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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Enduring Counterterrorism Challenge in Mozambique

EMILIA COLUMBO

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

Jessica White and Galen Lamphere- Englund

CO-CONVENERS, EXTREMISM AND
GAMING RESEARCH NETWORK

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FROM THE EDITOR

This month's feature article focuses on the challenge posed by the evolving Islamic State insurgency in Mozambique. Emilia Columbo writes: "The deployment of regional military and police forces to Cabo Delgado Province in northern Mozambique to assist the Mozambican government against what was then a growing jihadi insurgency nearly two years ago has introduced new dynamics into the conflict, expanding the insurgency's presence in the region and increasing the importance of the information space as each side works to persuade its constituencies that the conflict is proceeding in its favor." She assesses that the sustainability of security gains along the coast "will depend largely on the government's willingness to develop and implement a more balanced counterterrorism approach that addresses the underlying grievances driving this conflict."

Our interview is with Jessica White and Galen Lamphere-Englund, co-conveners of the Extremism and Gaming Research Network, which started a little over two years ago as a practitioner- and researcher-led initiative to try and unpack concerning developments in the online space.

Alexander Ritzmann writes that "the alleged plot against the German government by the Reichsbürger group Patriotic Union, whose key members were arrested on December 7, 2022, is best understood as a thwarted, possible early-stage terrorist plot, rather than a preempted imminent violent coup attempt. The Reichsbürger, who are comprised of different groups and networks, claim that the German state of today does not legally exist. Many Reichsbürger ascribe to a version of the anti-Semitic 'New World Order,' others believe in 'QAnon.'" He notes that "although the vast majority of Reichsbürger are neither considered violent nor right-wing extremists by German security agencies, the threat posed by a minority of violent and extremist Reichsbürger persists, with German security agencies continuing to thwart alleged violent activity linked to different Reichsbürger groups."

Francesco Marone examines how an ongoing hunger strike by the imprisoned insurrectionary anarchist terrorist Alfredo Cospito has amplified the threat in and beyond Italy posed by "a transnational extremist tendency that promotes 'self-organized' illegal and violent actions, even against people."

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Cover: In this image made from a video, Rwandan soldiers patrol in the village of Mute, in Cabo Delgado province, Mozambique on August 9, 2021. (Marc Hoogstejns/ AP Photo)

The Enduring Counterterrorism Challenge in Mozambique

By Emilia Columbo

The deployment of regional military and police forces to Cabo Delgado Province in northern Mozambique to assist the Mozambican government against what was then a growing jihadi insurgency nearly two years ago has introduced new dynamics into the conflict, expanding the insurgency's presence in the region and increasing the importance of the information space as each side works to persuade its constituencies that the conflict is proceeding in its favor. For the Mozambican government, showing progress on security and a return to normalcy in the province is of vital importance in order to accelerate the resumption of a \$20 billion liquefied natural gas project, an imperative all the more significant as ruling party elements begin preparing for the 2024 presidential election. The Islamic State-affiliated Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jamma'ah (ASWJ) insurgency—or as it is more commonly called locally, al-Shabaab—similarly must demonstrate that the increase in offensive operations did not significantly diminish its capabilities as it attempts to persuade civilians that it is a viable alternative to the state in northern Mozambique, an effort that the Islamic State regularly supports through its global media channels. The sustainability of security gains along the coast and the prospects for long-term stability, however, will depend largely on the government's willingness to develop and implement a more balanced counterterrorism approach that addresses the underlying grievances driving this conflict. Furthermore, as the cast of both domestic and foreign armed actors supporting the government grows, improved coordination and clearer definitions of what these actors' roles are and how they fit into the broader strategy will be essential to maximizing the impact of their contributions.

The conflict in northern Mozambique reached a turning point in March 2021 when the ASWJ insurgency launched its most audacious attack to date against the town of Palma, widely considered by locals and the international community alike as an island of relative security amid a spreading conflict. While the group achieved short-term material gains and a boost in notoriety as a real threat to the state, the first part of this article outlines how this escalation also proved to be the final straw that would push the Mozambican government into accepting foreign boots on the ground to bolster its own counterinsurgency efforts, turning this short-term win into a strategic error that presented the group with a more hostile

battlefield environment.

The second part of the article outlines how, after a period of reduced activity, the group last year began to rebound, leveraging its move into new areas of the province to find new opportunities to undermine the state, obtain new supply sources, and reconsider its relationship with the civilian population more broadly.

As the third part of the article details, these shifting dynamics on the ground have elevated the importance of the information space as both sides seek to persuade their constituencies that the conflict is progressing in their favor.

The fourth part of the article provides an outlook on the terrorist threat environment in Mozambique. Security improvements along the coast belie long-term counterterrorism challenges as the government struggles to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy that addresses the underlying social, economic, and political grievances driving this conflict. As displaced people return to their homes, the urgency for effective governance and a security strategy that goes beyond areas of highest economic value becomes more acute—a need that third parties are beginning to fill—further weakening the social contract between the state and the public and lending credence to insurgent propaganda about a government focused on self-enrichment and indifferent to the plight of the poor.

Part One: Strategic Error Introduces New Phase in Cabo Delgado Conflict

In retrospect, the March 2021 ASWJ attack on the northern Mozambique city of Palma¹ represented a poor strategic choice and overreach that was likely predicated on the assumption that as with other high-profile attacks, the consequences to the group would be minimal. In the months leading up to this event, the group had succeeded in controlling the primary paved north-south road as well as the key port town of Mocimboa da Praia, and was responsible for the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians.² Reports of a meager 200 fighters taking over the town of 70,000 that had been serving as a base for international liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects made headlines worldwide,³ directly impacting the international community for the first time as foreign

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*A Rwandan policeman stands by a road sign in Palma, Cabo Delgado province, Mozambique on August 15, 2021.
(Marc Hoogstejns/AP Photo)*

nationals suffered firsthand the effects of this attack.

In the short term, the attack on Palma provided the insurgents with supplies and a reputational boost. The town had just received a shipment of goods that the government and TotalEnergies had arranged and that the insurgents looted,⁴ and the Islamic State wasted little time in praising the operation in its media outlets.⁵ However, this attack also forced Maputo to come to terms with the growth and impact of this armed group and to accept foreign assistance, albeit on its own terms. In July 2021, just over four months after the Palma attack, roughly 1,000 Rwandan police and military deployed to hotspots along the Cabo Delgado coast through a bilateral arrangement,⁶ while the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission to Mozambique (SAMIM) consisting of roughly 2,000 troops⁷ from eight member states arrived the following month to provide security in other areas.⁸

The introduction of these foreign forces for the first time posed a serious threat to ASWJ, temporarily halting the momentum it had been building in the years prior. Rwandan forces, in collaboration with their Mozambican counterparts, launched operations against Palma first, driving out any remaining insurgents from the town before undertaking a two-pronged attack to retake Mocimboa da Praia,⁹ a key port town that the group had occupied for nearly two years.¹⁰ The operation to reclaim Mocimboa da Praia town began with joint Rwandan-Mozambican operations in the district of the same name in order to disrupt insurgent movements and access to Mocimboa da Praia town, an effort that the insurgents were unable to effectively counter given the Rwanda Defence Force's (RDF's) ability to resist insurgent ambushes. This extensive movement to Mocimboa da Praia culminated with an RDF-FADM^a attack on the

town itself, which lasted roughly three days as the insurgents put up enough resistance to facilitate the evacuation of their personnel, who ultimately retreated to remote, forested areas of the province where foreign forces—particularly the RDF, who had proved themselves a formidable challenge—were absent.¹¹

Having secured Mocimboa da Praia and Palma, these joint forces continued pushing toward strategically important towns in southern Mocimboa da Praia district, further restricting insurgent activity in an area that had served as its base.¹²

Follow-on operations by the RDF, SAMIM, and Mozambican forces resulted in the capture of insurgent bases and materiel in these areas,¹³ seemingly denying ASWJ a reliable safe haven and access to supplies. Indeed, a U.N. report published in February 2023 stated that after foreign intervention, the total number of fighters dropped, with the remaining group of hardened fighters splitting into small groups and returning to guerrilla warfare and attacking isolated villages and civilians.¹⁴

Part Two: The ASWJ Rebound

Evolving Strategic Approach to Targets and Civilians

ASWJ's area familiarity; ability to navigate gaps among Rwandan, SAMIM, and Mozambican forces; and ability to maintain access to supplies likely helped the group rebound and adapt, allowing it to carry on its fight albeit at a smaller scale than before foreign intervention. While the group retains a presence in its previous strongholds, the move into new geographic areas brought with it an opportunity to improve logistics, adjust its target set, and rebrand its relationship with civilians. The group's relationship with the Islamic State, which has evolved from being a part of the Islamic State-Central Africa Province to being its own wilayat,¹⁵ has helped to bolster the impact of the group's recovery in the media space, highlighting its successes to global audiences despite the presence

a FADM is the acronym for the Mozambique Defence Armed Forces.

of additional counterterrorism forces.

A Geographic Shift Provides Access to New Resources

The absence of a credible force to counter ASWJ beyond its coastal bases created space for the group to split up, relocate, and procure resources and recruits from areas that had experienced relative stability during the previous four years. Insurgent attacks in late 2021 and into 2022 spread southward, into Ancuabe and Balama districts¹⁶ and into neighboring Niassa Province, Nampula Province, and southern Tanzania,¹⁷ areas that had seen little to no activity prior and where local economies were still relatively intact. Furthermore, the presence of high numbers of displaced people struggling to find means of support and suffering from traumas at the hands of insurgents and government forces alike, provides the insurgents with a pool of vulnerable potential recruits seeking an income and stability. Indeed, some observers of this conflict speculated the group had hesitated to move into these areas previously in order to preserve a recruitment base.¹⁸ The relative stability of southern Cabo Delgado and neighboring provinces provides a stark contrast to the group's operating environment in its stronghold along Cabo Delgado's northern coastal areas, where years of violence and displacements—compounded by the effects of historic cyclones—had disrupted local commerce and agricultural activities, creating increasing logistical pressure on the group that its subsequent moves into previously undisturbed districts likely helped to alleviate.

Expanded Set of Economic Targets Provides Opportunities to Challenge the State

The presence of a more robust counterterrorism force pushed ASWJ to employ new tactics; split into smaller, more mobile units;¹⁹ and shift into areas that provided the group with economic targets that likely served to both send a message to the FRELIMO^b elite and underscore the group's messaging opposing government corruption. As the group divided into smaller units, it returned to guerrilla warfare, concentrating on attacking easy targets such as civilians and villages, rather than attempting to hold territory as it had previously.²⁰ Over time, these hit-and-run attacks began to evolve, disrupting the free movement of people and goods on primary roads in the new areas of operations,²¹ marking a continuation of its tactics in the northern part of the province. According to a February 2023 U.N. report, the group has been using surveillance drones as well as improvised explosive devices.²² This likely has enhanced its capabilities in light of a decreased force size, enabling it to challenge these superior forces from a distance.

The presence of multiple, foreign mining operations in the southern districts of Cabo Delgado have afforded ASWJ a new opportunity to strike the government economically, even on those occasions when its attacks are not directly targeting the mines themselves. Attacks against mining ventures in southern Mozambique began in June 2022,²³ forcing various mining interests to temporarily halt operations in response to growing insurgent activity. For example, Australian mining company Syrah Resources suspended operations at a major graphite mine in Balama in June

“The insurgents’ recent outreach to civilians marks another shift in the group’s strategy that suggests it may be seeking to more seriously demonstrate itself as a viable alternative to the state.”

2022 after attacks near a key road heightened the security risk to transporting the product,²⁴ while mounting insecurity around the mine itself led the company to briefly evacuate staff in November 2022.²⁵ Another Australian mining company that June ceased operations after two employees died in an attack on its graphite mining operations.²⁶ Gemfields, which owns a 75-percent stake in ruby mining in Ancuabe, has suspended its operations twice since June 2022 as a result of insurgent activity in the vicinity of its operations.²⁷

Nascent Attempts at Winning Hearts and Minds

The insurgents’ recent outreach to civilians marks another shift in the group’s strategy that suggests it may be seeking to more seriously demonstrate itself as a viable alternative to the state as well as secure a more reliable source of support and supplies in its current areas of operations. ASWJ fighters continued to attack villages and individuals throughout 2022, kidnapping civilians, burning personal property, and driving thousands of new displacements in southern Cabo Delgado, according to a U.N. report.²⁸ Indeed, images of these attacks have featured prominently in Islamic State media outlets and in local messaging²⁹ to intimidate civilians into remaining neutral if not outright supporting the group. However, in early 2023 local media and conflict observers reported a more concerted effort province-wide by ASWJ at building relations with civilians, portraying itself as an ally to the general public rather than an enemy. For example, ASWJ fighters in Mocimboa da Praia district contacted returnees to provide reassurances for their safety, according to Mozambican media.³⁰ The fighters purchased goods from locals at inflated prices, an approach they repeated at least twice in subsequent weeks in diverse parts of the province,³¹ suggesting a more global policy at play rather than a local leader’s initiative. Following an attack on Nairoto, Montepuez District in mid-February 2023 in which the insurgents destroyed or looted personal property,³² the group left behind letters in Arabic and local languages advising civilians it had taken only necessities and offering to repay Muslims who were impacted by the attack and encouraging Christians to convert to Islam to avoid paying a tax.³³

Part Three: The Growing Importance of the Information Space

An important driver of the ASWJ’s focus on economic targets and outreach to civilians is the need to reassure would-be supporters that the group is still intact after foreign intervention. The shifting winds of the conflict have made influence and the information space more relevant for insurgents and government officials and allies alike. Both sides need to project their versions of ground truth in an environment where reliable information is scarce and

b The Frente de Libertação de Mocambique (FRELIMO) originated as a nationalist movement fighting for independence from Portugal and has evolved into the dominant political party in Mozambique.

civilians are likely equally disenchanted with government forces and insurgents. A Mozambican civil society organization reported in February 2023 that the ASWJ had begun making a more concerted effort at developing counternarratives to the government's claims in its interactions with civilians,³⁴ an important shift for a group that has traditionally been conservative in its use of the media. It had initially released only a couple of low-quality videos decrying corruption within the FRELIMO government and presenting itself as a viable alternative.³⁵ In subsequent years, the group focused its messaging through community meetings,³⁶ the indoctrination of captives,³⁷ and graffiti.³⁸

The Islamic State has emerged as an important partner in this information war, promoting the group's operations through its global media channels. The Islamic State declared Mozambique its own wilayat in May 2022,³⁹ distinguishing it from Islamic State-Central Africa Province, a move that elevated the group in the Islamic State network. In the intervening months, videos and still images showing military supplies looted in attacks, burning villages, and captured or deceased members of local militia groups have frequently appeared on these channels, serving as force multipliers in portraying the group as a victor to a broader audience.⁴⁰

Conversely, for the government, showing progress on security and a return to normalcy in the province is of vital importance to accelerate the resumption of a \$20 billion liquified natural gas project led by TotalEnergies, an imperative all the more significant as ruling party elements begin preparing for the 2024 presidential election. Government officials and their allies have frequently highlighted the security gains their forces have made in reducing insurgent activity in Mocimboa da Praia and Palma districts and in preventing ASWJ from holding territory in these areas. For example, Cabo Delgado Governor Valige Tauabo⁴¹ in March 2022 noted the insurgents no longer held territory in the province, a sentiment echoed a year later by the RDF commander in Mocimboa da Praia who vowed the group would not hold the town again.⁴² Well-publicized visits to Palma and Mocimboa da Praia during the early part of 2023 by President Filipe Nyusi, TotalEnergies CEO Patrick Pouyanne,⁴³ and World Bank Vice President Victoria Kwakwa⁴⁴ further support the image that the government is creating of an area where security has been largely restored.

Part 4: Outlook

The progress foreign forces have made in reducing the insurgent presence in its former strongholds belie the long-term obstacles to achieving sustainable security gains in the region. The government's focus on a military solution comes at the expense of addressing the root causes of the conflict, while the growing presence of foreign forces risks disincentivizing the reforms required to ensure Mozambique's security forces are capable of eventually taking over security from these foreign partners. Absent major shifts in the current approach, Maputo and its partners will face three major sets of obstacles in achieving long-term counterterrorism gains.

1. Unresolved Grievances

First, the government's lack of attention to the underlying grievances that gave rise to this conflict risks undermining security gains as the state shows itself unable to respond to the growing need for state presence in areas that have been generally cleared of insurgent presence, such as Mocimboa da Praia and Palma towns. After five years of conflict, the decline in humanitarian conditions

and worsening economic conditions have likely fed into pre-existing grievances against the government, increasing the urgent need for a more balanced approach by the government that will also address the local drivers of conflict. A 2023 United Nations Development Program study of jihadism in Africa showed that 25 percent of former fighters interviewed for the study said they had joined a jihadi group because they lacked employment,⁴⁵ while another 40 percent said they joined out of a dire need for income.⁴⁶ Furthermore, nearly half of respondents noted they joined in reaction to a "trigger event," which for over 70 percent of that group involved a government abuse toward themselves or a loved one.⁴⁷

While former Mozambican fighters were not among those interviewed for the UNDP study, these same factors are almost certainly at play in Cabo Delgado as the focus on a military response to the conflict has come at the expense of addressing the underlying socioeconomic factors that facilitated the group's growth and continued operation. Indeed, the conditions detailed in the UNDP study as key drivers for recruitment into extremist groups, such as access to education, geographic isolation, and government distrust, are present and likely worsening in northern Mozambique. Years of widespread destruction of infrastructure and basic services, such as health and education, have driven hundreds of thousands of civilians from their homes.⁴⁸ Destruction and displacement have reduced employment opportunities and livelihoods, and increased dependence on humanitarian aid; as of February 2023, close to one million people had been displaced in northern Mozambique, with children representing over half of that number.⁴⁹ The head of the Confederation of Economic Associations of Mozambique (CTA) said in an interview in June 2022 that over 50,000 jobs had been lost and 5,000 companies impacted by terror attacks since October 2017.⁵⁰ Furthermore, disruptions in education during the past five years because insurgents have destroyed schools and displaced children⁵¹ who have been unable to resume their education risk worsening this economic marginalization over the long term, absent a more focused effort at improving governance in the area.

The need for a stronger government focus on economic development programs as part of its broader counterterrorism grows more acute in light of the shifting humanitarian situation. Demands for government services are growing as some displaced return to areas of relative stability even as others are displaced anew. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported that interviews with a small group of female returnees in Mocimboa da Praia revealed concerns over the lack of economic opportunities for returnees, a trend that in these areas had pushed young men to join civilian militias.⁵²

These findings are further supported by a study conducted by a Mozambican organization⁵³ evaluating the experience of displaced people returning to Mocimboa da Praia and Palma towns, which revealed widespread destruction of personal property and infrastructure and uneven efforts at rebuilding the local economy. While agriculture along the main road and near the coast is beginning to emerge, programs to provide seeds and other supports have fallen short, while the fishing industry continues to languish.⁵⁴ The disparities between the agriculture and fishing sectors threaten to reinforce pre-existing perceptions of a government that favors the Makonde ethnic group—who are prominent in agriculture and allied with the ruling FRELIMO party—over the Mwani fishermen, the coastal-based ethnic group from which the insurgency emerged.⁵⁵

2. Perceptions of Biased Security Provision

Secondly, disconnects between official government statements about security in the province and events taking place on the ground threatens to further sour government relations with civilians. The imbalance in the government's approach to the conflict extends to its military strategy, which appears to focus on key economic areas at the expense of less strategically important parts of the Cabo Delgado province, potentially reinforcing the insurgents' narrative that the FRELIMO government seeks to enrich itself at the expense of the poor. The initial Rwandan deployment to Palma and Mocimboa da Praia,⁵⁶ two towns vital to the LNG exploration project in the province, expanded in December 2022 to those mining areas of southern Cabo Delgado that had begun experiencing attacks that year.⁵⁷ While the February 2023⁵⁸ attacks in areas near the Rwandan deployment in southern Cabo Delgado⁵⁹ demonstrate the insurgents have become bolder in the face of a more robust security presence, the message that the deployment sends to those Cabo Delgado residents left with what they perceive as a less effective force is that the government's priority is not the general security of the population. This perception is likely further reinforced by government messages claiming improved security and stability in the province while segments of the population remain under attack. For example, in early February 2023, President Nyusi celebrated his birthday and hosted TotalEnergies CEO Patrick Pouyanné in Cabo Delgado, conveying an image of a stable and secure place.⁶⁰ However, during that same period, three groups of insurgents launched attacks in Mueda, Montapuez, and Meluco districts, causing civilian deaths and destruction of personal property.⁶¹

3. Overreliance on Foreign Partners for Security and Governance

Finally, foreign intervention itself, while it has helped improve security in parts of the province in the near term, risks over time contributing to a more complex counterterrorism environment absent better coordination among the growing number of actors in this space and a more robust effort from Maputo at developing and implementing a comprehensive counterterrorism approach. By February 2023, a bilateral Tanzanian police deployment had arrived in Cabo Delgado, joining the Rwandan, SAMIM, Mozambican security services, and civilian militias already in place. However, these multiple entities have struggled with communication and coordination,⁶² leaving gaps between their areas of responsibility that the insurgents can effectively exploit.

Rwanda's engagement in particular risks creating what a RAND study of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies calls "perverse incentives or dependencies,"⁶³ whereby the host government allows its foreign partner to carry the burden of rolling back the

insurgency for it, a trend that could potentially contribute to a further weakening of the social contract between the Mozambican government and the population of Cabo Delgado Province. The Rwandan force size in Cabo Delgado has already doubled since its initial deployment,⁶⁴ and its presence has expanded to cover areas of economic significance, giving the RDF a significantly greater role in security than it initially had. More recently, media reports suggest Rwandan private security companies are being hired to potentially expand the country's security presence in Cabo Delgado.

However, the Rwandan presence has extended beyond traditional security roles. Rwandan forces in Cabo Delgado have been applying the concept of *umuganda*, or community work, as part of its intervention in the province, a concept that calls on the RDF to work with locals to rebuild their communities in an effort to develop goodwill and improve stability in these areas of operation.⁶⁵

A Mozambican study of conditions in Palma and Mocimboa da Praia published in March 2023 showed Rwandan forces serving as mediators in disputes between civilians and Mozambican security services and stepping in where the state has failed to reassert its presence.⁶⁶ For example, the Rwandan military in February 2023 provided materials to school children in Palma and Mocimboa da Praia as they returned to schools that had been closed since 2020.⁶⁷ The Rwandan military also handed over to Mozambican authorities a newly constructed fish market in Mocimboa da Praia,⁶⁸ aiding an industry vital to that local economy, but that the government has largely neglected.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, despite the changes to the battlefield dynamic that foreign intervention introduced in 2021, the fundamental drivers of the trajectory⁶⁹ of this conflict remain largely intact. ASWJ retains the ability to procure supplies and recruits, and to operate with relative ease in areas where counterterrorism forces fail to communicate and coordinate their presence, enabling the group to continue destabilizing the region and disrupting daily life and commerce. The government, for its part, remains committed to a military solution to the conflict, bringing in multiple regional and bilateral partners to bolster this effort alongside Mozambican security forces and civilian militias. Trapped between these two forces are the growing number of civilians who are without access to health care, education, and employment, feeding the cycle that launched the conflict in the first place.

Breaking this cycle will require a genuine commitment among Mozambican elites to implement reforms that address the economic and social grievances at the heart of the conflict. As a RAND study of counterinsurgency practices has noted, the host government must want the win more than its foreign partners.⁷⁰ **CTC**

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A View from the CT Foxhole: Jessica White and Galen Lamphere-Englund, Co-Conveners, Extremism and Gaming Research Network

By Kristina Hummel and Madeleine Biscaichipy

Dr. Jessica White is a Senior Research Fellow in the Terrorism and Conflict group at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London. Her expertise encompasses countering terrorism and violent extremism policy and programming, with a focus on gender mainstreaming strategies. She has over a decade of experience, both as a researcher and as a security practitioner in the United States Navy. Jessica leads RUSI's Far-Right Extremism and Terrorism research program and is a co-founder of the Extremism and Gaming Research Network. She has published on a range of topics, including gender in security, far-right extremism, and terrorism in the media.

Galen Lamphere-Englund is a senior research and strategic communication consultant at the nexus of violent extremism, conflict, and tech issues. For over a decade, he has examined how various forms of radicalization can lead to violence and how to foster resilience to societal divides. Galen has led global research and programming in over 30 countries for United Nations agencies, governments, humanitarian agencies, think-tanks, and many of the largest tech platforms. Galen is a co-founder of the Extremism and Gaming Research Network and advises a range of clients on how to prevent the exploitation of online spaces and ICT by extremist and terrorist actors. He is also an Associate Fellow at RUSI.

CTC: Tell us about the Extremism and Gaming Research Network (EGRN). How did it come about, and what is its mission?

Lamphere-Englund: Jessica and I are co-founders and co-conveners of the Extremism and Gaming Research Network, which started a little over two years ago as a practitioner- and researcher-led initiative to try and unpack concerning developments we'd seen in the online space.

My background is as a conflict and terrorism researcher, and I'm also a gamer. I have been my entire life. I started to see those two worlds colliding more and more, and seeing significantly more violent extremist content in gaming spaces online. I sent around a note to a lot of other colleagues in this space and said, "Look, are you seeing something similar? Do you know anyone who's also working on this intersection?" That's when Jessica and I met, and we started putting together a wider group of practitioners to try and figure out: What kind of interventions can be programmed in this space? And on the research side, what kind of data do we currently have? And more importantly, what research gaps do we need to try and fill globally?

In the over two years since, we've put together a research agenda that we've gradually hacked away at through our different members, and we've managed to learn quite a bit about the scope of this problem, though there's still certainly more to be done. That's where we're at now. We now have monthly meetings with over 100

invitees and roughly 60 formal members, and [are] continuing to grow quite rapidly.

White: People were, in an ad hoc way, realizing that the online gaming space was something that needed to be discussed more, but we were the first group put together to really get to this issue of extremism and violent extremism in the online gaming space. We originally were largely research institutions and individuals working on researching violent extremism and terrorism and counterterrorism. As the network has grown, we've added in a wider variety of people. We've added in policymakers that are asking questions about how they can address extremism. We've added in people from the gaming industry who are also asking questions about what they should be doing. We've added in security practitioners who are concerned about this space. And we aim to make connections to other networks that are working on online gaming safety, including through bolstering research and 'safety by design'^a practice, etc.

CTC: Who are the partners in your network? Who does EGRN work with?

Lamphere-Englund: It's pretty wide. We are partners with a number of research institutions, so groups like the Royal United Services Institute, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, etc. We also work with a lot of university partners—the University of Sussex in the U.K., for example. We have a lot of PhD researchers who come and join us. Then we have the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT),^b which is an industry body. We are partnered with the Global Network on Extremism and Technology,^c which is also GIFCT-related but housed at King's College in London, and

a Editor's Note: "Safety by Design focuses on the ways technology companies can minimise online threats by anticipating, detecting and eliminating online harms before they occur." "Safety by Design (SbD)," World Economic Forum, n.d.

b Editor's Note: "The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) is an NGO designed to prevent terrorists and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms. Founded by Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube in 2017, the Forum was established to foster technical collaboration among member companies, advance relevant research, and share knowledge with smaller platforms." "About," Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, n.d.

c Editor's Note: "The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) is an academic research initiative backed by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), an independent but industry-funded initiative for better understanding, and counteracting, terrorist use of technology. GNET is convened and led by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), a globally renowned academic research centre based within the Department of War Studies at King's College London." "About," Global Network on Extremism and Technology, n.d.

Tech Against Terrorism.^d On the law enforcement side, we work with a kind of eclectic mix of people because it's based on interest. We have local beat cops who are designing 'cops versus kids' Esports initiatives¹ all the way up to informal partners who will come in from fusion cells and from national CT and intelligence centers as well. We span the gamut, as long as there is a genuine interest in exploring the space and developing solutions for it.

White: It's interesting to point out that the policymakers come along because they want to know what to do about legislating: What kind of considerations need to be made in relation to regulatory efforts and content moderation questions. The police and the intelligence services often come along because either, one, they're interested in knowing more about the harms and investigating how deep this issue of extremism in the online gaming space goes and what the legal and ethical parameters are around their intervention, if they're trying to investigate in that space. Or two, like Galen said, there are a lot of police departments that now use online gaming as a positive outreach tool to reach out to groups in the community to build that bond of trust through positive gameplay engagement or to use it as a positive mentorship tool to encourage behaviors—almost as a P/CVE [preventing/countering violent extremism] tool in a lot of cases.

CTC: As a starting point, can you describe how big gaming is? And who's participating in gaming?

Lamphere-Englund: Gaming is huge. It's colossal as a space. Right now, there are around three billion people who game across the world, so more than one in four humans are gamers. Now, that's a slightly misleading stat because that includes all of the mobile gamers who just play games on their phones. Generally speaking, in terms of our area of interest, we're more focused on games that have communicative abilities inside of them—online games that are multiplayer, generally speaking—so that's a bit of a smaller audience. We're still talking a massive swath of people across the world.

It's no longer a male-dominated space in terms of gamers themselves. When it comes to studios and game design, that's a different story. But about half the gamers in the world are women now, and increasingly they're everywhere, in every continent. About half the world's gamers are in the Asia Pacific region; that's probably the highest per capita in terms of where gamers are. But the fastest-growing audiences are in MENA [Middle East and North Africa] and Latin America at the moment.

Who participates in gaming? It's everyone really. Obviously, it's concentrated in terms of younger audiences. When we think about prime recruitment demographics for violent extremist organizations, terrorist groups, and armed groups globally, that core 14- to 24-year-old age range still constitutes one of the largest share of gamers.² There are a lot of older gamers now, too, but the majority are still in that slightly younger demographic.

White: Gaming is a huge industry. The value of the industry is more than other media—for example, movies and others you might think actually make more—but gaming makes more money than all of those.

Lamphere-Englund: \$200 billion last year in revenue. That's more than movies, TV, music, all of it. Gaming is incredibly lucrative and incredibly profitable.

CTC: Turning to the gamers themselves, what are the at-risk groups that you're really focusing on? We know that gaming can attract isolated individuals. And then there is the presence of online, often anonymous chat groups. How can the online chatting aspect impact gamers?

White: It's important to remember, as we are discussing the potential for extremism and violent extremism to be spreading in this space, that the majority of online gamers use it as a very positive engagement tool. People find positive communities in this space; there are gamer communities out there raising money for great causes. I think this question of at-risk groups is a really interesting one and a complicated one. We've seen over the last 20 years of counterterrorism efforts that it's really difficult to pinpoint at-risk groups. There's no profile for someone who might go out and commit a terrorist act. The radicalization process is usually a very complicated, back-forth, here-there process of stepping to and away from and back towards extremism and violent extremist content.

The online gaming space provides a myriad of subcommunities, and to really investigate how these different subcommunities are interacting with each other, we need more research, because there isn't a lot of research on the scope of how deep this issue [violent extremism] goes into the online gaming space. But we know from anecdotal evidence and incidents that have happened, things like Gamergate,^e that the online gaming space tolerates and sometimes encourages sexist language, sexist attitudes, racism—a lot of the -isms that we are worried about that can lead to extremism and violent extremism. These dynamics are part of the culture of some of these gaming subcultures.

What is difficult to pinpoint [is] that *this* group or *this* game has a problem. I think it's a pretty widespread issue. It's a reflection of society because so many people now play games. Gaming is such a transnational gathering place, where you do get expressions of hateful ideas that people hold and bring into their games and game chats with them, and exposure is quite widespread. So, there's an interesting challenge in looking for at-risk [groups], looking to see if we can discern if there are certain gaming narratives that perhaps allow extremists to pick it up and use it as part of their ideology, or certain games where people gather around a game and allow hateful content into their spaces. But it's something that certainly needs more investigation before we could really tell you whether

d Editor's Note: "Tech Against Terrorism is an initiative launched and supported by the United Nations Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate (UN CTED) working with the global tech industry to tackle terrorist use of the internet whilst respecting human rights." "About," Tech Against Terrorism, n.d.

e Editor's Note: Gamergate is a misogynist online harassment campaign connected to radical right backlash against diversity and progressivism within the online gaming space. It was a popular hashtag in 2014 and 2015, but continues to have impact today. For more on Gamergate, see Emily St. James, "#Gamergate: Here's why everybody in the video game world is fighting," Vox, October 13, 2014; Jay Hathaway, "What Is Gamergate, and Why? An Explainer for Non-Geeks," Gawker, October 10, 2014; and Evan Urquhart, "Gamergate Never Died," Slate, August 23, 2019.

there are those specific types of indicators that we can pick up on.

Lamphere-Englund: Agreed. Apart from focusing on individuals, we have tried to break out of a typology of use cases and of exploit cases by extremist actors. We've tried to go a bit in the opposite direction: What are the potential use cases for harm and exploits that occur rather than focusing on individual profiles that we haven't really been able to have much success with across this entire field, let alone in gaming per se.

The general six categories that we think are important to focus on are:

One, the production of bespoke or custom video games and 'mods,' or modifications, and those are really used for recruitment and retention purposes.

Two, gaming culture references. Gaming is pop culture now. Where you might have seen far-right extremist groups using MMA [mixed martial arts] and fighting groups as a popular call [or] pop culture reference 10 or 15 years ago, gaming works for that now. That's more the utilization in propaganda for recruitment.

Three, the use of in-game chat functions, but that's actually directly used for organizing, for communicating, and for grooming or indoctrinating users as well.

Then, four, there's this broader amorphous category of gamification, and that's using game-like elements outside of games. Think of going to your coffee shop, and you swipe a card and you get points back and you ladder up those points against other users. That's a gamified approach to marketing. We see extremist groups using gamified approaches, both strategically and organically.

And then, five, there's also the broader gaming-adjacent sphere of a lot of platforms like Discord, Twitch, Steam, Reddit, places where gamers congregate online that are not specifically games but are very popular with gamers and draw on gaming cultural references. Those spaces are also used for a whole host of different purposes.

Then lastly, there is the financing potential, too, where we see in-game items, avatars, apps, game keys that can be sold. And we know that money laundering occurs in these spaces, and there's clearly a very strong potential for at least money laundering if not direct terrorism-related financing to occur through some of those spaces. That's the general landscape of different harms, and that gives us a way to focus in on, 'Where are these harms occurring, and what individuals are impacted by them?'

CTC: We know that a range of nefarious groups and actors can and do use gaming to spread propaganda and spread their influence, from far-right extremists³ to the Islamic State.⁴ Are there groups or ideologies that are most concerning in terms of their effective use of gaming platforms to spread their beliefs?

White: I would say that it reflects the ideologies that are most prevalent in society. In the North American and the Western European context, you see a lot of far-right ideology being spread in the online gaming space. But if you looked to Southeast Asia or the Asian context, you would see Islamist extremism being the most prominent, or Buddhist extremism or whatever other types of extremism are the most prominent in their social space being reflected into the online gaming space. This goes back to what Galen was saying about the different ways you can think about the concerns of the online gaming space, but this socialization element

is where we see the most potential for people to be either exposed to violent extremist content or ideology or potentially recruited. It's a reflection of the actors that are most prominent in their cultural environment, their language environment.

There are certainly some violent extremist groups that have produced their own games, but this is more of an effort to communicate to their followers. They're not big games. They're not recruiting a huge following to play these games. It's more of a communication tool, an engagement tool with people who are already interested in being engaged with those groups. But where you see the wider spread of horrible ideas and horrible ideologies—for example, white supremacy or neo-Nazism in the case of the North American/Western European context—is often when people modify existing, popular games and put that content into existing platforms. You see it on Roblox, for example. There are many other examples, but you can play as a Nazi prison guard on a Roblox game. And Roblox is intended for children. It's really easy to manipulate some of these games to insert that hate.

CTC: With modified games, like the Roblox situation you described, is that intended to recruit individuals?

Lamphere-Englund: Not really, from what we can see. The modified games generally seem to be approaching people who already have a point of ideological entry into whatever external ideology that is. There was a case recently in Singapore, for example, where two kids made their own servers in Roblox that were modeling ISIS fight scenes, but they had already started down a radicalization pathway before that.⁵ And then they made this online server themselves, similar to the Nazi prison guard example. There are a couple examples from Germany looking at very similar set of radicalization cases. Most of those kids were also exposed to other content previously and already had an interest in that ideology before they designed their games.⁶ So usually those 'mods' are more preaching to the converted or to people who are already interested, and it's trying to maybe further them, but it's not usually the first entry point. Exposure is a little different. It's not usually modified games. It's more in-game chats or livestreaming settings versus a modified game.

White: One important element to point out here is that because there's so much [of] people bringing along their everyday hate, their everyday racism, their everyday sexism, whatever it is to these games, it almost becomes a question of resilience in these communities. How high is the level of resilience to this exposure? Because it's going to be there. You're going to find it. The minute you start looking for it, you will find it. It can seem pretty benign, but it's racist or sexist or whatever it might be, and as people become receptive to that kind of language, if people start showing positive inclination towards that type of content, then you start to see the recruitment happening.

If somebody was there to try and recruit people into an ideological perspective or into a group or a network, then they might pick up on this. As people become more positively receptive to racism or sexism or whatever it is, then they might then pull them out of this group gaming/online chat experience they're having and into a more closed environment where the conversation then might become more ideologically charged. And they might be pulled into basically more and more closed, dark corners of the internet as



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they show interest in going towards an ideological perspective. So the main concern about the online gaming space, at least from our perspective as a network, is this wider exposure to hate and how that can then encourage some people into acceptance of violent extremist ideology.

CTC: Earlier, Galen, you mentioned ‘strategic’ and ‘organic.’ Linda Schlegel has described “top-down gamification” versus “bottom-up gamification,” where “top-down gamification refers to the strategic use of gamified elements by extremist organizations to facilitate engagement with their content”—so a way to very directly get propaganda and other material in front of individuals—and “bottom-up gamification emerges organically, and online communities or small groups of individuals radicalizing together.”⁷ So again, what you spoke about with in-game chatting and so forth. Do you agree with that differentiation? Is that helpful when you think about this problem set, and if so, which in your opinion is more difficult to contend with?

Lamphere-Englund: Linda is wonderful. She’s one of our founding EGRN members, and so it’s always great to hear her work come up. She’s done some really wonderful thinking on this for longer than most people have, which is excellent. Yes, I generally agree with that premise. I think it’s a useful heuristic. I’m working on a kind of typology that builds on that at the moment.

In terms of organic use, I think there are two helpful subcomponents inside of that, not to overly categorize things, but I think there’s this use of social spaces, number one. Jessica, you were speaking to this a moment ago: People bring along their own biases, their own hate when they play games. So organic use to me is also, look, across the community of billions of gamers, there’s going to be some pretty nasty extremists who have really hateful views. You can look at the Anti-Defamation League surveys in the U.S. last year

where they found 20 percent of adult gamers have been exposed to white supremacist ideologies in online games; that doubled year on year.⁸ Does that show that games are the epicenter of that, or does that show a broader societal shift? Well, if you look at polling across the U.S. in general, that seems to reflect broader societal shifts at the same time. Maybe it’s a bit higher, maybe it’s more concentrated, but that’s also because what resonates online tends to be the most inciteful and the most outrageous type of content. So there’s that social aspect. Also, people like to game together.

Small group dynamics of the type that you will be very familiar with at West Point in looking at military small group dynamics—the type of group bonds that make a squad really effective on the battlefield—play out similarly in online spaces. If we look at gaming together in a “raid instance” to fight together in a small team, you’re engaging in small group dynamics. At the same time, those small group social bonds that make squads effective in battle and as cohesive units also confer radicalization risks. If one member of your group becomes radicalized, that’s actually very likely to then spread to other members of your group.

The other organic side that I think is interesting is identity fusion, which is something that one of our colleagues, Rachel Kowert, has looked into,⁹ and that’s drawing on the broader psychological research studies of radicalization. [It is] looking at the internalization of a group identity when that overwhelms all the other layers of your identity, and [it] becomes much more likely that you’re going to be susceptible to radicalization. That also holds true for gamer identities. When a gamer identity becomes the primary identity and becomes completely internalized, you’re much more likely to do things to advance that group. What Rachel has found with her work is that that can lead to a whole host of other negative behaviors and practices: willingness to fight or die, aggressive behaviors, Machiavellianism, narcissism, sexism, racism, and endorsement of extremist beliefs.

Strategic use, we definitely see as well, where VEOs and terrorist groups have tried to actually weaponize and exploit games, and that’s kind of that broader six-part typology, specific use cases and exploits discussed earlier.

CTC: Returning to online chat platforms, what are the impacts of apps like Discord, which can offer a degree of anonymity, on individuals that could be exposed to violent extremism through them?

White: The chat spaces are often where the socialization processes are happening. Academics have rehashed the issue of ‘do violent video games cause violence’ for decades now, and EGRN definitely takes the line of it’s not the video games themselves that are the problem. It’s not the violence of the video games, but it’s these environments that exist in these online chat spaces where that’s where you form your gameplay community. Our colleague Dr. Rachel Kowert always says that the online gaming space is a world-building experience, that you’re making something together, you’re achieving a goal together. Rachel is a psychologist, and she’s studied the psychological effects of the adrenaline, the feeling of connection, and she has found that the online experience of achieving a goal with your group is actually very similar to the real-world experience.

So the platforms themselves aren’t the problem, but it’s the socialization that occurs on those platforms and the connections that are made. They can be very positive in nature; they can be

“The platforms themselves aren’t the problem, but it’s the socialization that occurs on those platforms and the connections that are made. They can be very positive in nature; they can be great communities for people to be a part of. But they can also be negative. If you have entered into a space in which there are parts of your group in this chat environment ... and if those people happen to have hateful or extreme ideas about the world, and you’re now engaged with them in this gameplay and you feel that peer group attachment to them, then you might be more susceptible to their ideas and willing to take on the extremist nature of their ideas.”

- Jessica White

great communities for people to be a part of. But they can also be negative. If you have entered into a space in which there are parts of your group in this chat environment—where you’re playing games together, you form that bond with them in your gameplay experience—that then opens you up to hearing about their ideas about the world, and if those people happen to have hateful or extreme ideas about the world, and you’re now engaged with them in this gameplay and you feel that peer group attachment to them, then you might be more susceptible to their ideas and willing to take on the extremist nature of their ideas. People go to these platforms and start talking to each other because they’re talking about the gameplay, but really the conversation about everything else is actually more what we want to look at.

Lamphere-Englund: I completely agree, and it’s also interesting to think you have an audience funnel here. In stratcom [strategic communication] and marketing work, we think about how [to] bring in audiences to a conversion point where you actually shifted them on their ideas—whether that’s trying to convert them to buy something or you’re trying to convert to them ideologically.

Where does that happen? If you think of it in terms of games, maybe that first entry point is an in-game chat where someone makes a racist or a sexist or a misogynistic comment in an in-game chat; they look for reacts. From there you can start a DM [direct message] with that player. You can either have an audio chat with them or you can chat with them online. You say, ‘Hey, you look like a cool guy. Let’s talk a bit more about that.’ Then you bring someone to a wider service. So you might bring someone to Discord, for example. Discord is not fully anonymous necessarily.

It’s pseudo-nymous. There’s actually identifiable data that links the username to a real identity. It’s just not shown publicly in that server, compared to like 4Chan, which can actually be fully anonymous. Inside of Discord, you have those chats that are happening. Discord can be used for organizing, but then you also can bring it to another level down and have a chat with someone on a fully encrypted platform. So you bring them to Signal or to a Telegram group. The communication platform choice depends on the degree of anonymity or discretion required. So online chat rooms show how that can happen in a broader socialization sphere. And then specifically we can see how different channels are used for different types of communication and organization purposes, too.

CTC: Do you still see Discord as that platform for discussion, or more often do you see gamers jumping straight to 4Chan, for example?

Lamphere-Englund: Discord is interesting. They’ve done a lot of work to try and improve their content moderation policies and their trust and safety work, and they’re probably doing more than the vast majority of platforms out there. I think they’re really trying to tackle this as a problem set. That being said, Discord is absolutely still used because it’s a massive space. We’re talking about millions and millions of users who can create specific community servers. It’s that creation of a community space that makes it really helpful for all manner [of activity], whether that’s trying to do your homework or discussing a specific game or talking about organizing a white supremacist cult that wants to go out and kill people. So you have all these different types of communities that can be imagined and exist. And that’s both the strength of it as a platform and why it also gets exploited.

White: It’s useful to note that a lot of the violent extremists are very clever at knowing what the rules of engagement are. They know when to move to a darker corner of the internet, a more closed space that has less moderating. They know how to operate within the terms of service of these platforms and how to edit the conversation just right in the text so that the content moderation doesn’t pick it up. The Trust and Safety Teams of these companies, who are not necessarily all violent extremist experts, are a few people working against a tide of hundreds if not thousands [or] however many people, and trying to be effective in addressing these problems while their counterparts are very clever at moving around and moving into spaces where it’s easier for them to get around moderation efforts.

CTC: With both the Christchurch, New Zealand, attack in 2019¹⁰ and the Buffalo, New York, attack last May,¹¹ the perpetrators livestreamed their attacks. And there have

been gamified elements present in other recent attacks.^f It's one problem set to try to eliminate extremist content on the platforms, but how can stakeholders work to prevent elements of gaming manifesting offline, in the form of terrorist attacks? Is that beyond the scope of what platforms are responsible for or capable of mitigating?

White: I think it kind of is in a sense. Going back to Linda's categorization of gamification, that top-down element of gamification: Gamification is a tool. It's not positive or negative in and of itself. Marketing companies have been wielding gamification to sell you products for decades, and they have a huge body of historical research on how to use gamification positively. There are policymakers now concerned about, 'what do we do about gamification, livestreaming of attacks, and that gamified element of attacks?' But you can't legislate against gamification. It is a tool. So in a sense, it is somewhat beyond the scope of what can be addressed by gaming companies or by legislation with content moderation-type efforts.

On the other hand, I think the issue is that this element of awarding points to go out and kill people or whatever it is, that element of using gamification to make engaging with horrible, hateful activities a fun experience for people who want to do that, that is something where it's reflecting a wider social acceptance of these hateful ideas. It wouldn't spread if people weren't clicking on it and wanting to look at these manifestos and the videos of these attacks. It's a reflection of a wider problem, I think. So, it's perhaps outside the scope of what gaming companies can address, but it's something that should be addressed as part of this question of what do we do about the mainstreaming of extremism in society as a whole and why people are enticed into getting points for going out and killing people or whatever it is.

Lamphere-Englund: I think that's very true. While it is not incumbent on tech platforms to prevent all forms of violent extremism and misuse of their platforms, there are some steps to be taken. Twitch, for example, after it was used in the livestreaming

^f For example, the perpetrator of the deadly shooting outside a synagogue in Halle, Germany, in October 2019 livestreamed his attack on Twitch, a popular interactive video livestreaming service among gamers. Additionally, in his manifesto, he made references to his "achievements," which is "typical of computer games." Achievements, i.e. tasks, are a way of comparing yourself to other players in the game." The Poway, California, shooter's manifesto, which he posted to 8chan, referenced a "high score." Furthermore, "the first 8chan user to respond to Earnest's attack announcement told him to 'get the high score' — videogame parlance by which white ethno-nationalists refer to the death toll of terrorist attacks. 'Score' has become an overriding obsession for many online observers since the attack in Christchurch." See Oscar Gonzalez, "Twitch video of Germany shooting near Halle synagogue included anti-semitic motives," CNET, October 11, 2019; Kira Ayyadi, "The 'Gamification' of Terror – When Hate Becomes a Game," Belltower News, October 11, 2019; Bridget Johnson, "Another Synagogue Shooting: Manifesto Attributed to Poway Attacker Claims Christchurch, Pittsburgh as Influences," Homeland Security Today, April 27, 2019; and Emerson T. Brooking, "Christchurch-Style Terrorism Reaches American Shores," Digital Forensic Research Lab via Medium, April 30, 2019, respectively. For more on gamified elements in attacks, see Robert Evans, "The El Paso Shooting and the Gamification of Terror," Bellingcat, August 4, 2019, and Linda Schlegel, "Can You Hear Your Call of Duty? The Gamification of Radicalization and Extremist Violence," European Eye on Radicalization, March 17, 2020.



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attack in Halle, Germany,¹² designed new image recognition technology to try and spot and take down attacks more rapidly. So when Buffalo happened, the live video went down within two minutes.¹³ Now, that content was then reposted online and still received millions and millions of views, but the actual technical response improved substantially. So while technical solutions are not going to get us out of this problem, there are still internal innovations that can happen.

[What] we try to do as a network is promote those conversations between platforms and teams and regulators and policymakers to say, 'Here are promising practices that maybe you all should share rather than just silo them.' Because there's not necessarily an incentive to share across different companies, even though the individuals there might be interested in doing it. So trying to cross-pollinate some of those good practices and technical solutions can be helpful, too.

CTC: From your perspective, who should ultimately be responsible for keeping gaming safe? Should it be the developers who control the games and profit from their use? Governments that have an interest in public safety? An international organization, as gaming is borderless in many regards? Or should it be the end user and that mitigation ultimately comes down to the players themselves?

White: It is a tricky question. I think it's a little bit of everyone. Everyone must get together and be involved in making it a safe space. It's massively cross-geographical, cross-language, cross-identity factors, cross-government. It's a space that is used by people around the globe of all ages. So, I think everyone has a little bit of responsibility in making it a safer space, just like everyone has a responsibility in making social spaces safer. There are definitely things that gaming companies can do. 'Safety by design' is a phrase used in the gaming industry to indicate their efforts to mitigate

illicit or harmful activities in their games or effects of their games. I think that part of the industry can become more aware of concerns around violent extremism and think about the narratives of the games and how they're played.

The question around content moderation: It is not a whole solution, but it is a useful tool and governments can help to increase emphasis on content moderation efforts and ensure that it's happening across the industry rather than [just] within a few of the large companies wanting to do it and positively engaging with it, while there are still some resisting and not wanting to engage with it. You see varied interest from the gaming companies as to whether they want to engage in conversations around this, whether they're interested in trying to address violent extremism on their platforms. So, I think government can be useful in enforcing a more even approach across the companies.

But it's also about end users, like you say, and the gaming communities policing themselves and policing the behavior in their communities and not allowing that kind of hateful content to be encouraged or allowed in their spaces. Ultimately, that is going to be that piece of the puzzle that has to fall into place, because until you start encouraging these communities to police themselves or encouraging them not to buy games because [perhaps] that game is bringing a harmful element into their community, then it will continue to be sort of an ad hoc approach to addressing it.

Lamphere-Englund: Agreed. I think it's an eminently cross-sectoral solution that's needed, and there needs to be a lot more synchronization across actors. That's something we really believe in and try to practice. On the regulatory side, the U.S. is behind. If you look at NetDZ in Germany^g or the Online Harms Bill in the U.K.^h or the DSA in the E.U.,ⁱ we're seeing a lot of nascent efforts to try and figure out how to grapple with online harms. None of them are perfect, but in the U.S., we're not really even at that point yet. There is a regulatory question: That sometimes that gets it wrong and can be improved. There's the platform side: That needs to be encouraged and hopefully work on regulation in conjunction with government to actually figure out some of the nuances of these platforms, especially for smaller ones. And then there's that assistance aspect: Groups like Tech Against Terrorism really try to

g Editor's Note: "In 2017, Germany passed the Network Enforcement Act (*Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*, NetzDG) (also called the 'Facebook Act'). The law did not create any new duties for social media platforms but did impose high fines for noncompliance with existing legal obligations. The Network Enforcement Act is applicable only to social media networks that have 2 million or more registered users in Germany. It obligates the covered social media networks to remove content that is 'clearly illegal' within 24 hours after receiving a user complaint." "Germany: Network Enforcement Act Amended to Better Fight Online Hate Speech," Library of Congress, February 22, 2022.

h Editor's Note: This draft legislation aims to "protect children online and tackle some of the worst abuses on social media, including racist hate crimes." See "Landmark laws to keep children safe, stop racial hate and protect democracy online published," UK Government, May 12, 2021.

i Editor's Note: The Digital Services Act (DSA), a European Union regulation approved in October 2022, provides "a common set of rules on intermediaries' obligations and accountability across the single market [that] will open up new opportunities to provide digital services across borders, while ensuring a high level of protection to all users." See "The Digital Services Act: ensuring a safe and accountable online environment," European Commission, n.d.

"Gaming is one window into the future of social reality for humans. Reality is becoming increasingly distorted and fused with virtual aspects. Arguably what happens in virtual reality is every bit as real as what's happening in the offline world, and that distinction will become blurrier and blurrier and blurrier until, I think, it will completely go away, even for folks who engage online very little ... if we fail to grapple with the fact that extremism is becoming really present in quite a number of online subcommunities and gamer subcommunities, then the costs for not really addressing harms in the future grow higher and higher."

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help smaller platforms understand what harmful content is present and how they can do something about it.

And also parents and educators are massively important here, too. With younger generations, there's no difference between the online world and the offline world. It's just their world. So as a parent or as an educator, you should also be looking at that part of kids' worlds. That's a really important element for keeping folks safe online.

CTC: What is the potential of P/CVE gaming?

White: I think it's difficult because often P/CVE programs are small-scale with small budgets and a small amount of time [for their development], and to develop a game in that space that's actually going to be picked up and played widely is challenging. I do think where you see, for example, police departments that have these programs like 'cops versus kids' to engage with communities through online gaming, that's a really positive use of the tool. So, to use Esports or whatever it might be as a platform for your engagement with other communities, [while] it's not exactly P/CVE all the time, it's a really positive use of the online gaming space.

When it comes to P/CVE as a type of programming, practitioners could become more familiar with how to 'gamify' their efforts and make it more engaging and more fun for the communities that they're trying to reach out to. We could learn a lot from the marketing industry, from the ones that have been using this and from the educators that have used this in schools to make education interesting. There are tools of gamification that could be useful to the P/CVE world.

Lamphere-Englund: Agreed. Programs I have worked on before

use different influencers as well to talk about social issues or talk about P/CVE issues—using Esports influencers or gaming influencers to talk about, in more soft terms, exposure to extremists or harmful content online and pushing back against it. We've had some colleagues who have been working on online bystander effect questions: How do you use mentorship to try and actually change how people react when they see harms happening online? There is space there to engage. And game-based learning is also effective at changing behaviors and skills. Games are actually really beneficial, if you can get them in front of people. So using games for P/CVE in educational settings can be really beneficial.

We've seen a lot of promise in using games to counter disinformation. So when you use them in the right setting in the right way, they're helpful, but just investing money blindly into building a game and expecting that someone's going to use it, no. Think of your audience: How are you going to reach the audience? If the game is the right way to do that and you have a way to get that in front of people, it's an effective tool, but it's really only one tool in a pretty wide space.

CTC: If the relevant stakeholders fail to adequately address extremism in the gaming community, what do you think or fear will happen in this space over the next few years? Are there any possible solutions to help mitigate this that they should be taking advantage of?

Lamphere-Englund: Gaming is one window into the future of social reality for humans. Reality is becoming increasingly distorted and fused with virtual aspects. Arguably what happens in virtual reality is every bit as real as what's happening in the offline world, and that distinction will become blurrier and blurrier and blurrier until, I think, it will completely go away, even for folks who engage online very little. If gaming shows us a window to the future, if we fail to grapple with the fact that extremism is becoming really present in quite a number of online subcommunities and gamer

subcommunities, then the costs for not really addressing harms in the future grow higher and higher.

I think the P/CVE and CT spaces generally missed the social media wagon tremendously; they missed a lot of online socialization problems by five to 10 years. The gaming sector right now is behind social media platforms when it comes to addressing all manner of online harms. Now, if we can help the game sector to catch up, that also will help our future realities to be hopefully a bit more safe, inclusive, and fun. So if we can address some of these problems now, we're setting ourselves up significantly better for the next decade, two decades, three decades. If we don't invest in understanding these problems now and ways to successfully respond to them, I think we're looking at a lot more toxic and potentially more dangerous future online and offline [activity] because that distinction is going to be much less relevant.

White: I think that's the point: The gaming space reflects the social reality. There's a wider social reality right now in today's world—post-COVID pandemic, with global crises, with political polarization—where there is a mainstreaming of extreme content. There's discussion on mainstream news and in mainstream media spaces and mainstream politics of very extreme ideas and even extremist ideologies. That sort of mainstreaming of extremism, while it's happening in society, it will continue to get worse in the online gaming space and vice versa. They reflect each other in many ways.

Lamphere-Englund: I believe there's an opportunity. Coming from working on really intractable conflicts to working in gaming, I like gaming because there's potential to actually move the needle a bit. There are interventions that work. There are ways that we can make these spaces a bit safer. There's a potential to actually do something. Changing everything in broader society is really difficult. But can we change some things in gaming spaces? I think we can, and that's worth investing in. **CTC**

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The December 2022 German Reichsbürger Plot to Overthrow the German Government

By Alexander Ritzmann

The alleged plot against the German government by the Reichsbürger group Patriotic Union, whose key members were arrested on December 7, 2022, is best understood as a thwarted, possible early-stage terrorist plot, rather than a preempted imminent violent coup attempt. The Reichsbürger, who are comprised of different groups and networks, claim that the German state of today does not legally exist. Many Reichsbürger ascribe to a version of the anti-Semitic ‘New World Order;’ others believe in “QAnon.” Some are right-wing extremists. However, the German Reichsbürger are not a movement. They lack structure, unifying narratives, and a common leadership, and their leading adherents do not cooperate with each other. Although the vast majority of Reichsbürger are neither considered violent nor right-wing extremists by German security agencies, the threat posed by a minority of violent and extremist Reichsbürger persists, with German security agencies continuing to thwart alleged violent activity linked to different Reichsbürger groups. Hence, the broad variety of Reichsbürger groups and individuals requires ongoing and focused attention by the German police and intelligence agencies, investigative journalists as well as civil society organizations.

The largest counterterrorism raid in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany took place on December 7, 2022.¹ It was directed against a network of Reichsbürger (Citizens of the Empire) called the Patriotic Union. More than 3,000 police officers, including SWAT teams and special forces, searched apartments, houses, and offices in 11 of the 16 German federal states. Twenty-five people were arrested, including one each in Austria and Italy. Among the arrested was the alleged ring-leader, Heinrich the 13th, Prinz Reuß who has strong anti-Semitic and pro-Putin sentiments.² Until the abolishment of the monarchy in Germany in 1918, his family had ruled a small part of eastern Germany for centuries.

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Also arrested were a former member of the Bundestag and now suspended judge, former officers of the German armed forces, a police inspector, a doctor, a gourmet chef, a lawyer, a pilot, an opera singer, a clairvoyant, a roofer, and an employee of an advertising agency.³ Some of the defendants are also part of Querdenken, a German movement driven by conspiracy narratives, that featured in organized protests by networks, groups, and individuals during the pandemic against government measures to contain the coronavirus.⁴ In total, more than 50 people are under investigation.

This article assesses the alleged plot by the Reichsbürger group called Patriotic Union to overthrow the German government that was thwarted in December 2022. The article first outlines what is known about the plot. It then in turn examines the history, the ideology, the adherents, and the threat posed by the Reichsbürger.

The Plot

The German Federal Prosecutor General accuses the defendants of having created a terrorist organization and aiming to overthrow the existing state order in Germany, possibly by using military means and violence against state representatives. Among the discussed actions were entering the German Bundestag building (the federal parliament) and taking its members hostage.⁵

During the raid, police forces seized 97 guns, more than 25,000 pieces of ammunition, helmets, uniforms, night-vision devices, machetes, daggers, radios, blank vaccination cards, computers, cell phones, hard drives, and illegal narcotics. More than 400,000 euros in cash and around 100 pounds of precious metals, mainly gold bars and coins, were also found.⁶ However, it is unclear if these valuables were intended to finance the alleged terrorist group. Most of the weapons were legally owned.⁷ A list with names and addresses of politicians and their staff were found as well.⁸

The plot appears to also have had a foreign dimension. A Russian suspect living in Germany, reportedly the life partner of the group’s leader,⁹ is suspected of having supported the organization, in particular by facilitating contact between the Patriotic Union leadership and Russian officials.¹⁰ A spokesperson for the Kremlin denied any Russian involvement.¹¹

The History of the Reichsbürger

The roots of the Reichsbürger phenomenon go back nearly 40 years. The first “provisional government of the German Reich” was created in 1985 by Wolfgang Gerhard Günther Ebel, a disgruntled former employee of the East German state-owned train service Reichsbahn.¹² After having been fired from the train service for co-organizing a strike for better working conditions in 1980, and after several lost court cases where he tried to get re-employed by the Reichsbahn,¹³ he reportedly claimed that someone from the U.S. government told him that the victors of World War II were still in charge and that neither the German Democratic Republic nor the Federal Republic of Germany legally existed.¹⁴ As a result,

he argued, the laws of the German Reich would still apply where public servants (*Beamte*) could not be fired.¹⁵ In 1985, Ebel declared himself Reichschancellor of the “provisional government of the German Reich” and started to gather likeminded individuals around him. Over the years, several independent spin-off groups were created, leading to the very diverse Reichsbürger phenomenon of today.¹⁶

Reichsbürger Ideology

The Reichsbürger challenge the legitimacy of the current German democratic political order. However, Reichsbürger are by no means a unified movement with a clear ideology. Notably, in their definition of the Reichsbürger, German police and intelligence services include a separate but somewhat similar group of people, the so-called sovereign citizens (*Selbstverwalter*),¹⁷ who in this article will be included in the term Reichsbürger.

Among the Reichsbürger are several self-proclaimed kings of Germany and many self-proclaimed counts, dukes, chancellors and ministers, mayors, and special envoys who produce their own ‘government-issued’ documents and are often in conflict with each other.¹⁸ German intelligence services estimated 23,000 individuals to be Reichsbürger in 2022.¹⁹ This number had more than doubled since 2017, when around 10,000 Reichsbürger were estimated to exist.²⁰

Many Reichsbürger ascribe to any number of conspiracy narratives, such as a supposed Jewish-controlled ‘New World Order.’²¹ Others believe in a supposedly all-powerful child-murdering deep state, espoused by ‘QAnon.’²² Some are right-wing extremists. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a cross-fertilization of various conspiracy narratives, with individuals choosing parts of one narrative or another in a “salad-bar” manner in order to support their personal and political agendas.

A visible but also extreme example of this cross-fertilization and cross-cooperation was the Querdenken protest in Berlin on August 29, 2020. Out of an estimated 38,000 participants, a group of 300-400 rioters overcame the police barriers and occupied the steps of the Reichstag building, the seat of the German Federal Parliament. Among the rioters were QAnon believers, right-wing extremists and Reichsbürger, waiving historic German imperial war flags. Some tried to enter the Reichstag but were held off by a handful of police officers until police reinforcements arrived.²³ During the whole Querdenken protest, 33 police officers were injured and 316 suspects were arrested.²⁴ This led to 77 charges for trespassing and five charges for resisting arrest, but most cases have been dismissed due to lack of evidence.²⁵

The only narrative all Reichsbürger agree upon is that the Federal Republic of Germany supposedly does not legally exist. Unlike the above-mentioned conspiracy narratives, which are postulated in different Reichsbürger milieus, the question of whether the German Empire legally still exists and what this would mean for Germany today has actually been discussed in German mainstream jurisprudence for decades.²⁶

Germany’s turbulent history of the last 150 years is not characterized by smooth transitions between various political systems. The German Empire was founded in 1871 as a monarchy. After losing World War I in 1918, Germany abolished the monarchic system and became the democratic Weimar Republic before turning into the fascist dictatorship of Nazi-Germany, the “Third Reich.” After losing World War II in 1945, two separate German

states existed for 40 years from 1949 onward, only merging into the Germany of today in 1990.

Decisions of the German supreme court from 1973 and 1987 have dealt specifically with the question of whether the German Reich still exists and whether today’s Germany is the German Reich from 1871 or 1937 just within different borders and with a new political order. The court finally decided that today’s Germany is the German Reich within different borders and with a new political order.²⁷ Other points of legitimate legal discussion are caused by the fact that the German constitution (*Grundgesetz*) was initially intended as a temporary constitution that was supposed to expire with a unified Germany but became the constitution of today’s unified Germany.²⁸ In summary, some of the legal arguments raised by Reichsbürger are not without merit, but the vast majority of the population, the judiciary, historians, and policymakers consider these questions answered and have moved on.²⁹

Who Are the Reichsbürger?

Notwithstanding the fact that up to 29 percent of adherents are women, the typical Reichsbürger is over 50 years old and male, has lived through different personal and professional crises, is frustrated about his status quo in society, and is in financial debt.³⁰ For a believer of the Reichsbürger ideology, claiming that the German state does not legally exist promises to fix several of these issues: If Germany is not a legitimate state, then no taxes, fees, fines, or debts would need to be paid.

Moreover, the individual railing against this supposedly illegitimate state can claim to be a hero struggling for justice and against a supposedly unjust or even criminal state. For some, joining in the ranks of the Reichsbürger may lead to a higher sense of status. Using Arie Kruglanski, Jocelyn Bélanger, and Rohan Gunaratna’s radicalization theory of needs, narratives, and networks as a quest for significance,³¹ the process of becoming a Reichsbürger can be understood as a strategy of self-help and self-empowerment to satisfy basic human needs.

However, not all Reichsbürger are in financial trouble; some are even wealthy. These individuals might seek a type of significance and status upgrade that money cannot buy. The supposed leader of the Patriotic Union, Heinrich the 13th Prinz Reuß, reportedly owns several properties, including a small castle, and bought a forest worth one million euros from the German federal government just days before the police raid.³² However, the large aristocratic family of the prince had distanced themselves from him years ago due to his extreme political views, making him a pariah among aristocratic elite circles.³³

How Dangerous Are the Reichsbürger?

A popular term used by German officials in describing Reichsbürger activities is “paper-terrorism.”³⁴ Reichsbürger regularly send letters and files with hundreds of pages to public authorities claiming the illegitimacy of the German government and objecting to paying property taxes, street cleaning fees, or parking ticket fines.³⁵ Since public administration in principle needs to respond to every letter professionally, dealing with Reichsbürger puts a significant burden on the affected authorities. At some point, templates and forms for such Reichsbürger letter-writing were posted online, leading to a deluge of such correspondence to government offices.³⁶ Some of the letters also include threats that non-compliant recipients will be prosecuted once the German empire is reestablished. As



Police officers lead Heinrich 13th Prince Reuss to a police vehicle on December 7, 2022, in Frankfurt, Germany, during a raid against the Reichsbürger group Patriotic Union. (Boris Roessler/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

a result, government agencies and civil society organizations have developed several handbooks and trainings for local, state, and federal authorities, as well as for judges, on how to deal with this harassment.³⁷

If a person residing in Germany does not pay taxes, fees, or fines that they owe the government, at some point a court-mandated debt collector will show up at that individual's door to claim and confiscate valuables to settle the debt. If the individual in question does not comply, police officers will enforce the court order. Considering the previously described self-empowerment functionality of becoming a Reichsbürger—for example, pursuing a hero-status to achieve a desired status-upgrade—it is likely that any resistance against the supposedly illegitimate state and its agents would be framed as self-defense.

For example, a research study from 2018, which analyzed media reports about crimes or misdemeanors committed by Reichsbürger between the years 2003 and 2016, identified 1,070 such incidents committed by 487 individuals who fall within the category of Reichsbürger.³⁸ These cases involved driving without official (but with self-made) driver's licenses and license plates, violating the duty to pay mandatory long-term healthcare insurance (*Pflegeversicherung*), and resisting police officers. There were also reported cases of coercion and blackmailing of public officials. Confrontations with the police—for example, during property searches, traffic checks, or court-ordered seizures—were reportedly provoked and initiated by Reichsbürger.³⁹

A tipping point in the perception of policymakers and security agencies in Germany regarding the threat posed by some

Reichsbürger was the murder of a policeman in Bavaria in 2016. In this incident, during a police raid to confiscate the 30 legally purchased firearms of a Reichsbürger, the 50-year-old man fired 11 shots, killing a police officer and injuring two others.⁴⁰

In March 2020, the German federal government banned the Reichsbürger association “Geeinte deutsche Völker und Stämme” (United German peoples and tribes) due to its aggressive racism and anti-Semitic propaganda, which violate the constitutional principle of the “peaceful understanding of peoples” and the German penal code.⁴¹ This legal instrument is frequently used by federal or state authorities (*Innenministerien*) in Germany to stop the activities of extremist groups.⁴²

In December 2022, German security agencies estimated that fewer than 10 percent, or 2,100, of the 23,000 Reichsbürger were violence-oriented, which is defined as an individual who perpetrates acts of violence, issues threats, or openly supports violence.⁴³ About six percent (1,250) of the Reichsbürger were considered to be right-wing extremists. To fall into both the Reichsbürger and right-wing extremist categories, according to the definitions of German security agencies, an individual needs to be visibly active in both milieus.⁴⁴ Between 2016 and 2022, 1,100 firearm permits held by Reichsbürger were revoked, leaving about 500 Reichsbürger legally owning firearms at the start of 2022.⁴⁵ Last year, Reichsbürger were accused of having committed 29 crimes involving firearms.⁴⁶

In April 2022, eight months before German authorities broke up the alleged Patriotic Union plot to overthrow the government, a group of five Reichsbürger was charged with creating a terrorist organization, preparing an act of high treason, and planning

to kidnap the federal health minister. They were arrested while attempting to buy two AK-47 assault rifles and four Glock handguns from an undercover police officer. The group had already collected 17 firearms and 59 other weapons and was reportedly active on the public Telegram channel of the Patriotic Union.⁴⁷ A 75-year-old woman and former teacher was in charge of the administration of the supposed terrorist group.⁴⁸ As already noted, up to 29 percent of Reichsbürger are reportedly women.⁴⁹

Public Controversy Around the Raid

The raid to break up the alleged December 2022 Patriotic Union plot was and continues to be controversial. The right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) ridiculed the plans of the Patriotic Union as a “rolling walker coup,” referring to the high age of the arrested leadership with many of them being around 70 years old.⁵⁰ The arrested judge and former member of the Bundestag, who was the designated justice minister of the Reichsbürger group, is a member of the AfD, as are two other suspected members of the Patriotic Union.⁵¹

Some members of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in parliament also questioned the capabilities of the alleged plotters and were skeptical regarding the actual threat they posed.⁵² The leader of the opposition in the Bundestag and head of the CDU did not publicly comment on the arrests for several days.⁵³ Conversely, parties from the center-left to the far-left saw the arrests as proof of the growing threat from the (extreme-right) Reichsbürger milieus.⁵⁴

Broad criticism focused on the fact that the arrests in the early morning of December 7, 2022, were broadcast live by major TV networks. Various media outlets published comprehensive background stories on the arrested individuals on the same day. Reportedly, due to the involvement of dozens of police departments in the raids, journalists had been made aware in advance of the planned raid. The arrested individuals had been under surveillance by police, intelligence agencies, and investigative reporters since at least March 2022.⁵⁵

There are reports suggesting that some of the defendants were made aware of the raids in advance. A former German special forces commander who was one of those arrested supposedly called a neighbor in his hometown in Germany from his vacation home in Croatia to inform them about the upcoming police raid on his (the former special forces commander’s) residence.⁵⁶ The question of to what degree the security of the police officers that morning was in jeopardy due to leaked information about the raid was a major concern.⁵⁷ There was, however, no resistance during the arrests.

Was a Violent Coup Attempt Imminent?

The potential threat emanating from the Patriotic Union concerning the supposed planned violent coup should be assessed like any other preemptive arrest of members of a suspected terrorist organization. The Federal Prosecutor General accuses the more than 50 defendants of having created a terrorist organization that aimed to overthrow the existing state order in Germany. This included alleged collusion to enter the German Bundestag building by force and with arms, to take its members hostage, and—following the establishment of a proto-government structure—to proclaim martial law.⁵⁸ Allegedly, at least three members of the Patriotic Union are former members of the German armed forces (*Bundeswehr*); one was an active-duty soldier at the time of his arrest. Among the defendants are also three

policemen. These individuals were supposedly planning to establish homeland security units (*Heimatschutzkompanien*), in particular by recruiting members of the Bundeswehr and the police.⁵⁹

As noted at the beginning of the article, during the raids, police forces seized 97 guns, most of them legally owned, with more than 25,000 rounds of ammunition. A list with names and addresses of politicians and their staff were found as well.⁶⁰ More than 100 individuals reportedly signed non-disclosure agreements with the Patriotic Union. A violation of this agreement was reportedly punishable, in severe cases by a death penalty.⁶¹

Of the accused 50 individuals, three are categorized as dangerous (*Gefährder*), referring to individuals for which the security forces have substantiated indications that justify the presumption that they will commit serious politically motivated crimes. Two of the Patriotic Union *Gefährder* are considered to have an extreme right-wing background. Five other suspects are categorized as relevant individuals (*relevante Personen*), meaning they will likely support and enable serious politically motivated crimes.⁶²

The German Federal Criminal Police (*Bundeskriminalamt*, BKA) has a developed risk and mobilization tool (RADAR) to assess the threats posed by individuals classified by state police as dangerous individuals (*Gefährder*) and relevant persons.⁶³ This tool is designed to help prioritize government interventions such as surveillance measures or the imposition of travel restrictions. The criteria and indicators applied in this classification have not been made public.

However, the National Counterterrorism Center, the FBI, and the Department of Homeland Security have co-published a handbook on U.S. violent extremism mobilization indicators. When applying these criteria to the publicly available information concerning the members of the Patriotic Union and their actions, a mixed picture appears. Indicators from the U.S. document that would (partially) apply to the accused members of the Patriotic Union include:

- “Financial: Moving or acquiring money or resources to prepare for or conduct violence.
- Ideology: Developing or communicating the mentality or justification that could lead to the commission of a violent act.
- Intent: Developing or communicating goals or plans to commit a violent act.
- Relationship: Interacting with others, including family or other violent extremists.
- Tactics: Acquiring or developing skills, knowledge, or materials to engage in violent extremist activities⁷⁶⁴

On the other hand, other indicators for an imminent threat are not met, such as:

- “Disseminating one’s own martyrdom or last will video or statement (for example, a pre-attack manifesto or final statement)
- Conducting a dry run of an attack or assault or attempting to gain proximity or access to targets ...
- Disposing of meaningful personal assets or belongings in an unusual manner, particularly with a sense of urgency or without regard for personal financial gain.
- Unusual goodbyes or post-death instructions⁷⁶⁵

At the time of writing, there are no reports of manifestos or last-will statements by the alleged plotters. The existence of such documents would make sense if an armed attack on the Bundestag,

including the proclamation of martial law, had been planned for the near future. The same applies for indicators such as having conducted a dry run of the attack (e.g., in the Bundestag buildings) or of the selling of meaningful personal assets with a sense of urgency (e.g., to bribe government officials or to procure costly gear or weapons in the final stages of planning). According to public records, quite the opposite seems to be true. As mentioned earlier, the alleged leader of the Patriotic Union purchased real estate worth one million euros from the German federal government just days before the police raid.

The head of the German Federal Criminal Police stated on German national TV that apparently no date was set for the alleged intended attack on the Reichstag but that the security agencies did not want to wait until the last moment and that the alleged creation of a terrorist organization provided sufficient grounds for the raids and arrests.⁶⁶

In this author's assessment, it therefore seems unlikely that an imminent intent was present during the time of the arrests. It is also highly questionable that an attempted violent coup by this group, if followed through, would have been successful in any considerable manner. It is, however, very likely that an attack on the Bundestag or other targets would have caused injuries and possible deaths on the side of the police, targeted politicians, bystanders, and attackers. Due to the massive surveillance by police and intelligence agencies (and investigative journalists) on the Patriotic Union since March 2022, the Bundestag police had reportedly spent weeks preparing for the possibility of an attack. The police bodyguards of the most important government ministers had reportedly been put on high alert.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Since their inception in the 1980s, the German Reichsbürger have not been an organized movement. They lack structure, unifying narratives, a common leadership, or even strategic cooperation between their different self-appointed "kings," "chancellors," "special envoys," and other fantasy-titled key figures.⁶⁸ The only thing that connects them is the fundamental denial of the legitimacy of the German state. This is one of the main reasons why German authorities have a somewhat difficult time assessing their (changing) potential for violence and terrorist acts in comparison to more ideologically coherent, unified, and structured extremist movements.

The Reichsbürger/far-right/right-wing extremism nexus has

been up for debate for some time now. German security agencies consider six percent of the 23,000 Reichsbürger as also being right-wing extremists, an analysis that has been challenged by some civil-society organizations.⁶⁹ The main issue here seems to be the matter of terminology, with the government's definition of right-wing extremism being more narrow than that of civil society organizations. The large increase in official estimates for the number of Reichsbürger from 10,000 in 2019 to 23,000 in 2022, on the other hand, is possibly related to an increased focus by security services on the Reichsbürger phenomenon, as well as to the overall mobilization and therefore visibility of conspiracy narrative believers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Patriotic Union's alleged plot against the German federal government can probably be best understood as a thwarted, possible early-stage terrorist plot, rather than a preempted imminent violent coup. The evidence presented at the upcoming trial will show whether this assessment can be considered correct.

Despite the arrests made on December 7, 2022, the threat posed by a minority of violent Reichsbürger has not been removed. In February 2023, police in Bavaria arrested six individuals who are reportedly part of a Reichsbürger network.⁷⁰ They are charged with creating a terrorist organization and planning to sabotage the power grid^a in Germany to allow other likeminded groups to overthrow the government.⁷¹ There are speculations about a possible wider network of different Reichsbürger groups communicating through various Telegram channels, where ideas for attacks allegedly have been discussed.⁷² On March 22, as this article went to press, a police officer was shot and wounded in the arm by a witness he was interviewing in Reutlingen, south of Stuttgart, as part of the ongoing counterterrorism investigation into the Patriotic Union. The attacker, reportedly a competitive marksman who legally owns 22 firearms, was arrested for suspected attempted murder. Media reports suggest that he had participated in Querdenken protests in the past and had donated to the far-right party AfD.⁷³ This makes clear that the broad variety of Reichsbürger groups and individuals requires ongoing and focused attention by the German police and intelligence agencies, as well as from investigative journalists and civil society organizations. **CTC**

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The Prisoner Dilemma: Insurrectionary Anarchism and the Cospito Affair

By Francesco Marone

Italy is a crucial epicenter of insurrectionary anarchism, a transnational extremist tendency that promotes “self-organized” illegal and violent actions, even against people. In particular, over the last two decades, dozens of acts of violence, including letter bombs, homemade bombs, and shootings, have been claimed under the banner of the Informal Anarchist Federation (*Federazione Anarchica Informale*, FAI), a loosely connected network that has also fostered relationships with likeminded groups abroad. The Italian counterterrorism system has successfully addressed this threat with aggressive rules, measures, and practices, that, in part, derive directly or indirectly from the long fight against the Mafia. However, today Italian authorities face a new challenge, posed by the case of Alfredo Cospito, an influential exponent of the FAI network who started an indefinite hunger strike in prison in October 2022. The handling of the Cospito affair highlights the complex political, legal, and ethical dilemmas that liberal democracies have to address in combating terrorism.

Insurrectionary anarchism is a violent extremist tendency within the diverse anarchist galaxy. In Italy, a cradle of this understudied transnational phenomenon, insurrectionary anarchism is regarded as the most serious form of domestic (non-jihadi) terrorist threat. In the country, the most important entity has been the Informal Anarchist Federation (*Federazione Anarchica Informale*, FAI), a network of individuals and small temporary “affinity groups,” that has also fostered contacts and relationships with foreign networks and groups.

In recent months, the cause of insurrectionary anarchism has attracted much attention in Italy and in other countries due to the story of the best-known exponent of the FAI network, Alfredo Cospito. In October 2022, this Italian citizen, in prison since 2012 for acts of terrorism, started an indefinite hunger strike to protest against both a special regime prison (the so-called *41-bis* regime) and the risk of *ergastolo ostativo* (“life in prison without parole”).

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His story turned into a transnational *cause célèbre* and a major legal and political case in the country, forcing Italian authorities to make difficult decisions. The Cospito affair deserves attention not only because it confirms the dynamism of insurrectionary anarchism in Italy and abroad, including destructive “direct actions,” but also, more generally, because it highlights the complex dilemmas that liberal democracies have to address in combating terrorism.

This article examines the Cospito affair and its challenges. After presenting the cause of insurrectionary anarchism and the FAI network, it discusses the story of Alfredo Cospito, from his acts of terrorism under the banner of the FAI to his indefinite hunger strike in prison. It then examines the handling of the Cospito affair, highlighting the complex dilemmas that Italian authorities have to face. Finally, it explores the actual and potential effects of the case on the visibility and dynamism of insurrectionary anarchism.

Insurrectionary Anarchism and the FAI Network

Insurrectionary anarchism is an extremist tendency within the diverse anarchist movement that emphasizes the practice of revolutionary “insurrection” through illegal and violent actions. While anarchism generally prioritizes practice over theory, insurrectionary anarchism takes this position to an extreme. In fact, in their unconditional struggle against the state, capitalism, and any form of dominion, insurrectionary anarchists focus more on tactics than on strategy.¹ The immediate, self-organized “attack” here and now is considered essential. Furthermore, some insurrectionary anarchist militants and networks do not hesitate to target human beings.²

Contemporary insurrectionary anarchism emerged at the turn of this century, and from the beginning, Italy has been a crucial epicenter of this phenomenon.³ Overall, Italian insurrectionary anarchists (*anarchici insurrezionalisti*) have used a “double level” of action.⁴ On the one hand, they have engaged in public campaigns of collective mobilization on different issues,⁵ including “anti-militarism,” opposition to state “repression” (particularly against the prison system), militant “environmentalism,” support to immigrants, and opposition to modern technology and the so-called “techno-industrial system.”⁶

On the other hand, fringes of the insurrectionary anarchist movement have resorted to terrorist methods. From this perspective, in Italy insurrectionary anarchism is still regarded as the most serious form of domestic (non-jihadi) terrorist and subversive threat.⁷

Over the last two decades, the most important insurrectionary anarchist entity engaged in terrorist activities has been the Informal Anarchist Federation (*Federazione Anarchica Informale*, FAI).⁸ The FAI is a loosely connected network of individuals and small temporary “affinity groups.”⁹ Since its inception, in 2003, dozens of acts of violence have been claimed under the banner of this shadowy entity in Italy. Several attacks took the form of letter

bombs and homemade bombs against various targets, including political leaders, law enforcement, and businesspeople.¹⁰ These incidents have caused several injuries.¹¹ Despite the fact that a few of the attacks were assessed as having the potential to be lethal,¹² fortunately, thus far, they have not resulted in fatalities.

Additionally, the Italian FAI has fostered contacts and relationships with foreign networks and groups. In particular, the FAI has strong ideological and solidarity ties with Greek anarchist groups,¹³ especially with the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire (CCF), a revolutionary anarcho-individualist armed group that emerged in 2008.¹⁴ In 2011, the FAI also promoted the development of the *Fronte Rivoluzionario Internazionale* (International Revolutionary Front), FRI, an ambitious effort to connect together likeminded action groups at the transnational level. Moreover, in recent years, several individuals and cells around the world have used the FAI brand name to claim responsibility for their own attacks (usually acts of sabotage or arson), from Chile to Indonesia.¹⁵ Despite this, the FAI/FRI network and its violent extremist cause have thus far received little attention from scholars and experts.

In Italy, the FAI network was weakened after several waves of arrests, especially in 2012-2013,¹⁶ but its brand name has not disappeared. For example, in September 2020, FAI-linked insurrectionary anarchists sent a parcel bomb to the president of the employers' union of Brescia, northern Italy;¹⁷ fortunately, the homemade device did not explode.¹⁸ The anonymous perpetrators claimed the attack a few days later in a communique posted on an anarchist website, under the moniker of the FAI/FRI "Mikhail Zhlobitsky Nucleus."¹⁹ The online communique also mentioned that a second, similar device was sent to the Union of the Penitentiary Police in Modena, north-central Italy, although it was never delivered.¹⁹

The Case of Alfredo Cospito

Against this background, the case of Alfredo Cospito, the best-known exponent of the FAI network and an influential figure in the wider insurrectionary anarchist movement, deserves special attention. In recent months, his story has turned into a transnational *cause célèbre* and a major legal and political case in Italy.

Cospito was born in the city of Pescara, central Italy, on July 14, 1967. During his youth, he joined the cause of anarchism, and based on these political beliefs, he refused to perform his military service.^b For this reason, he was convicted of desertion and imprisoned on March 10, 1989, and again, after a general amnesty in 1990,^c on

April 16, 1991.²⁰ During his second detention, on August 27, 1991, Cospito began an indefinite hunger strike for the first time. On September 27, 1991, his father requested amnesty from Italy's president, and like many other draft evaders during that period, Cospito was pardoned on December 27, 1991. He was eventually exempted from military service in 1993.²¹

In the early 1990s, Cospito was also involved in squatting actions in Pescara and other areas in Italy. He then moved to the area of Turin, northwestern Italy. Here, Cospito cemented his reputation as an uncompromising anarchist militant and engaged in terrorist violence, under the banner of the FAI.²²

In 2006, Cospito and his partner, Anna Beniamino, another prominent insurrectionary anarchist, secretly plotted a bomb attack on a cadet barracks of *Carabinieri* (Italy's national gendarmerie) in the town of Fossano, not far from Turin. The bombing was planned with a booby-trap technique, with two explosive devices: a minor device to lure cadets out, and a second one with a higher potential (approximately 500 grams of gunpowder) timed to explode around 30 minutes later to hit cadets.²³ Eventually, the bomb attack was carried out on the night between June 2 and 3, 2006, on behalf of the FAI, and only by chance did it result in no injuries.²⁴

In 2012, Cospito launched another terrorist attack. On May 7 that year, Cospito and another insurrectionary anarchist, Nicola Gai, shot the executive of an Italian nuclear power company in the legs in the northwestern port city of Genoa.²⁵ A letter sent to *Corriere della Sera*, Italy's leading newspaper, claimed responsibility for this *gambizzazione* (kneecapping) on behalf of the FAI.²⁶ Four months later, on the night between September 14 and 15, 2012, Cospito was arrested in Turin, together with his accomplice, Gai. Cospito, who has never disowned his acts of violence, was found guilty and sentenced to 10 years and eight months in prison.²⁷ Gai was sentenced to nine years, but later he obtained a sentence reduction and was eventually released in November 2020.²⁸

While serving his sentence in prison for the 2012 assault in Genoa and other offenses, in 2019-2020 Cospito received an additional 20-year term for his association with the FAI network, formally recognized by the judges as an "association with the purpose of terrorism" (under article 270-bis of the Italian Penal Code), and for the 2006 attack in Fossano.²⁹ At the same time, his partner Beniamino was sentenced to 16 years in prison. Furthermore, in relation to the 2006 bombing, on July 6, 2022, Italy's Supreme Court of Cassation formally changed the sentence from the crime of "common' massacre" (*strage "comune"*) against public safety (article 422 of the Penal Code), established in a 2019 trial, to the even more serious crime of "political' massacre" (*strage "politica"*) against State security (article 285 of the Penal Code).^d

On February 8, 2023, Cospito's lawyer appealed to the European Court of Human Rights, contesting this ruling of the Italian Court of Cassation and, at the time of writing this article, Cospito's defense was waiting for the decision of the Strasbourg court.³⁰

As part of a complex court case, Italy's Constitutional Court will have to determine the final penalty against Cospito, in a hearing scheduled for April 18, 2023.³¹ The anarchist extremist risks *ergastolo ostativo* (translatable as "life in prison without parole").

a Mikhail Vasilievich Zhlobitsky was a Russian anarchist who blew himself up in the local office of the FSB (Federal Security Service) in Arkhangelsk, northwestern Russia, on October 31, 2018. Zhlobitsky, a 17-year-old student, died at the scene, while three FSB officers were injured. See, for example, "Russia Arkhangelsk blast: Teen blows himself up at FSB office," BBC, October 31, 2018.

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c In April 1990, the president of the Italian Republic granted amnesty for non-financial crimes with sentences of up to four years in prison. Two years later, in 1992, a constitutional law gave the power to grant amnesty to Parliament. At the time of writing of this article, the 1990 amnesty was the last one to be granted in Italy.

d To avoid potential misunderstanding, it is important to highlight that in the Italian legal system the crimes of "massacre" (*strage*) do not necessarily require the actual death of people.



Anarchists use a smoke bomb during the protest against prison conditions of jailed anarchist Alfredo Cospito on March 4, 2023, in Turin, Italy. (Alberto Gandolfo/NurPhoto via AP)

This strict (and legally controversial)³² type of custodial sentence was introduced in 1992, soon after the assassination of high-level, anti-Mafia prosecuting magistrate Giovanni Falcone and four others (his wife and three police escort agents) by Sicilian *Cosa Nostra* on May 23, 1992.³³ It can be applied to detainees convicted of Mafia association, terrorism, and other serious crimes who do not accept to collaborate with justice. According to recent official data, in 2022, there were 1,280 detainees sentenced to *ergastolo ostativo* (out of 1,822 serving life sentences) in Italy.³⁴

From prison, Cospito continued his efforts to actively promote his violent extremist cause, especially by writing public contributions to the insurrectionary anarchist debate and propaganda. In particular, he gave an inflammatory interview to an extremist anarchist journal, published in three parts, respectively in 2018, 2019, and 2020.³⁵ In this public interview in Italian, Cospito advocated the use of “nihilistic” violence against people: He first condemned, to use his words, the “refusal (never admitted, but in fact practiced) [by most Italian anarchists] to target people, those directly responsible for the atrocities of the system. For many anarchists there is only ‘sabotage’ and destructive action (hitting and destroying things).” He then argued, to legitimize his position, that violence against people is actually an integral part of the anarchist tradition. Furthermore, unlike most contemporary actors engaged in terrorism, Cospito did not hesitate to use this term in a positive sense: In his words, “bottom-up terrorism has all the justifications in the world.”³⁶

In addition, it is interesting to note that, while insurrectionary anarchism is not inclined to glorify political “martyrdom,”³⁷ in another passage of this interview, Cospito apparently showed appreciation for suicide attacks: “We have lost sight of ‘the possibility of succeeding’ and this has made us coward to such an extent that we do not recognize, for example, the greatness of the act of one of

our brothers, Mikhail Zhlobitsky, who blew himself up at the FSB headquarters in Arkhangelsk to avenge his comrades tortured by Russian cops. An invaluable contribution to the struggle.”³⁸

The (Complex) Handling of the Cospito Affair

In order to avoid the supposed risk of Cospito inciting people to violence from his cell in a “high-security section”^e of the prison of Ferrara, northern Italy, and based on an evaluation by competent judges, the then Minister of Justice Marta Cartabia decided on May 4, 2022, to put Cospito under the so-called *41-bis* special regime^f in a dedicated section of the prison of Sassari on the island of Sardinia.

The *41-bis* prison regime formally suspends a few rules of the ordinary treatment of detainees, imposing in practice a number of strict restrictions on the affected detainee, including: isolation from all other inmates, in a solitary cell, in a special prison section; yard time limited to two hours a day (or one hour in special cases); constant surveillance by a special unit of the Penitentiary Police; and control of outgoing and incoming mail. Originally conceived in 1986 for exceptional cases of prison riots or other emergency situations, the *41-bis* regime was expanded in 1992, a few days after anti-Mafia prosecuting magistrate Giovanni Falcone’s assassination, and is now applied to detainees convicted of Mafia

e In Italy, the (non-*41-bis*) detainees awaiting trial or convicted for crimes related to terrorism or the eversion of democratic order through violent acts are held in a special “High Security 2” (*Alta sicurezza 2*, AS2) “prison section” (*circuito penitenziario*). Francesco Marone and Marco Olimpio, “Jihadist radicalization in Italian prisons: A primer,” Analysis, *ISPI*, February 2019, p. 9.

f *41-bis* is a reference to Article 41-bis (*Articolo 41-bis*) of the current *Ordinamento Penitenziario* (Prison Administration Act).

association, terrorism, and other serious crimes. According to the latest official data, covering the year 2022, in Italy there were 728 detainees under the *41-bis* regime (out of approximately 56,000 inmates in total in the same year). Of these detainees, 724 were serving sentences for association to a Mafia-type organization, and four, including Cospito, for terrorism.³⁹

While the *41-bis* prison regime, sometimes informally dubbed “hard prison” (*carcere duro*), may have, in practice, a serious impact on the psychological and social condition of affected detainees and has also raised legal and moral controversies,⁴⁰ its official function is limited to separating inmates, especially those in positions of leadership in their organizations, from their (former) criminal associates. In the case of Cospito, the *41-bis* regime was used for the very first time against an anarchist detainee.

On October 20, 2022, Cospito started a hunger strike to protest against both the *41-bis* regime and the risk of *ergastolo ostativo*. Cospito made clear that his body was the only “weapon” in his “last battle” against a supposed “inhuman” regime, as he reportedly told a delegation of Italian MPs that visited his prison facility on January 12, 2023.⁴¹ At the same time, he did not show any fascination with death. For example, in a letter written in January 2023, and made public by his lawyer on March 1, Cospito claimed that he did not seek “the altars of martyrdom”: “I love life, I am a happy man, I would not exchange my life with that of another. And precisely because I love life, I cannot accept this hopeless non-life.”⁴²

After a few months of abstinence from eating, at times interrupted by the intake of supplements, by late January 2023, Cospito lost almost 50 kilograms of weight and his health conditions seriously deteriorated.⁴³ For this reason, in early 2023 the Supreme Court of Cassation brought forward the hearing for his appeal against the *41-bis* regime first from April 20, 2023, to March 7, and then to February 24. Meanwhile, on January 30, 2023, the Minister of Justice Carlo Nordio ordered that Cospito be moved from the prison in Sassari first to the prison in Opera, near Milan, where his health conditions could be treated better; and then, on February 11, 2023, to a special wing of a hospital in Milan, always maintaining the same special prison regime. On February 24, 2023, the Court of Cassation rejected Cospito’s appeal against the *41-bis* regime⁴⁴ and the Minister of Justice immediately acknowledged this decision.⁴⁵ On the same day, soon after learning of this undesired outcome, the Italian anarchist extremist announced that he was sure that he would die soon and that he hoped that someone would continue the struggle after him.⁴⁶

On February 25, 2023, Cospito’s lawyer also submitted an individual complaint to the United Nations Human Rights Committee. On March 1, this body replied that “while his case is under consideration by the Committee,” “the State party [Italy] has been requested to ensure that Mr. Cospito’s imprisonment conditions are in accordance with international standards.”⁴⁷

The Italian government also considered force-feeding Cospito, in case serious harm was imminent. According to some legal experts, although the anarchist extremist is in prison and consequently in the custody of the State, the force-feeding option does not seem to have a solid legal basis, even in the event that the detainee was no longer conscious, especially since Cospito already signed his living will in which he clearly expressed his refusal to be fed.⁴⁸

With this respect, on February 6, 2023, the Minister of Justice asked the Comitato Nazionale per la Bioetica, CNB (National Bioethics Committee) for its non-binding opinion on the

controversial ethical issues of this potential practice in general. On March 6, 2023, this governmental advisory body, which by regulation cannot consider specific “personal cases,” approved a complex document that, by unanimity, argued that the State does not have the right to limit a hunger strike by coercive measures and that the detainee can refuse medical treatment; however, at the same time, this CNB document, by a majority of present members (19 out of 30), supported the interpretation that “in the case of imminent danger to life, when it is not possible to ascertain the actual will of the detainee, the medical doctor is not exempt from carrying out all those interventions suitable for saving his/her life.”⁴⁹

Actual and Potential Effects of the Cospito Affair

After Cospito was subjected to the *41-bis* prison regime in May 2022, several Italian and foreign anarchist militants organized protests and “direct actions,” including premeditated attacks, in the country and abroad in solidarity with his struggle in prison. For example, on June 27, 2022, in Rome, a bomb squad defused a parcel bomb that was sent to the headquarters of an Italian aerospace and defense multinational company, to the attention of its CEO;⁵⁰ this action was claimed online by insurrectionary anarchists under the moniker of the FAI/FRI and was explicitly “dedicated” to Cospito.⁵¹

After the beginning of Cospito’s hunger strike, on the night of December 2, 2022, anarchist militants set fire to cars of an Italian diplomat and left a Molotov cocktail in front of her private house in Athens. A few days later, the perpetrators claimed the attack in Greek⁵² under the banner of the “Carlo Giuliani revenge Nuclei” in solidarity with the Italian anarchist detainee.⁵ Within a few weeks, other lower-level “direct actions” were carried against Italian diplomatic missions in various foreign countries (including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States).⁵³

In addition, several threatening messages were spread. For example, on February 15, 2023, a letter signed with the FAI moniker was delivered to a few Italian companies and a newspaper. This typewritten flyer claimed that a certain manager “will be shot to death in front of his family” and added that this person, identified as “the black soul of market operations [...], at the service of the war that fuels death in Ukraine ... is the ideal target for the revenge of Alfredo [Cospito] and all comrades in prison. He [the manager] can be hit at any time. We know his habits, his interests.”⁵⁴

Interestingly, Cospito’s struggle against the *41-bis* regime attracted the interest of detainees placed under the same special regime belonging to Italian Mafia-type organizations. In particular, on January 31, 2023, it was revealed in a parliamentary speech by an Italian MP⁵⁵ that during Cospito’s one-hour yard time (with no more than four other, fixed inmates under the *41-bis* regime, without any turnover), on at least two occasions—on December 28, 2022, and on January 12, 2023—Cospito had a brief exchange of words with at least two *mafiosi* who opportunistically showed their support for his struggle against this special prison regime.

g This new cell apparently paid homage to Carlo Giuliani, the 23-year-old Italian demonstrator (not belonging to the insurrectionary anarchist movement) who was killed by a police agent on July 20, 2001, during the G8 Summit in Genoa. See also Duncan McDonnell, “The Genoa G8 and the Death of Carlo Giuliani,” in Stephen Gundle and Lucia Rinaldi eds., *Assassinations and Murder in Modern Italy: Transformations in Society and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 73-85.

It is worth bearing in mind that, unsurprisingly, members of Italian Mafia-type organizations have repeatedly attempted to oppose both the *41-bis* regime and *ergastolo ostativo*, even with occasional hunger strikes in prison,⁵⁶ often highlighting the legally controversial aspects of these prison rules.

Against this background, there should be concern that anarchist extremists could benefit from the visibility and interest generated by the Cospito affair. In fact, solidarity with prisoners has always been a key element of insurrectionary anarchism.^h In addition, common hostility toward state “repression” can reduce the distances with other sectors of the diverse anarchist galaxy and even with extremist left-wing milieus.ⁱ

In exceptional cases, such as the current Cospito affair, the theme of solidarity with “political prisoners” could attract more or less passive sympathies even from outside these extremist circles,^j potentially not only for the specific human story of this detainee on hunger strike, but also in favor of his violent extremist cause.

Furthermore, long before this prominent exponent of the FAI network ended up at the center of public debate and political discussion in Italy, many destructive “direct actions” had already been carried out “in revolutionary solidarity” with imprisoned comrades in Italy and abroad.⁵⁷ For example, Cospito and Gai claimed their 2012 Genoa gun attack under the moniker of the

“Olga Nucleus” of the FAI/FRI, with an explicit reference to Olga Ikonomidou, an imprisoned member of the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire.⁵⁸ Along these lines, authorities should anticipate that insurrectionary anarchists could intensify their violent and even terrorist activities in solidarity with Cospito, especially if his health conditions in prison were to deteriorate even further. This risk would likely only increase if Cospito ends up dying in prison, as, while he has stated that he does not want to become a “martyr,”⁵⁹ he seems to be heading down a path that leads to being recognized as such.

Conclusions

Insurrectionary anarchism has shown to be a serious threat in Italy and beyond. As regards the terrorist dimension of this phenomenon, in Italy the authorities have dealt with this menace with considerable success. In doing so, they have used relatively aggressive counterterrorism rules, measures, and practices⁶⁰ that, in part, derive directly or indirectly from the long fight against powerful Mafia-type organizations. Some rules, including key prison rules,⁶¹ were first introduced in emergency conditions but have subsequently been carefully and extensively tested and at times partially revised. While Italy’s approach against both the Mafia⁶² and terrorist actors⁶³ overall is usually considered sophisticated and effective, and involves a crucial and active role for an independent judiciary, some specific rules have raised delicate legal issues.

Against this background, the recent Cospito affair poses further difficulties. As in similar cases elsewhere,⁶⁴ the story of an unrepentant terrorist on indefinite hunger strike poses delicate dilemmas for a liberal democracy. On the one hand, state authorities cannot easily give in to what could be considered political blackmail, potentially even with indirect effects on the demanding fight against the Mafia; on the other hand, they must guarantee the protection of human rights while avoiding the risk of a *cause célèbre* increasing the visibility and potentially even the actual vitality of a violent extremist cause. Furthermore, in the case of insurrectionary anarchism, the decentralized and fluid nature of this largely clandestine phenomenon⁶⁵ implies that reactions of militants and sympathizers cannot be fully controlled, even by prominent figures who are part of this movement.

In conclusion, the Cospito affair not only confirms the dynamism of insurrectionary anarchism in Italy and internationally, it highlights more generally the complex dilemmas that liberal democracies face in combating terrorism. **CTC**

h For example, in the 2003 “Open Letter” in which the FAI introduced itself as a new entity to “the anarchist and anti-authoritarian movement,” the FAI claimed that the first of three “key points” underpinning “the pact of mutual support” among its members was solidarity with imprisoned comrades: “each action group in the Informal Anarchist Federation agrees to offer revolutionary solidarity to comrades who are under arrest or at large. This solidarity will show itself mainly through armed action.” “Chi siamo: lettera aperta al movimento anarchico ed antiautoritario,” FAI, December 21, 2003. See also Francesco Marone, “The rise of insurrectionary anarchist terrorism in Italy,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 8:3 (2015).

i In particular, despite the insurrectionary anarchists’ traditional disdain for Marxism, Italian Marxist-Leninist extremists showed solidarity with Cospito, also with the aim to draw attention to the condition of likeminded comrades in prison for terrorism. See, in particular, *Relazione sulla politica dell’informazione per la sicurezza 2022*, Sistema di informazione per la sicurezza della Repubblica, February 28, 2023, p. 92.

j For example, in early February 2023, groups of students occupied areas of universities in solidarity with Cospito, in Rome, Naples, and other Italian cities. See, for example, “Cospito, studenti Sapienza occupano facoltà di Lettere per solidarietà,” *Adnkronos*, February 2, 2023; “Cospito, occupata sede dell’ateneo L’Orientale di Napoli,” *Ansa*, February 8, 2023.

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