe page allegedly established by Tamara Lich, a western separatist from the Maverick party and a Yellow Vest Canada organizer from Medicine Hat (Preston 2022) (for more information on the Yellow Vest Canada movement, click here). Derek Harrison has also been promoting the convoy and is associated with the extremist group the Plaid Army who has allegedly expressed that he would like to see the movement emulate the Jan. 6 insurrection in the United States (Smith, 2022). Patrick King of Alberta and James Bauder have allegedly expressed anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, homophobic, White Supremacist, accelerationist, and anti-democratic views (Stelter, 2022; Winsor, 2022). Dave Steenberg previously posted a Soldiers of Odin Logo on his Tok-tok page and Patrick King, in a clip posted on Twitter, stated that the vaccine was created to depopulate the white race (Gilmore, 2022). Jason LaFace, an Ontario organizer, has posted online pictures of himself wearing an SOO (Soldiers of Odin) cap. The leadership structure can be seen to be polycentric, as there are a variety of regional leaders from different provinces that coalesce under the banner of the movement (Winsor, 2022).

The use of soft violence by the movement includes the display of anti-Semitic symbology, anti-government slogans, RWE symbology, and rhetoric from participants allegedly including threats to the organizers of an event held in remembrance of the anniversary of the January 29th Quebec City Mosque shooting, which resulted in the event being canceled (CBC, 2022; Globe Staff and Wire Services, 2022). This suggests that the Islamophobic segments were able to assert dominance of their identity over others. It might be asked whether the Freedom Convoy, while stating one cause as its motivation, is actually engaged in promoting multiple causes which are all relevant to identity welfare and wellbeing concerns. The trucker's vaccine mandate, it might be argued, could be a dog whistle given the veiled interest in identity-based conflict among the disparate segments via the ease of use of co-opted and hate symbols.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS/ CHARACTERISTICS OF A VTSM

The Freedom Convoy Movement is arguably a violent transnational social movement as it is an identity-exclusive movement that seeks "the preservation and maintenance of dominance, legitimacy, authority, and superiority of one identity group over another" (Kelshall, 2020) while being polycentric, reticulate, segmentary in nature, transnational in its support base, while using soft violence to achieve its goal of bringing about normative societal change in its favour (Kelshall, 2020). The convoy lacks centralized leadership and is instead constituted by a diffused network of various regional actors throughout Canada (Winsor, 2022). It is reticulated as the participating actors and groups can draw upon each other for support. The movement is segmentary in nature as the various RWE groups participating in the convoy

have multiple identity beliefs represented behind the public mandate of the convoy, which is to repeal all Canadian COVID-based restrictions. The convoy is transnational in its support base as it receives international funding and sympathy from groups and individuals around the world including American truckers who have joined the convoy and the emergence of parallel trucker convoy groups across social media in Australia, Israel and across Europe (2022 Official Convoy to Canberra, n.d.; Freedom Convoy Europe, n.d.; Israel Convoy for Freedom 2022, n.d.).

Groups promoting White Nationalism, anti-Semitism, anti-transgenderism, and Islamophobia have converged behind the thinly veiled public mandate (Canadian Anti-Hate Network, 2022; CBC News, 2022; Chartrand, 2019; Government of Canada n.d.; Leavitt et al., 2022; LeBel, 2022; Stelter, 2022; Zimonjic & Dhanraj & Hoff, 2022). The gathering of these groups with segmented interests throughout the convoy may enable RWE groups to increase their support base and potentially influence the messaging of the movement to encourage violence given the beliefs of these groups. The messaging of the movement and escalation to violence have evolved to include direct threats to the Muslim community as a candlelight vigil planned for remembrance of the anniversary of the Quebec City Mosque shooting was cancelled due to threats of violence from participants of the convoy (Globe Staff and Wire Service, 2022).

The movement is allegedly attempting to influence media narratives surrounding the Freedom Convoy by blockading the exit of CTV's offices (Canada-unity, 2022a). A participant of the Freedom Convoy stated that "the media started it, if they would report from the beginning the truth, then we wouldn't be in this position" (Canada-unity, 2022a) when asked why they were allegedly blockading CTV's offices. This behaviour distinguishes the movement as a VTSM as this is an attempt to preserve and maintain the "dominance, legitimacy, authority, and superiority" (Kelshall, 2021) of their identity over "the powerful elite" that controls mainstream media reporting. In this instance, the Freedom Convoy is using power by physically blockading the office seemingly with the intention of influencing CTV to alter their narrative in favour of the Freedom Convoy and the identitarian values expressed by its participants.

The Freedom Convoy movement has been allegedly associated with the use of soft violence to amplify their perceived grievances imposed by the vaccine mandate, under its veiled goals of advancing their extremist agenda while legitimizing the rhetoric of other extremist networks (Crabb, 2022; Kelshall, 2019; Reynolds, 2022). A blue truck reportedly attached a yellow star with "freedom" written at the top, which referenced the Jews forcibly wearing yellow stars as means of identifying themselves in the occupied countries (Crabb, 2022). An individual was seen to be pointing at a possibly self-created QR code that had swastikas embedded in it, possibly conflating anti-Semitic expressions with vaccine passports (Pho, 2022). The Freedom Convoy movement has arguably disenfranchised the Jewish community by coopting Jewish symbology which conflates pandemic restrictions with the suffering that the Jewish community experienced during the Holocaust (Crabb, 2022).

The slogans that have been associated with the January 6th Capitol riot such as "Liberty or Death" and "Don't Tread on Me" have been witnessed being used by Freedom Convoy participants (Mitsui, 2022), thus demonstrating commonality of sentiments. Two supporters were also photographed wearing a MAGA hat and a yellow Star of David, which documents the performance of anti-normative behaviour reflective of VTSMs (CBC News, 2022).

WHAT IS NOT KNOWN

The genuine intentions and full extent of the capabilities of the Freedom Convoy are not known. The propensity for the movement to escalate to violence remains to be seen, despite pleas by the alleged organizers to adhere to peaceful protest (Canada-unity, 2022). The intentions of the participants and their responses to counter-protestors and law-enforcement will dictate the movement's potential escalation to violence as the participants will likely consider counter-protestors and law-enforcement as a threat to the maintenance and preservation of their shared identity which they consider as being under threat. This may result in the movement doubling down on their beliefs and escalating to higher levels of kinetic violence as counter-protester and law-enforcement responses consecutively escalate.

The extent and scale of organization between the polycentric leaders and individuals across disparate participating groups is unclear, which complicates de-escalation by establishing a credible-commitment problem. The lack of strong central leadership which can enforce discipline among participants arguably prevents attempts to keep the movement non-violent and can arguably complicate de-escalation from occurring as commitments to de-escalation become uncredible given that the level of existing discipline and ability to enforce discipline across participating groups and individuals is unclear. It simply remains unclear if participants will obey commands from the organizers resulting in an unclear path to resolution. Even if groups and individuals deescalate in kinetic violence, it is likely that soft violence will continue. Similarly, the intentions and capabilities of counter-protest activity remain unclear.

NEXT STEPS

Given the polycentric, reticulate, and segmentary nature of the movement, law enforcement responses using counter-narrative techniques could possibly provide an effective means of mitigating the normalization of extremist rhetoric. As seen with the Yellow Vest Canada movement, traditional public safety responses to VTSMs have the potential to increase tribal bonds and identity affirmation which can heighten perceptions of being "othered" or attacked by the state (Kelshall et al., 2020). Enhanced law enforcement responses could be evaluated using the Counter-Violence Impact Assessment Grid, which allows decision-makers to identify possible interventions on VTSMs.

Advanced technological capabilities have enabled extremist networks to expand their support base while legitimizing their dominance in online and offline spaces. With previous bans on extremists' use of GoFundMe pages, the Freedom Convoy proponents have circulated interests on adjusting their GoFundMe page titles and other ways to which they present themselves to avoid censorship (Rightmyer, 2022; B diplomat, 2022). Many of the donors on GoFundMe have already been self-identifying to be public figures, such as Justin Trudeau, Sophie Trudeau and Theresa Tam (Thompson & Rocha, 2022), which might be interpreted as an attempt to delegitimize the identity of the "other" while empowering their own, and might also suggest that they fear the possible repercussions of being involved in the movement financially. The enhanced accessibility and autonomy to create their own language, code and representation may further insulate identities, while circumventing efforts to de-platform their online presence. Security analysts, researchers, and law enforcement could compile data, incorporate literature, and increase the understanding of the emergent patterns of the ways extremists present and garner

support for their cause. Cryptocurrencies have introduced more opportunities to bypass their concerns for online monitorization. As an alternate channel, Bitcoin donations have been set up and promoted in their social media circles (Lou, 2022), demonstrating a propensity for the networks to expand their monetary support base through increasingly diversified and accessible crowdfunding capabilities. With online communication providing means to expand support, law enforcement could develop ways to identify and contain the transactions that are promoted online to limit the fundraising activity and counteract a potential violent transnational social movement from growing (The Canadian Centre for Identity-Based Conflict, 2021).

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