

Lone Leaders of Leaderless Resistors

**A Theory of Informal Leadership in Contemporary Terrorism
and Political Violence**

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Previous studies found that informal leadership emerges in leaderless resistance movements. However, its boundaries – i.e., the conditions in which leaders can be successful – remain obscure. This paper develops a theoretical framework to then apply it to the Informal Anarchist Federation. The findings suggest that leaders are more likely to succeed when conforming to the organization’s core values. Moreover, informal leadership is context-dependent, temporary, and spontaneous, but also ubiquitous since any militant can be a leader and followers play a crucial role in co-creating the enactment of leadership. The paper argues that understanding the leadership’s boundaries is crucial for counterterrorism purposes.

Introduction

Is leaderless resistance truly leaderless? If not, what kind of leadership can be expected to emerge in a leaderless movement and what circumstances will facilitate this process? This paper explores such issues to understand the leadership dynamics that characterize leaderless movements. By combining Gray’s notion of “ideational oligarchy” with Western’s “autonomist leadership”, it proposes a theoretical framework that can be useful to understand these leadership dynamics and carries out a case study on the Informal Anarchist Federation and Alfredo Cospito – a prominent insurrectionary anarchist.¹ The findings suggest different dynamics. First, to become influential, “ideational oligarchies” are more likely to be successful when they conform to core values and norms. Secondly, leaderless movements filter and select the ideational oligarch’s deeds and messages that resonated with them rather than embracing them *in toto*. Thirdly, ownership of, and control over, channels of communication with the wider movements are necessary but not sufficient for informal leadership to emerge. Reputation and legitimacy appear, instead, to play a more crucial role. Finally, every militant is a potential leader, but oligarchs can also assume this mantle against their intention.

The paper reviews the scholarship on leaderless resistance to then discuss the concepts of “ideational oligarchy”, “autonomist leadership”, “leader/leadership”, and “organization vs. movement”. Thereafter, it illustrates the methodology before discussing the case study. The subsequent sections provide an analysis of Cospito’s role within the Federation and his operational boundaries as an ideational oligarch. In conclusion, a brief comparison between Cospito and the cases of Theodore J. Kaczynski and Barry Horne – respectively, an antitechnology extremist and an animal rights activist – cor-

¹ Phillip W. Gray, “Leaderless Resistance, Networked Organization, and Ideological Hegemony,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 5 (November 2013): 655–71, doi.org; Simon Western, “Autonomist Leadership in Leaderless Movements: Anarchists Leading the Way,” *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 14, no. 4 (2014): 673–98.

roborates the findings of the case study. Thereafter, the paper concludes by highlighting lessons for counterterrorism efforts.

On Post-Organizational Terrorism: Leaderless Resistance in Contemporary Terrorism and Political Violence

Also known as Phantom Cell structure, leaderless resistance constitutes a major expression of contemporary “post-organizational terrorism”.² Defined as “a strategy of opposition that allows for and encourages individuals or small cells to engage in acts of political violence independent of any hierarchical leadership or network of support”,³ leadership resistance can thus be conceived as a form of struggle “in which an individual, or a very small, highly cohesive group engages in acts of anti-state violence independent of any movement, leader or network of support”.⁴ First proposed by US Col. Amoss in 1962, leaderless resistance was later reformulated by Louis Beam, an American Klansman also active in Aryan Nations.⁵ Its rationale has been traditionally attributed to the failure of previous, more hierarchical-based struggle.⁶ In other words, it has usually been considered as a strategy of desperation, “a child of necessity”⁷, or “a mark of despair” that seeks “to make a virtue of weakness and political isolation”.⁸

However, leaderless resistance has historical roots in various ideological milieus, such as the far left in Australia in the 1960s-1970s and among 19th-century anarchists.⁹ The latter did not, however, adopt this structure solely because of security concerns. Their refusal to identify or appoint leaders stems from the assumption that an egalitarian

² Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 271; Colin P. Clarke, “Trends in Terrorism: What’s on the Horizon in 2023?” (Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 3, 2023), www.fpri.org.

³ Paul Joosse, “Leaderless Resistance and Ideological Inclusion: The Case of the Earth Liberation Front,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 3 (July 4, 2007): 351, [doi.org](https://doi.org/10.1080/09639860701431111).

⁴ Jeffrey Kaplan, “Leaderless Resistance,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 3 (September 1997): 80, [doi.org](https://doi.org/10.1080/09639869708839381).

⁵ Louis Beam, “Leaderless Resistance,” *The Seditonist* 12 (1992), www.louisbeam.com; Joosse, “Leaderless Resistance and Ideological Inclusion”; Kaplan, “Leaderless Resistance.”

⁶ Paul Joosse, “Leaderless Resistance and the Loneliness of Lone Wolves: Exploring the Rhetorical Dynamics of Lone Actor Violence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 52–53, [doi.org](https://doi.org/10.1080/09639860600581111).

⁷ Beam, “Leaderless Resistance.”

⁸ Kaplan, “Leaderless Resistance,” 80.

⁹ Jean-Marc Flükiger, “The Radical Animal Liberation Movement: Some Reflections on Its Future,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 2, no. 2 (2008): 112–13, [doi.org](https://doi.org/10.1080/15393050802288111); Kristy Champion, “‘Unstructured Terrorism’? Assessing Left Wing Extremism in Australia,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 13, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 545–67, [doi.org](https://doi.org/10.1080/17513758.2020.1811111).

society would not emerge from a leader-driven, hierarchical movement.¹⁰ Therefore, leaderless resistance can also be a trait inherent to a milieu's identity and ideology.¹¹ While a few authors acknowledge the longer history of leaderless resistance, most of the studies relate it to the contemporary far right, Jihadism, and/or eco-terrorism.¹² This disregard for history is not new in terrorism studies.¹³ Similarly, as it is essentially an event-driven field, it is not surprising that the literature has focused predominantly on leaderless resistance in the more topical far-right and Jihadist violence.¹⁴

So, leaderless movements lack top-down authority structures and networks of support. As such, they are distinct from de-centralized organizations that retain a core group, such as in the hub-and-spoke model.¹⁵ They also cannot be equated to other forms of protest such as, e.g., "cultural resistance". While both lack coordination, a leaderless movement pursues a common political goal. Hence, it is a form of violence that puts forward an agenda, which is elaborated and presented in one or more documents.¹⁶ A further relevant trait is that it allows for a high degree of ideological inclusion to "avoid ideological cleavages".¹⁷

Additionally, it is important to clarify the conceptual distinction between the "leaderless resistor" and the so-called "lone wolf". These terms have been used interchangeably based on the assumption that leaderless resisters are "functionally separate from the organization or concept they represented at the time of their violent attack".¹⁸ Sweeney warns against these assumptions and argues that scholars "must be able to discern a lone wolf adapting Al Qaeda's ideology (...) from a leaderless resistor who internalizes the ideology of (...) Phineas Priesthood".¹⁹ While the "lone wolf" enjoyed popularity for

¹⁰ Jeff Ferrell, "An Anarchist Criminology for Uncertain Times," *Journal of Criminology* 54, no. 1 (March 2021): 97, doi.org.

¹¹ Matthew M. Sweeney, "Leaderless Resistance and the Truly Leaderless: A Case Study Test of the Literature-Based Findings," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 7 (July 3, 2019): 626–27, doi.org.

¹² Campion, "'Unstructured Terrorism'?", 559; Stefan H. Leader and Peter Probst, "The Earth Liberation Front and Environmental Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, no. 4 (2003): 37–58; Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "From Bombs to Books, and Back Again? Mapping Strategies of Right-Wing Revolutionary Resistance," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, April 5, 2021, 1–29, doi.org; Mattias Gardell, "Crusader Dreams: Oslo 22/7, Islamophobia, and the Quest for a Monocultural Europe," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 1 (January 2014): 129–55, doi.org; Andreas Önnarfors, "Between Breivik and PEGIDA: The Absence of Ideologues and Leaders on the Contemporary European Far Right," *Patterns of Prejudice* 51, no. 2 (March 15, 2017): 159–75, doi.org; Zachary Kallenborn and Philipp C. Bleek, "Avatars of the Earth: Radical Environmentalism and Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Weapons," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, May 3, 2018, 1–31, doi.org.

¹³ Richard English, "History and the Study of Terrorism," in *The Cambridge History of Terrorism*, ed. Richard English, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3–28, doi.org.

¹⁴ Bart Schuurman, "Topics in Terrorism Research: Reviewing Trends and Gaps, 2007–2016," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 463–80, doi.org.

¹⁵ Simson Garfinkel, "Leaderless Resistance Today," *First Monday* 8, no. 3 (2003).

¹⁶ Garfinkel.

¹⁷ Joosse, "Leaderless Resistance and Ideological Inclusion," 352.

¹⁸ Sweeney, "Leaderless Resistance," 626.

¹⁹ Sweeney, 629.

a few years, terrorism scholars are now reconsidering this typology, as “lone actors” are not completely isolated from (online or offline) radical milieus.²⁰ While notable examples remain – i.e., Theodore Kaczynski or Anders Breivik – these should be regarded as exceptions.²¹ Thus, lone wolves are individuals who, while operating outside of any organizations or movement, might, however, “borrow” an ideology or construct their own. Opposed to that, leaderless resisters are defined by their militancy in a movement that is leaderless, i.e., horizontal, diffused, and non-hierarchical.

Yet does the non-hierarchical nature of leaderless resistance prevent the emergence of forms of leadership? Liang and Lee argue that leadership does not disappear but becomes decentralized, diffuse, and informal.²² Therefore, as it would be “a mistake to think that any kind of group or organization can exist without leadership; the question is, what kind of leadership is it going to be”.²³ In this regard, Western concurs with Liang and Lee that informal leadership will emerge, while Gray argues that “ideational oligarchies” can form within leaderless movements. These oligarchies can provide ideological inspiration and information on where and how to carry out attacks.²⁴ Macklin and Bjørgo have similarly investigated the tasks that leaders can perform. Retracing Anders Breivik’s influence on tactical innovation in far-right milieus, they concluded that this was actually limited despite Breivik’s apparent ubiquity in far-right discourse.²⁵ Other studies highlight the inspirational role of the “Unabomber”, Theodore Kaczynski, within both the eco-fascist milieu²⁶ and the antitechnology movement.²⁷ While these articles shed light on the leadership dynamics in leaderless movements,

²⁰ Bart Schuurman et al., “End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology That Should Not Have Been,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 8 (August 3, 2019): 771–78, doi.org.

²¹ Sean Fleming, “The Unabomber and the Origins of Anti-Tech Radicalism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 27, no. 2 (2022): 218, doi.org; Schuurman et al., “End of the Lone Wolf,” 772.

²² Hai Liang and Francis L.F. Lee, “Opinion Leadership in a Leaderless Movement: Discussion of the AntiExtradition Bill Movement in the ‘LIHKG’ Web Forum,” *Social Movement Studies*, October 16, 2021, 1–19, doi.org.

²³ Bufe 1988, cited in Western, “Autonomist Leadership,” 679.

²⁴ Western, “Autonomist Leadership,” 677; Gray, “Leaderless Resistance.”

²⁵ Graham Macklin and Tore Bjørgo, “Breivik’s Long Shadow? The Impact of the July 22, 2011 Attacks on the Modus Operandi of Extreme-Right Lone Actor Terrorists,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 3 (2021): 14–36; See also Jacob Ware and Colin P. Clarke, “How Far-Right Terrorists Choose Their Enemies,” Issue Brief (The Soufan Center, December 2022), thesoufancenter.org.

²⁶ Joshua Farrel-Molloy and Graham Macklin, “Ted Kaczynski, Anti-Technology Radicalism and EcoFascism,” Perspectives (The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, June 15, 2022), icct.nl; Brian Hughes, Dave Jones, and Amarnath Amarasingam, “Ecofascism: An Examination of the Far-Right/Ecology Nexus in the Online Space,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, June 14, 2022, 1–27, doi.org; Graham Macklin, “The Extreme Right, Climate Change and Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 5 (July 4, 2022): 979–96, doi.org; Imogen Richards, Callum Jones, and Gearóid Brinn, “EcoFascism Online: Conceptualizing Far-Right Actors’ Response to Climate Change on Stormfront,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, December 18, 2022, 1–27, doi.org.

²⁷ Fleming, “The Unabomber”; Mauro Lubrano, “Stop the Machines: How Emerging Technologies Are Fomenting the War on Civilization,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 2 (February 17, 2023): 331, doi.org.

they offer only a surface-level understanding of how leadership is enacted. As such, both the dynamics and the boundaries of this leadership remain somewhat obscure, in particular when it comes to its role in processes of innovation. Indeed, as the scholarly debate on terrorist innovation has focused largely on traditional, hierarchical organizations, it remains unclear how these processes unfold in leaderless movements.²⁸ To investigate these dynamics, the next section combines the works of Gray and Western into a theoretical framework that is then applied to the case of the Informal Anarchist Federation.

Autonomist Leadership and Ideational Oligarchs

As argued, the non-hierarchical nature of leaderless resistance does not prevent leadership dynamics. Transposing Robert Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" onto the study of leaderless resistance, Gray argues that "ideational oligarchies" emerge within leaderless movements. This does not mean that individuals or cells receive specific, tailored directions and/or direct support. Instead, the oligarchies exercise their leadership by providing "ideological inspiration, general and/or specific targets of interest, and perhaps some technical information on planning and actualizing an attack".²⁹ While this paper borrows the term "ideational oligarchy" and fundamentally agrees with Gray on the tasks performed by the oligarch, it disagrees on the characteristics ascribed to this leadership. Gray argues that the oligarchy prevents innovations since, even if they "could benefit the organization, there are disincentives for the hegemonic group: a) there is too much to lose (...), and b) the leaders will tend to be comfortable with what has worked in the past".³⁰ At the same time, Gray argues that controlling the means of communication in a leaderless movement translates into controlling the movement.³¹ These notions are based on two problematic assumptions. First, it assumes the presence of a single ideational oligarchy, while, in a leaderless movement, there could be multiple ones. Then, considering today's multiplicity and diversity of means and channels of communication in the digital space, the idea that legitimacy and authority within a leaderless movement can depend entirely and solely on "who control the hyperlinks" appears improbable.³²

Instead, by resorting to Western's concept of "autonomist leadership", this paper attributes five characteristics to the ideational oligarchy: spontaneity, autonomy, mutualism, networks, and affect. Spontaneity implies that leadership is spontaneous and temporary since it emerges and falls away as contexts arise. Secondly, leaders and

²⁸ Mauro Lubrano, "Navigating Terrorist Innovation: A Proposal for a Conceptual Framework on How Terrorists Innovate," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 2 (2023): 249, doi.org.

²⁹ Gray, "Leaderless Resistance," 658.

³⁰ Gray, 666.

³¹ Gray, 663.

³² Gray, 663.

followers are interchangeable, and they both participate autonomously to co-create the enactment of leadership. To counterbalance the excesses of individual autonomy, this enactment is for the mutual benefit of the movement rather than self-interest. Moreover, autonomist leadership is fluid and dispersed throughout the networks; “[i]t pops up, disappears, reappears, is beyond any single individual or elite group and is potentially within all individuals”.³³ Finally, movements generate powerful collective affects, such as hope, solidarity, and love. Therefore, “[a]utonomist leaders act upon their personal affective investments and are mobilised by others into taking courageous or utilitarian acts of leadership”.³⁴ Since autonomist leadership emerged from the anarchist tradition, one might expect (some of) these characteristics to be exclusive of anarchism. However, elements of autonomist leadership are likely to characterize different leaderless milieus, as they are not solely dependent on ideology but also, and importantly, on the leaderless structure.

Thus, combining these two concepts provides a theoretical framework that identifies the tasks that informal leadership is expected to perform while also singling out the characteristics that this leadership will exhibit. Therefore, for an ideational oligarchy to emerge, it would have to exercise some degree of informal leadership and perform a few tasks, namely a) the provision of ideological inspiration; b) the identification of general and/or specific targets of interest; c) the provision of technical information on planning and actualizing attacks. In doing so, as there are no mechanisms to enforce it, leadership can be expected to be temporary, contextdependent, dispersed throughout the network, and founded upon the principles of autonomy, mutualism, and solidarity.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define a few additional terms, namely the notions of leader/leadership and that of organizations/movement. Drawing on the work of Freeman, this paper defines leaders as individuals who possess significant influence within a movement or organization when it comes to the provision of inspiration, ideological guidance, and operational direction.³⁵ Whereas organizations like the Provisional IRA or al-Qaeda formalize this influence by sanctioning one or more members’ authority and decision-making power over the rest of the organization through official titles and formal roles, leadership in leaderless movements is informal, dispersed, and context-dependent. Therefore, the aggregate functions that leaders perform in a leaderless context are similar to those that characterize hierarchical organizations, i.e., inspiration for members/militants and the provision of operational direction. It is how this leadership is enacted – i.e., its characteristics – that varies considerably. Being “leaderless” does not mean lacking direction or guidance; instead, it signifies that these tasks are performed in a decentralized and informal manner. Moreover, this paper will refer to leaderless entities as “movements” rather than “organization”. After all, the latter usually indicates clear leadership or governance structures, whereas the former

³³ Western, “Autonomist Leadership,” 681.

³⁴ Western, 682.

³⁵ Michael Freeman, “A Theory of Terrorist Leadership (and Its Consequences for Leadership Targeting),” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (September 2014): 667–70, doi.org.

is associated with notions of decentralization and informality. The term “organization” is used sparingly, either when quoting primary sources or when discussing the notion of “informal organization”.

Finally, while this paper primarily focuses on leaderless movements, it is important to note that informal leadership can also emerge within hierarchical organizations. Members without any formal position of authority can still provide inspirational and operational guidance. For example, Gerry Adams, despite being imprisoned and lacking a formal leadership role in the Provisional IRA in the mid-1970s, exerted informal leadership by advocating for a change in strategy through his writing under the pseudonym “Brownie” in *Republican News*. His strategic proposal for a “Long War” gained consensus within the Republican Movement, showcasing his influence.³⁶ Eventually, Adams assumed positions of power within the Republican Movement and the “Long War” was launched in the late 1970s. Similarly, the Historic Nucleus of the Italian Red Brigades exercised considerable influence over the rest of the organization even though its components did not hold any official title or role since they were all serving terms of imprisonment.³⁷ Both these examples contribute to illustrating that how informal leadership is not a prerogative of leaderless movements.

Methodology

The paper presents a case study on the Informal Anarchist Federation (FAI) with a specific focus on Alfredo Cospito – an anarchist risen to prominence within the Federation. Three reasons underpin this case selection. First, as discussed in the literature review, the FAI’s leaderless nature is inherent to its ideology, whereas previous studies on leadership dynamics in leaderless movements have focused on milieus that have adopted the leaderless resistance following the failure of previous methods and strategies.³⁸ Secondly, the recent increase in farright political violence, along with the ongoing Jihadist threat, have overshadowed insurrectionary anarchism, leaving it largely unexplored. Therefore, shedding light on this obscure and under-researched milieu might uncover interesting patterns and driving forces. Finally, Cospito’s case is particularly intriguing due to his ambiguous record as an informal leader, having both succeeded and failed in this role. As such, carrying out a within-case comparison of Cospito’s role within the FAI might allow to identify the determinants that facilitate or hinder the ideational oligarchy. Thereafter, the cases of Kaczynski and Barry Horne enrich the observations and corroborate the case study’s findings.

³⁶ Gerry Adams, *Cage Eleven* (Dingle: Brandon, 2012); Patrick Bishop and Eamon Mallie, *The Provisional IRA* (London: Corgi Books, 1988), 346.

³⁷ Senato della Repubblica — Camera dei Deputati, “Commissione Parlamentare d’inchiesta Sulla Strage Di Via Fani, Sul Sequestro e l’assassinio Di Aldo Moro e Sul Terrorismo in Italia,” VIII Leg., Doc. XXII, No.5, Vol. 10, 1986, 594, www.senato.it.

³⁸ See, e.g., Sweeney, “Leaderless Resistance”; Kaplan, ““Leaderless Resistance.””

In terms of data, this paper makes extensive use of primary sources including documents published online by the FAI and other anarchist movements as well as Cospito and additional anarchist ideologues. These documents are available on the Internet or were retrieved from underground bookstores in Europe – e.g., Kalaballk in Berlin, Germany. This data set is complemented by reports from various government security and law enforcement agencies as well as court documents. The next section will now present the case study.

The Informal Anarchist Federation – International Revolutionary Front

The Informal Anarchist Federation (FAI – *Federazione Anarchica Informale*) is a loose network that emerged in Italy in 2003.³⁹ Originally consisting of four cells, it has grown to become the most dangerous form of endogenous extremism in Italy and an international brand active in several countries.⁴⁰ The following paragraphs present a brief overview of the FAI. This is necessary, since the last substantial analysis of the FAI available in the literature dates to 2015.⁴¹ Thereafter, the analysis focuses on Alfredo Cospito.

The FAI: Ideology and Organizational Structure

“To call yourself an anarchist is to invite identification with an unpredictable array of associations, an ensemble which is unlikely to mean the same thing to any two people, including any two anarchists”.⁴² Anarchism can, thus, be seen as a set of overlapping and, at times, competing traditions rather than as a coherent theory.⁴³ When it comes to violence, anarchists have historically exhibited three stances. According to the first, anarchism is nonviolent, while the second one supports violence against property. Lastly, the third stance – ascribable to Errico Malatesta’s thought – deems violence against both property and people as necessary.⁴⁴

³⁹ FAI, “Lettera Aperta al Movimento Anarchico Ed Anti-Autoritario [Open Letter to the Anarchiststand AntiAuthoritarian Movement],” December 21, 2003, www.sebbenchesiamodonne.it.

⁴⁰ Ministero degli Interni, “Relazione al Parlamento Sull’Attività Delle Forze Di Polizia, Sullo Stato Dell’ordine e Della Sicurezza Pubblica e Sulla Criminalità Organizzata.” (Rome: Italian Ministry of the Interior, 2014), www.interno.gov.it.

⁴¹ Francesco Marone, “The Rise of Insurrectionary Anarchist Terrorism in Italy,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 8, no. 3 (September 2, 2015): 194–214, [doi.org](https://doi.org/10.1080/17513758.2015.1081111).

⁴² Bob Black, “My Anarchism Problem,” 1994, theanarchistlibrary.org.

⁴³ Leonard Williams, “Anarchism Revived,” *New Political Science* 29, no. 3 (September 2007): 299, [doi.org](https://doi.org/10.1080/00287180701611111).

⁴⁴ Randy Borum and Chuck Tilby, “Anarchist Direct Actions: A Challenge for Law Enforcement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 3 (May 2005): 201–2, [doi.org](https://doi.org/10.1080/10577170500046111).

Anarchism is also rather flexible and, as such, capable of integrating other issues into its struggles besides the traditional opposition to the state, the prison system, and authority.⁴⁵ Additionally, two key elements characterize anarchism: the reliance on direct action and the ethos of prefigurative politics.⁴⁶ While the latter refers to the modes of organization that reflect the type of society that anarchists strive for, the former is “a multifaceted term which reflects the do-it-yourself approach animating anarchists’ action repertoires”.⁴⁷ In its violent acceptation then, direct action is “every method of immediate warfare by the workers [or other sections of society] against their economic and political oppressors”.⁴⁸ Therefore, contemporary anarchism is a theory of practice based on the idea of propaganda of the deed.⁴⁹ While sharing features such as ideological flexibility, prefigurative politics, and direct action with the rest of the anarchist universe, the FAI galaxy displays an approach that aligns with Malatesta’s perspective and considers violence essential for the revolution. However, it must be noted that anarchist violence is typically low-profile. Because of a “deep-rooted and indestructible repugnance for any bloody act”, insurrectionary anarchists rarely aim at causing casualties.⁵⁰ While some militants have supported the idea of killing people, the Federation has yet to claim its first fatal operation.⁵¹ Overall, the FAI ideology is therefore based on “an extremist tendency within the anarchist movement” that “emphasized the practice of revolutionary insurrection through illegal and violent ‘direct action’”⁵² – what is usually referred to as “insurrectionary anarchism”. This ideology defines an ongoing practice based on the “informal organization” model.⁵³ Informal organizations emerge when multiple affinity groups – i.e., people with a shared purpose or interest – unite under a common cause and resort to direct actions.⁵⁴

Consistent with these precepts, the FAI defines itself as “a chaotic and horizontal organization, without bosses, authorities, or central committees” which is fundamentally a manifestation of its ethos of prefigurative politics. The “informality” derives from the fact that anarchists “do not believe in vanguards nor do we think that we are an enlightened active minority”.⁵⁵ Operationally, the FAI leans on three pillars. First,

⁴⁵ Williams, “Anarchism Revived,” 300.

⁴⁶ Uri Gordon, “Anarchism Reloaded,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12, no. 1 (February 2007): 30, doi.org.

⁴⁷ Gordon, 36.

⁴⁸ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*, Sixth (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2004), 78.

⁴⁹ Williams, “Anarchism Revived,” 312.

⁵⁰ Anonymous, “Journey Towards the Abyss: Scattered Reflections on the Technoworld” (Hourriya, April 2018), 12.

⁵¹ Marone, “The Rise,” 205.

⁵² Francesco Marone, “A Profile of the Informal Anarchist Federation in Italy,” *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 3 (2014): 21.

⁵³ Anonymous, “Do or Die. Insurrectionary Anarchism: Organising for Attack!,” 2011, 3–14, theanarchistlibrary.org.

⁵⁴ Alfredo M. Bonanno, *Anarchismus Und Aufstand* (Edition Irreversibel, 2014), 175–176.

⁵⁵ FAI, “Letter Aperta.”

they demonstrate solidarity for imprisoned comrades through direct actions. Secondly, they organize their activities in revolutionary campaigns, illustrating their rationale and purpose through direct actions and communiqués. Any individual or affinity group can launch a campaign. Other cells/individuals can follow or express their disagreement through actions and communiqués. Finally, communication between militants must be through actions rather than personal connections. The informality of these practices is meant to prevent the emergence of vanguards, leaders, and/or bureaucracies, while also making repression harder for the authorities.⁵⁶ It emerges from this brief description that characteristics of the autonomist leadership are inherent to the FAI. Any single individual or cell can assume the mantle by carrying out direct actions and explaining their rationale. In what resembles a process of natural selection, the Federation then follows up with more actions which could turn into campaigns if the original direct action resonated with the FAI militants. This is a spontaneous and diffuse process whereby followers and leaders work together to enact leadership for the mutual benefit of the Federation and the anarchist cause. Retracing Cospito's rise as an ideational oligarch, the next sections probe this process.

The FAI: Two Decades of Activity

Since stepping on the stage in 2003, the FAI had carried out at least thirty attacks on Italian soil against police and military targets until they appeared to be over in 2007.⁵⁷ It was not until 2009 that the FAI resumed its activity. Allegedly, the exacerbation of an internal debate caused the 2007–2009 period of dormancy.⁵⁸ Upon resuming violence, the Federation launched an internationalization project which culminated in the establishment of the International Revolutionary Front (FRI) in 2011. From there on, FAI used the acronym FAI-FRI (*Federazione Anarchica Informale – Fronte Rivoluzionario Internazionale*). This project was launched in concert with the Greek insurrectionary anarchist movement, Conspiracy of the Cells of Fire (CCF – *Συνωμοσία των Πυρήνων της Φωτιάς*).

Thanks to the new, international brand, FAI-FRI claimed attacks in several countries, including Spain, Chile, Indonesia, and Mexico, in 2012. However, the main FAI-FRI hub – i.e., the Italian Peninsula – witnessed a deadlock following the Federation's most spectacular attack i.e., the kneecapping of Roberto Adinolfi, a senior executive of the nuclear engineering group Ansaldo Nucleare, in May 2012.⁵⁹ The “Olga Nucleus”, consisting of Nicola Gai and Alfredo Cospito and named after the CCF imprisoned

⁵⁶ FAI.

⁵⁷ Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza, “Relazione al Parlamento 2011,” Relazione Sulla Politica Dell'Informazione per La Sicurezza (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, February 28, 2012), 40, www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it.

⁵⁸ Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza, 40.

⁵⁹ EUROPOL, “European Union: Terrorism Situation and Trend Report” (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2013), 31, www.europol.europa.eu.

militant Olga Ikonomidou, claimed responsibility but was apprehended shortly thereafter. Following this, an internal debate stalled operations.⁶⁰ This inactivity coincided with a longer period of dormancy of the CCF.⁶¹ However, both movements resumed activities in 2013 when they launched a few initiatives including the Phoenix Project⁶² and the *Croce Nera Anarchica* (Anarchist Black Cross).⁶³ Allegedly, Cospito and Gai were the proponents of this latter initiative.⁶⁴ Thanks to this renewed momentum, FAI-FRI attacks were reported in fourteen countries in 2014 – although the main hotbeds remained Greece and Italy.⁶⁵

Throughout the years, the FAI-FRI displayed old and new trends.⁶⁶ While engaged in traditional issues, such as the prison system, the Federation also focused on the pro-migrant struggle, with actions carried out against immigration detention centers.⁶⁷ Similarly, the FAIFRI has demonstrated an increasing interest in emerging technologies with different attacks against targets related to, e.g., nuclear technologies or biotechnologies.⁶⁸ These campaigns against (emerging) technologies stem from the belief that technologies “are solidifying existing power relationship of dominion and will lead to profoundly unimaginable living situations for billions of people. (...)”.⁶⁹ This anti-technology agenda, combined with its anti-capitalist and anti-elites stance, has become a predominant issue within the Federation.⁷⁰ Consistent with the inclusive nature of leaderless movements, it intersects with other issues, such as the fight against the state, the prison system, and right-wing extremism, to form a broad antagonistic campaign of violence.⁷¹ Then, the Covid-19 pandemic offered an opportunity

⁶⁰ Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza, “Relazione al Parlamento 2012,” Relazione Sulla Politica Dell’Informazione per La Sicurezza (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, February 28, 2013), 34, www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it; Ministero degli Interni, “Relazione al Parlamento Sull’Attività Delle Forze Di Polizia, Sullo Stato Dell’ordine e Della Sicurezza Pubblica e Sulla Criminalità Organizzata.” (Rome: Italian Ministry of the Interior, 2013), 11, www.interno.gov.it.

⁶¹ Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza, “Relazione al Parlamento 2014,” Relazione Sulla Politica Dell’Informazione per La Sicurezza (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, March 6, 2015), 44, www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it.

⁶² Anonymous, “The Phoenix Project: Initiatives of Combative Anarchy 2013–2014” (Untorelli Press, August 2015), untorellipress.noblogs.org.

⁶³ FAI, “Roma – Presentazione Del Progetto Editoriale Croce Nera Anarchica,” 2014, www.autistici.org.

⁶⁴ Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza, “Relazione 2014,” 69–70.

⁶⁵ Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza, 71.

⁶⁶ EUROPOL, “European Union: Terrorism Situation and Trend Report” (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2017), 42, www.europol.europa.eu.

⁶⁷ Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza, “Relazione al Parlamento 2016,” Relazione Sulla Politica Dell’Informazione per La Sicurezza (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, February 27, 2017), 71–72, www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it.

⁶⁸ 325, “#11,” 2014, 325.nostate.net.

⁶⁹ 325, 10.

⁷⁰ Lubrano, “Stop the Machines.”

⁷¹ Ariel Koch, “Trends in Anti-Fascist and Anarchist Recruitment and Mobilization,” *Journal for Deradicalization* 14 (2018): 3.

for the antitechnology issue to gain momentum. The FAI-FRI spoke of Covid-19 as the “greatest opportunity” to implement the “dominion of the machine-world”, which will allow the technoelites “to good-naturedly do what yesterday’s fascists and secret services wanted to impose brutally”.⁷² The front against technology widens, as even medicine is now considered an “oppressive institution, one of the many columns upon which the patriarchal, techno-industrial capitalist system is founded”.⁷³ Interestingly, such an anti-technology stance has not impeded resorting to encrypted applications for communication, awareness-raising, propaganda, and recruiting.⁷⁴

Overall, there have been “growing concerns about an increased propensity for violence within the left-wing and anarchist extremist scene”.⁷⁵ Several EU Member States have reported an increasing number of extremist incidents and terrorist attacks in 2021.⁷⁶ This reflects the twolevel activism that characterizes insurrectionary anarchism, consisting of a movementist and a clandestine approach. The movementist approach entails infiltrating public demonstrations to promote more antagonistic forms of struggle, whereas the clandestine one involves resorting to more violent and destructive direct actions.⁷⁷

Aligned with this recent escalation, the latest FAI-FRI offensive commenced in 2022. The *casus belli* was Alfredo Cospito’s transfer from the ordinary prison regime into the 41-bis regime in May 2022.⁷⁸ Also known as “hard prison system” (*carcere duro*), Article 41-bis of the Italian Prison Administration Act allows the suspension of certain prison regulations and is typically enforced against those people imprisoned for Mafia-related crimes, terrorism, or attempts to subvert the constitutional system that can still direct the organizations from behind bars thereby constituting a risk even from within the prison. The goal is to isolate and separate inmates from their criminal or terrorist associates. It involves solitary confinement for twentytwo hours a day and a one-hour visit per month along with other restrictions.⁷⁹ Significantly, it was Cospito’s “apical role” (*ruolo apicale*) within the Federation that motivated implementing the 41-bis prison.⁸⁰ Cospito went on a hunger strike in October 2022 to protest against this decision.⁸¹ As

⁷² 325, “#12,” 2020, 14–17; 29, 325.nostate.net.

⁷³ Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza, “Relazione al Parlamento 2021,” Relazione Sulla Politica Dell’Informazione per La Sicurezza (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, February 28, 2022), 100, www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it.

⁷⁴ EUROPOL, “European Union: Terrorism Situation and Trend Report” (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2022), 62, www.europol.europa.eu.

⁷⁵ EUROPOL, 58.

⁷⁶ EUROPOL, 63–64.

⁷⁷ Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza, “Relazione 2021,” 99.

⁷⁸ Angela Giuffrida, “Italian Anarchist’s Hunger Strike Rekindles Debate over Harsh Prison Regime,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2023, www.theguardian.com.

⁷⁹ Antonia Roberta Siino, “The Article 41-Bis of the Italian Criminal Jurisdiction : Indispensable Instrument or Basis for Torture?,” *Sicurezza e Scienze Sociali*, no. 2 (2015): 122–34, doi.org.

⁸⁰ Adriano Sofri, “La Vicenda Di Alfredo Cospito. Quando La Giustizia è Smisurata e Si Compiace Di Esserl,” *Il Foglio*, December 21, 2022, sec. Piccola Posta, www.ilfoglio.it.

⁸¹ Sofri.

of March 2023, he continues the strike which resulted in a loss of over forty kilograms.⁸² Rallying behind Cospito, anarchists' lines of intervention developed along the above-mentioned two-level approach. This resulted in violent public demonstrations in cities like Rome and Turin⁸³ as well as clandestine operations in Italy and abroad. Domestically, these strikes targeted law enforcement and telecommunication systems,⁸⁴ while the attacks abroad struck cultural and diplomatic targets in Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Greece, Spain, Germany, and Switzerland.⁸⁵ Consistent with the historic anarchist low profile, these attacks resulted in property damage but no casualty. Who is, however, Alfredo Cospito? Why and how has he become such a prominent, apical figure in an organization that knows neither leaders nor vanguards?⁸⁶

Alfredo Cospito has been actively involved in the Italian insurrectionary anarchist scene since the late 1980s.⁸⁷ As of 2006, the Italian security forces started monitoring his activities.⁸⁸ His most notorious deed as a FAI militant is the kneecapping of Adinolfi in 2012 for which he was sentenced to ten years and eight months.⁸⁹ While serving this sentence, he was found guilty of the bombing at a Carabinieri cadet barracks near Turin in 2006 and sentenced to an additional twenty years.⁹⁰ During the third and last instance of the trial, in 2022, the Supreme Court of Cassation (*Corte Suprema di Cassazione*), ordered a new trial asking to consider revising the charges from “common massacre” (*strage comune*) to “political massacre” (*strage politica*).⁹¹ This re-classification means that Cospito could be sentenced to life imprisonment without parole. Instead of proceeding with the trial, the Court of Assizes of Appeal (*Corte d'Assise d'Appello*) in Turin invoked the Constitutional Court (*Corte Costituzionale*) of the Italian Republic

⁸² Giuffrida, “Italian”; Alessandra Arachi, “Alfredo Cospito Ricoverato in Ospedale: Oltre al Cibo, Rifiuta Anche Gli Integratori,” *Il Corriere Della Sera*, February 11, 2023, www.corriere.it.

⁸³ Alessia Marani, “Anarchici, La Galassia Si Allarga: Lo Zoccolo Duro Romano e La ‘Chiamata Alle Armi,’” *Il Messaggero*, January 30, 2023, www.ilmessaggero.it; Redazione ANSA, “Violence, Vandalism at Anarchist Demonstration in Turin,” *ANSA*, December 5, 2022, www.ansa.it.

⁸⁴ Carlotta Rocci, “Protesta Degli Anarchici per Cospito, a Fuoco Un Ripetitore Sulla Collina Di Torino,” *La Repubblica*, January 28, 2023, torino.repubblica.it; Redazione ANSA, “A Roma Cinque Auto in Fiamme Nel Parcheggio Della Tim, Poco Distante Le Scritte ‘No 41 Bis’. Rivendicazione Degli Anarchici,” *ANSA*, January 31, 2023, www.ansa.it.

⁸⁵ Alvisè Armellini, “Italy Facing Attacks by International Anarchists, Foreign Minister Says,” *Reuters*, January 31, 2023, www.reuters.com.

⁸⁶ The following discussion covers events up to March 2023

⁸⁷ Alfredo Cospito, A Few Words of “Freedom” Interview by CCF – Imprisoned Members Cell with Alfredo Cospito, interview by Conspiracy of Cells of Fire, July 2014, 3, 325.nostate.net.

⁸⁸ Redazione ANSA, “Alfredo Cospito, l’anarchico al 41 Bis,” *ANSA*, February 2, 2023, www.ansa.it.

⁸⁹ Maria R. D’Angelo, Sentenza n. 6 del 11 luglio 2014 nel procedimento penale contro Alfredo Cospito e Nicola Gai, No. Verdict N. 6 (Corte d’Assise di Appello di Genova July 11, 2014).

⁹⁰ For the 2006 attack in Fossano, see EUROPOL, “European Union: Terrorism Situation and Trend Report” (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2007), 33, www.europol.europa.eu.

⁹¹ Sarah Martinenghi, “‘Scripta Manent’, La Cassazione Ordina Un Nuovo Processo d’appello per Il Leader Anarchico Alfredo Cospito,” *La Repubblica*, July 7, 2022, sec. Cronaca, https://torino.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/07/07/news/scripta_manent_la_cassazione_nuovo_processo_dap

which will have to decide whether certain mitigating circumstances can be applied to Cospito's retrial.⁹²

While Cospito's fate remains uncertain, his years in prison have been rather turbulent. Even from behind prison bars, Cospito has kept fighting the anarchist struggle carrying out direct actions with whatever means available. In August 2016, he vandalized the meeting room of the Ferrara Prison in solidarity with imprisoned Greek comrades.⁹³ Confined into temporary solitary, Cospito launched a short-lived hunger strike.⁹⁴ In June 2019, he then joined a few other anarchists on a second hunger strike.⁹⁵ Meanwhile, Cospito has also contributed to debates within the FAI. His writings have been published on websites close to the FAI.⁹⁶ This led to accusations that he was directing the FAI's activities from within the prison, prompting the authorities to impose the 41-bis prison regime, thereby precluding him any opportunity to communicate with the outside world.⁹⁷ Although Cospito has repeatedly denied being the Federation's leader or ideologue, the investigators concluded that he exercised enough influence to be considered a reference point for insurrectionary anarchists to whom he suggested both programmatic lines and potential targets.⁹⁸ Overall, he allegedly contributed to two books and several letters.⁹⁹

An Ideational Oligarch? Cospito and the Federation

While this paper remains impartial in the legal debate, it is undeniable that, in a universe devoid of heroes like the anarchist one, Cospito has surged to a special status – in particular, following his apprehension in 2012. Prior to this, Cospito's identity was – consistent with leaderless resistance precepts – unknown to his FAI comrades.

⁹² Stefano Pagliarini, "Questa è La Storia Di Alfredo Cospito, Il Primo Anarchico Italiano in Carcere al 41 Bis," *Today*, February 2, 2023, sec. Politica, www.today.it.

⁹³ Redazione ANSA, "Terrorismo: Arrestati 7 Anarchici Fai," *ANSA*, September 7, 2016, www.ansa.it.

⁹⁴ Massimo Numa, "Sciopero Della Fame in Carcere per Gli Anarchici Dell'operazione Scripta Mament," *La Stampa*, October 21, 2016, www.lastampa.it.

⁹⁵ CNA, "Aggiornamento Sullo Sciopero Della Fame Della Sezione AS2 Di Ferrara" (Croce Nera Anarchica, June 19, 2019), www.autistici.org.

⁹⁶ See, e.g., Cospito, A Few Words of "Freedom"; Alfredo Cospito, "The Autism of the Insurrectionists," July 2018, theanarchistlibrary.org; Alfredo Cospito, "On the 'Proposal For a New Anarchist Manifesto,'" April 19, 2021, theanarchistlibrary.org; Alfredo Cospito, "Ready or Not," November 25, 2017, theanarchistlibrary.org; Alfredo Cospito, "From the Belly of the Leviathan. Declaration at the Trial (October 30 2013) for the Wounding of Ansaldo Nucleare Managing Director Roberto Adinolf," November 4, 2013, theanarchistlibrary.org.

⁹⁷ Federico Genta, "Bomba a Due Magistrati, Allarme a Torino," *La Stampa*, June 16, 2017, sec. Cronaca, www.lastampa.it; "Ferrara, Il Diktat Dell'anarchico in Cella: 'Colpite Il Mio Carceriere,'" *Il Resto Del Carlino*, May 22, 2019, sec. Cronaca, www.ilrestodelcarlino.it.

⁹⁸ "Cospito, Ecco Tutte Le Accuse Contro l'anarchico," *Il Sole 24 Ore*, February 3, 2023, sec. Giustizia, www.ilsole24ore.com.

⁹⁹ Luigi Manconi, "L'anarchico Delle Bombe Che Ora Rischia Di Morire in Cella Come Un Boss. Ma Non Ha Ucciso Nessuno," *La Repubblica*, November 15, 2022, sec. Cronaca, www.repubblica.it.

Cospito himself claimed that the only FAI militant he knew before his arrest was Nicola Gai¹⁰⁰ – and that no one else knew that the operation was in the pipeline.¹⁰¹ While the latter statement could be true, there is reason to doubt the former. After all, Cospito allegedly carried out the 2006 bombing along with his partner, Anna Beniamino, a FAI militant.¹⁰² It is reasonable to suspect that Cospito knew, or was close to, other individuals gravitating towards the FAI galaxy – which, of course, does not indicate a hierarchical relationship between them.

So, paradoxically, instead of representing his downfall, Cospito’s arrest elevated his status to that of a prominent figure within the Federation. The analysis here focuses on two episodes, namely the 2012 Adinolfi kneecapping and Cospito’s role in mobilizing anarchists from behind prison bars in the last years. Interestingly, these episodes had different outcomes, one negative and one positive. In the former, Cospito’s actions did not become a source of inspiration, whereas they did in the latter.

From the Adinolfi Kneecapping to the 41-bis Protest

On May 7, 2012, Nicola Gai waited on a stolen motorbike as Cospito approached Roberto Adinolfi – a senior executive of Ansaldo Nucleare – and shot him in the knee with a Tokarev semi-automatic pistol purchased on the black market for three hundred euros. Cospito and Gai fled the scene, but Adinolfi managed to take note of the license plate. This proved instrumental for apprehending the Olga Nucleus.¹⁰³ As transpired from the subsequent trial, this direct action was calling for a larger campaign consisting of seven – the number of CFF comrades imprisoned with Olga¹⁰⁴ – additional actions targeting Finmeccanica, a multinational company specialized in defense and security. According to the principle of informality, the other attacks should have been carried out by other FAI-FRI affinity groups.¹⁰⁵

Negative Case: The Failed Finmeccanica Campaign

However, the Finmeccanica campaign never came to fruition. Its target was the technoindustrial civilization represented by the nuclear and defense industries.¹⁰⁶ Even though this campaign failed to take off, anarchist anti-technology violence increased in subsequent years. In fact, anti-technology motives were not significantly featured in

¹⁰⁰ Cospito, A Few Words of "Freedom".

¹⁰¹ Cospito, "From the Belly."

¹⁰² Sarah Martinenghi and Carlotta Rocci, "Torino, Chiesto l'ergastolo per Cospito. Gli Anarchici in Corteo Picchiano Un Barista," *La Repubblica*, December 5, 2022, https://torino.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/12/05/news/lideologo_del_fai_alfredo_cospito_rischia_lergastolo

¹⁰³ Cospito, "From the Belly."

¹⁰⁴ D'Angelo, *Sentenza n. 6* at 13.

¹⁰⁵ D'Angelo, at 13.

¹⁰⁶ Cospito, "From the Belly," 2.

anarchists' documents or *modus operandi* until 2011. The first mention in EUROPOL's "EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report" appears in the 2011 issue.¹⁰⁷ Conversely, the 2021 and 2022 reports clearly indicate the growing significance of anti-technology sentiments, not only within the anarchist narratives and praxis but also in other ideological milieus, such as the far right.¹⁰⁸ Now, attributing this increase in anti-technology violence to Cospito would be shortsighted. If anything, he is a symptom, rather than a cause. What makes Cospito's attack stand out is the *modus operandi*. Firearms and armed assault are not recurrent weapons of choice or attack types in the FAI. The only attack displaying these characteristics featured in the Global Terrorist Database is the Adinolfi one.¹⁰⁹ In fact, this direct action sparked an internal discussion. The Olga Nucleus – and, by reflection, Cospito – was accused of "vanguardism" and "armed fetishism".¹¹⁰ In other words, this action was reminiscent of notions that are fundamentally incompatible with the FAI, namely the long-standing opposition to vanguards and the controversial stances over the resort to lethal violence – even more so considering the unusual weapon selection and attack type that characterized the latter.¹¹¹ Even the then-director of Italy's Internal Information and Security Agency, Giorgio Piccirillo, admitted that this attack displayed several novel elements, including a careful planning – an unusual element that contradicted the traditional spontaneity and non-hierarchical nature of anarchist praxis.¹¹² More than an aversion to the anti-technology issue, therefore, it was over the Nucleus' *modus operandi* that the Federation polarized. Consequently, the Finmeccanica campaign did not materialize and the resort to firearms remained an isolated event, for now.

Since militants did not embrace Cospito's call, they did not participate in the co-creation of the enactment of leadership; a leadership which was perceived to be motivated by self-interest (i.e., vanguardism and armed fetishism) rather than mutual benefit for the movement. A leadership that did not emerge spontaneously from the network, but that was perceived as an attempt to consolidate authority in one individual. Perhaps the fact that Cospito was relatively unknown to the larger anarchist masses at the time of the Adinolfi operation also undermined his reputation. Therefore,

¹⁰⁷ EUROPOL, "European Union: Terrorism Situation and Trend Report" (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2011), 32, www.europol.europa.eu.

¹⁰⁸ EUROPOL, "European Union: Terrorism Situation and Trend Report" (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021), 90, www.europol.europa.eu; EUROPOL, "European Union 2022," 58–70.

¹⁰⁹ START (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism), "Global Terrorism Database 1970 — 2020," 2022, www.start.umd.edu. There exists the possibility that the GTD neglected similar episodes. However, considering the coverage of other, minor FAI-FRI's activities, it is reasonable to assume that a spectacular, Adinolfi-like attack would have been reported.

¹¹⁰ Dipartimento delle Informazioni per la Sicurezza, "Relazione 2012," 34; Ministero degli Interni, "Relazione 2013," 11.

¹¹¹ Anonymous, "Journey Towards the Abyss," 12; FAI, "Letter Aperta."

¹¹² "I Servizi: «Ci Saranno Nuovi Attentati Anarchici»,” *Corriere Della Sera*, May 23, 2012, www.corriere.it.

despite opting for anarchists' preferred method of communication – i.e., direct action and online communiqués on several anarchist websites – and proposing a campaign that could resonate with the public, Cospito did not manage to perform the three tasks of the oligarch as his *modus operandi* clashed with anarchist operational and ideological principles.

Positive Case: Cospito Mobilizes Anarchists

As mentioned, after his arrest, Cospito gained notoriety. Free from the shackles of anonymity imposed by security concerns during his violent activist day, Cospito's name started circulating along with his writings on anarchist-affiliated websites. This contributed to making him an increasingly prominent figure – at least, more than other imprisoned anarchists. In these documents, Cospito espouses the most extremist, nihilist interpretation of insurrectionary anarchism.¹¹³ A staunch anti-civilization and anti-technology anarchist, Cospito also commented on the possibility of connecting the FAI struggle with that of the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front. In doing so, he lamented “their opposition on striking people”; something he could “not understand”, while he could “agree more with the violence of the Mexican ITS”.¹¹⁴ ITS – i.e., Individualists Tending Towards the Wild) – is a group that resorted to lethal violence against scientists and representatives of the techno-industrial society.¹¹⁵

Similarly, Cospito engaged in broader debates within the insurrectionary anarchist milieu. For example, in February/April 2020, an anonymous document titled “Reflections on the underlying environment of contemporary informal, insurrectional, international anarchy (for a new anarchic manifesto)”, published on an anarchist website, promoted a return to a different “anarchism of praxis”; one that should not rely solely on destructive direct actions, as this would restrict the struggle to “the limited performance of a group of specialists” – i.e., a vanguard.¹¹⁶ On 19 April 2021, Cospito wrote his rebuttal. Fundamentally opposed to nostalgic practices that prioritize ideological discussions and theorization over direct actions, Cospito defended the FAI-FRI “method”, while also stating that when it comes to social insurrection:¹¹⁷

[i]t should be the groups and the anarchist individualities, through their actions, to talk about it. Only from their analyses, conveyed through ac-

¹¹³ Cospito, A Few Words of “Freedom”; Alfredo Cospito, Claudia and Stefano, and Gioacchino Somma, “Operation Scripta Manent – Statements to the Court,” November 2017, theanarchistlibrary.org.

¹¹⁴ Cospito, A Few Words of “Freedom”, 9.

¹¹⁵ Michael Loadenthal, *The Politics of Attack: Communiqués and Insurrectionary Violence* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2018), 83; Lubrano, “Stop the Machines,” 327–29.

¹¹⁶ Anonymous, “Reflections on the Underlying Environment of Contemporary Informal, Insurrectional, International Anarchy (for a New Anarchic Manifesto),” April 2020, <https://corrispondenzeanarchiche.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/manifesto-inglese.pdf>.

¹¹⁷ Alfredo Cospito, “On the ‘Proposal for a New Anarchist Manifesto,’” April 19, 2021, theanarchistlibrary.org.

tions, the new anarchist perspective can be strengthened. Only in this way we can make the necessary and indispensable selection that can exclude a priori the “professional ideologists”, those who do not act in the real world and therefore do not have the sharp tools and a concrete and realistic vision to affect reality.

Ironically, but not surprisingly, accusations of vanguardism are moved from both sides – an armed vanguard or an intellectual vanguard, but still a vanguard. Overall, Cospito uses language in a guarded manner to avoid “stepping on anyone’s toes” or making accusations.¹¹⁸ Yet Cospito also said that he “would like this writing of mine to circulate as much as possible outside the Italian borders and so I hope that some comrade will translate these words of mine into the various languages”.¹¹⁹ Inherent in these words appears Cospito’s desire to be considered, if not a leader, a beacon that lights the path for the International of insurrectionary anarchists. In doing so, Cospito performs one of the oligarch’s duties, i.e., ideological, and operational inspiration and the promotion of the FAI “method” for the armed struggle against a proposed alternative.

As mentioned, Cospito has also been accused of directing the FAI-FRI’s activities from behind the bars. In 2017, for example, the Federation admitted responsibility for the parcel bombs sent to two judges and the deputy public prosecutor involved in the investigation that led to Cospito being accused of the 2006 attack. The Italian authorities believe that this attack was inspired, if not requested, by Cospito.¹²⁰ Whether or not he solicited the attack, the FAI-FRI targeted those individuals because of their role in the investigations against Cospito. This indicates that he fulfills another prerequisite of the ideational oligarch, i.e., the identification of general or specific targets.

During the hunger strike in October 2022, Cospito similarly acted as a catalyst for anarchist violence. The strike was met with across-the-board support from various anarchist milieus, including those that reject clandestine violence and the FAI’s *modus operandi*, as well as certain political forces and sectors of civil society.¹²¹ After all, the 41-bis represented a controversial topic long before the Cospito affair with some regarding it as an indispensable instrument in the fight against organized crime and terrorism, while others see it as a violation of human rights and a basis for torture.¹²² While several demonstrations demanding the end of the 41-bis regime for Cospito resulted in violent clashes,¹²³ the FAI opted for its usual method of clandestine violence thereby responding to the call for action against the 41-bis regime that Cospito launched with the strike. As he played a crucial role in inspiring this campaign, Cospito successfully

¹¹⁸ Cospito.

¹¹⁹ Cospito.

¹²⁰ Genta, “Bomba”; “Ferrara, Il Diktat Dell’anarchico in Cella: ‘Colpito Il Mio Carceriere.’”

¹²¹ “Cospito, Studenti Sapienza Occupano Facoltà Di Lettere per Solidarietà,” *Adnkronos*, February 2, 2023, sec. Cronaca, www.adnkronos.com; Davide Leo, “Le Posizioni Dei Partiti Sul Caso Cospito,” *Pagella Politica*, February 1, 2023, sec. Giustizia, pagellapolitica.it.

¹²² Siino, “The Article 41-Bis.”

¹²³ Martinenghi and Rocci, “Torino.”

mobilized the FAI against the prison system and so he performed another duty of the ideational oligarchy, namely the identification of targets.

Therefore, during his years in prison, Cospito performed all the three tasks of the oligarch. He provided ideological as well as operational guidance when defending the FAI *modus operandi* and when he elaborated on certain additional aspects of insurrectionary anarchism, most notably anti-technology extremism and the fight against the 41-bis regime. To do so, he used the means that he had available to carry out direct actions in prison while contributing to the online anarchist debates. These contributions built on positions that found consensus within the FAI galaxy and that were not in opposition to fundamental principles and values. At the same time, Cospito contributed to identifying both general (e.g., diplomatic and cultural institutions) and specific (judges and prosecutors) targets of interests over the years. Undoubtedly, the availability of channels of communication contributed to elevating Cospito's status. Even when those channels were denied after he was placed in the 41-bis, Cospito communicated with a direct action, i.e., the strike. Yet Cospito could equally rely on channels of communication in 2012 when he kneecapped Adinolfi. Therefore, it appears that the mere availability of, and control over, channels of communications does not necessarily translate into controlling or influencing the movement. Cospito clearly did not “control the hyperlinks” from beyond prison bars – something which he arguably had better chance to do in the context of the Adinolfi attacks and yet he failed to capitalize on it. Since his identity had been revealed, it is also possible that he gained a reputation – from an unknown, enthusiastic, and radical militant at the time of the Adinolfi attack to a regular contributor whose commitment had been proven in his years in prison. Then, as his contributions resonated with militants, Cospito emerged from the anarchist network as an informal leader in the specific contexts of the fight against 41-bis. A leader who was pursuing the interest of the movement and whose leadership was co-created with the militants without there being any official or formal appointment.

A hypothetical conversation with Cospito would undoubtedly end up with him rejecting the title of oligarch along with the analysis offered here. In a letter transmitted on 1 March 2023, Cospito declared his readiness to die for his fight against the 41-bis regime while also stating that “the greatest offence for an anarchist is to be accused of giving or receiving orders”.¹²⁴ While the legal procedures will determine whether he has given or received orders, that arguably has little impact on the argument this paper is putting forward. First, giving “orders” is not a prerequisite of the ideational oligarch. Then, regardless of his true intentions – and, perhaps occasionally, against his own will – Cospito did emerge as a reference figure in the anarchist universe and, more importantly, in the FAI galaxy. After all, the latter has been carrying out violent campaigns along trajectories and patterns that Cospito identified in his writings and statements.

¹²⁴ “Cospito, La Lettera: ‘Pronto a Morire per Far Conoscere Il 41 Bis’ — Leggi,” *Adnkronos*, March 1, 2023, www.adnkronos.com.

This is crucial, as it fundamentally qualifies Cospito as an ideational oligarch, rather than a martyr. While one might argue that the heavy hand of the Italian law is also contributing to turning him into a martyr, the role he has been performing since his arrest in 2012, included, as argued, providing ideological inspiration in intra-milieu debates, but also identifying targets of interest thus contributing to launching campaigns. Interestingly, Cospito was not always successful, as the critiques he received following the Adinolfi attacks show. What are, then, the conditions under which ideational oligarchs can exert their influence? Looking at the specific case of Cospito and the FAI and abstracting from this context, the boundaries of the autonomist, ideational oligarchy can be identified.

Lone Leaders: Boundaries of the Ideational Oligarchy

Overall, the fundamental difference between the 2012 Adinolfi attack and Cospito's subsequent oligarchical enterprises is that the former appears to have transgressed a few core values of insurrectionary anarchism. First, the Federation's targeted actions against individuals had, thus far, been limited to demonstrative attacks, such as parcel bombs, rather than injuring, or potentially lethal, ones. Even on the rare occasions where the FAI sought to bring about casualties, they shied away from the Olga Nucleus' *modus operandi*. The 2003 Santa Claus campaign or the 2022 attack against the CEO of Leonardo Finmeccanica, Alessandro Profumo, demonstrate this.¹²⁵ The above-mentioned deep-rooted "repugnance for any bloody act" contributes to understanding the skepticism towards the kneecapping of Adinolfi and Cospito's "armed fetishism". Then, it is necessary to highlight an additional aspect underlying the accusations of "vanguardism" moved against the Olga Nucleus. Any researcher, journalist, or commentator that is familiar with Italy's history of political violence will recall that kneecappings were a recurrent tactic during the so-called "Years of Lead" in the 1970s and 1980s. Several Marxist-Leninist organizations, including *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades) and *Prima Linea* (Front Line), resorted to it frequently¹²⁶ – in particular, when the objective was to send a "warning" to the victims.¹²⁷ It is not surprising then that journalists and prosecutors mentioned the Red Brigades following the Adinolfi attack, as this tactic was reminiscent of the Years of Lead.¹²⁸ Similarly, the revolutionary

¹²⁵ "August Masetti" Brigade FAI-FRI, "Anche i Ricchi Sanguinano. Rivendicazione Del Pacco Bomba Contro Alessandro Profumo, Amministratore Delegato Di Leonardo," August 8, 2022, www.rivoluzioneanarchica.it.

¹²⁶ Richard Drake, *The Revolutionary Mystique and Terrorism in Contemporary Italy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 19; 104–5.

¹²⁷ Sergio Zavoli, *La Notte Della Repubblica* (Milano: Mondadori, 2017), 242.

¹²⁸ Redazione, "Attentato Adinolfi, Procura: «La Dinamica Ci Riporta Agli Attentati Br»,» *Genova Today*, May 9, 2012, www.genovatoday.it.

efforts of these Marxist-Leninist organizations have long been subject to the scrutiny of insurrectionary anarchists who have vehemently condemned their vanguard-based approach to the armed struggle.¹²⁹ When Cospito and Gai struck Adinolfi in 2012, the tactic and communiqué resurrected memories from the past, not only for commentators and law enforcement but also for insurrectionary anarchist comrades. They were quick to accuse the Olga Nucleus of “vanguardism”. As this *modus operandi* was fundamentally antithetical to the principles of insurrectionary anarchism, it did not take root.

Conversely, Cospito’s influence in recent years is the product of both the notoriety and reputation he gained following his arrest and his involvement in struggles that concern core, fundamental values of insurrectionary anarchism, namely opposition to the prison system. In his struggle, Cospito assisted in the identification of targets related to it, while also mobilizing waves of anarchists. Prior to his fight against 41-bis, he had also contributed to the debate within the anarchist movement defending the informal organization against proposed alternatives.

Overall, interventions that align with core areas and principles appear to facilitate the role of the ideational oligarch. This does not mean that Cospito’s positions were always embraced *in toto*. His support for the Mexican ITS, for example, does not mirror the FAI-FRI’s stance.¹³⁰ Contrary to what Gray posited then, militants – rather than oligarchs – can also have a negative impact on innovations, since they play a crucial role in the emergence of the oligarchy. So, the autonomist, ideational oligarch does not solely depend on the context and the specific issue(s) involved, but also on the individual and collective agencies within the leaderless movement(s). Militants can, therefore, select the different aspects of leadership. Further evidence of this can be found in the influence that Theodore Kaczynski currently exerts on the far right, insurrectionary anarchism, and radical environmentalism. As these represent quite different ideological milieus, one wonders how a single individual can influence them all. As the following discussion demonstrates, these milieus have selected the specific aspects of Kaczynski’s ideology that fit within their worldview.

Theodore John Kaczynski, aka the Unabomber, is a former mathematics professor who waged a one-man war against the techno-industrial civilization between 1978 and 1995. His actions caused the death of three people and injured 23. Nearly thirty years after the publication of his manifesto, Kaczynski’s message has made a surprising comeback. Indeed, his manifesto, along with other writings, has become a recurrent feature in different radical milieus. Indeed, like Cospito, the Unabomber was a prolific writer during his years in prison.¹³¹ Some of these writings resonate with insurrec-

¹²⁹ Alfredo M. Bonanno, *La Gioia Armata* (Catania: Edizioni Anarchismo, 1993), 3, theanarchistlibrary.org.

¹³⁰ Lubrano, “Stop the Machines,” 328.

¹³¹ Theodore J. Kaczynski, “Hit Where It Hurts,” 2002, theanarchistlibrary.org; Theodore J. Kaczynski, *Technological Slavery: The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski, a.k.a. “The Unabomber”* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2010); Theodore J. Kaczynski, *AntiTech Revolution: How and Why*

tionary anarchists when it comes to two specific aspects. First, anarchists concur with the Unabomber's strategy of attacking the "megamachine" – i.e., all the integrated technologies – there "where it hurts".¹³² That is, the revolutionary activities should focus on identifying the vulnerabilities of the megamachine so that, once struck, the technoindustrial society crumbles in its wake. Secondly, insurrectionary anarchists also seem to have adopted Kaczynski's definition of technologies, in particular his distinction between smallscale and the much more dangerous large-scale technologies, which need to be eradicated.¹³³ At the same time, the Unabomber's profound distaste for "leftism" and misanthropy have gained him a substantial following among large segments of the far right. Similarly, as he fundamentally promoted an accelerationist strategy, far-right extremists regularly glorify and cite him.¹³⁴ Finally, elements within radical environmentalism – most notably the abovementioned Individualists Tending Towards the Wild – have candidly admitted to having been (at least initially) influenced by Kaczynski's *modus operandi* and target selection.¹³⁵ In selecting aspects of Kaczynski's message, these milieus have ignored elements that do not dovetail with their core values. For example, insurrectionary anarchists disregard Kaczynski's argument in favor of the revolutionary vanguard (though he does not use this term).¹³⁶ Thus, this example contributes to showing how ideational oligarchies emerge with respect to specific contexts and issues, and how their messages are subject to a process of natural selection. Moreover, Kaczynski provides further evidence that specific individuals can emerge as ideational oligarchs against their own will. While he had hoped to inspire a generation of antitechnology revolutionaries with his manifesto, the Unabomber has, indeed, openly expressed his distaste for the above milieus.¹³⁷ There are two important observations to be made here. First, militancy in a movement is not a prerequisite for becoming an ideational oligarch, since Kaczynski has not pledged allegiance or declared his militancy for any of these milieus. Secondly, the comparison with Kaczynski can also serve to highlight an additional negative case of informal leadership. When Kaczynski's manifesto was published in *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times* in 1995, he was hoping to animate like-minded extremists to launch an assault on the techno-industrial society.¹³⁸ To do so, he formulated a novel interpretation of anti-technology extremism, while also providing strategic and operational

(Scottsdale, AZ: Fitch & Madison Publishers, 2015); Theodore J. Kaczynski, "Ted Kaczynski on Individualists Tending Toward Savagery (ITS)," 2017, theanarchistlibrary.org.

¹³² 325, "#12," 47.

¹³³ 325, "#11," 16.

¹³⁴ Macklin, "The Extreme Right," 985.

¹³⁵ Individualists Tending toward the Wild, "Communiqués of ITS — 2011–2013," 2013, 35, theanarchistlibrary.org.

¹³⁶ Theodore J. Kaczynski, "Industrial Society and Its Future," 1995, 21–22, editionshache.com.

¹³⁷ Kaczynski, *Anti-Tech Revolution*, 167–68.

¹³⁸ Kaczynski, "Industrial Society and Its Future," 21; Brett A Barnett, "20 Years Later: A Look Back at the Unabomber Manifesto," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 6 (2015): 61.

guidance.¹³⁹ Admittedly, Kaczynski did find a sympathetic audience in movements like Earth First! and other eco-extremists, but the widespread opposition against striking people among these milieus, among other factors, contained Kaczynski's influence.¹⁴⁰ Thus, the focus of these movements remained on the environmentalist cause.¹⁴¹ As such, the anti-technology revolution failed to materialize, and it is not until more recently that Kaczynski's message has propagated substantially.¹⁴²

Similar dynamics can be also observed in the relationship between the animal rights movement and Barry Horne, the UK animal rights militant who gained notoriety in the 1990s for a series of violent and destructive actions. In fact, there are a few parallels between Cospito and Horne. While originally active in the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), Horne was later operating under the banner of Animal Rights Militia (ARM).¹⁴³ For his ARM militancy, Horne was sentenced to 18 years imprisonment – the longest ever for an animal rights activists.¹⁴⁴ While in prison, he launched four hunger strikes with the fourth ultimately resulting in his death.¹⁴⁵ Horne represented one of the most extremist forms of animal rights activism and his positions struggled to prevail within the Animal Liberation Front which might explain why he ended up operating as Animal Rights Militia. Indeed, the ALF's policy imposed to take every reasonable precaution not to harm or endanger life, including humans.¹⁴⁶ As such, they were morally, ideologically, and operationally incompatible with Horne's extremism and the ALF "routinely demarcated their actions from those of the Animal Rights Militia".¹⁴⁷

Following his apprehension, Horne managed to become more influential within the broader animal rights movement. As Monaghan argues, a new campaign of animal rights violence – which involved ALF as well – might have indeed been inspired by the 1998 hunger strike of Horne in protest at the Labour Government's failure to set up a Royal Commission on animal experimentation.¹⁴⁸ While the ALF policy of not harming life persisted, Horne's influence grew along with his commitment to hunger strikes. Following his death during the fourth strike, the ALF now hails Horne as a martyr.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, other movements draw inspiration from Horne with some men-

¹³⁹ Fleming, "The Unabomber"; Barnett, "20 Years Later," 63.

¹⁴⁰ Fleming, "The Unabomber," 218.

¹⁴¹ Macklin, "The Extreme Right," 984.

¹⁴² {Citation}

¹⁴³ Rachel Monaghan, "Not Quite Terrorism: Animal Rights Extremism in the United Kingdom," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 11 (November 2013): 939, doi.org.

¹⁴⁴ Monaghan, 941.

¹⁴⁵ Jeff Green, "The Animal Rights Movement: The Challenge for Corporate Resilience" (Portsmouth, University of Portsmouth, 2014), 63, pure.port.ac.uk.

¹⁴⁶ Jean-Marc Flükiger, "The Radical Animal Liberation Movement," 120.

¹⁴⁷ Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues, "Is the Animal Liberation Front Morally Justified in Engaging in Violent and Illegal Activism towards Animal Farms?," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 9, no. 2 (May 3, 2016): 229, doi.org.

¹⁴⁸ Monaghan, "Not Quite Terrorism," 937.

¹⁴⁹ Green, "The Animal Rights Movement," 64.

tioning him directly in their names, like the Brigade of Vegan Fighters Barry Horne and the Informal Anarchist Band Barry Horne's Revenge.¹⁵⁰

As he reflected an incompatible stance on violence, Horne's actions clashed with the ALF. While some of his messages might have resonated with the broader movement – as the 1998 campaign indicates – his *modus operandi* and ideological commitment prevented his informal leadership from emerging within the ALF which might contribute to explaining why he started operating under the ARM banner. As further evidence that informal leadership is contextdependent, Horne contributed to operational guidance and the selection of targets following his arrest thereby performing oligarch tasks. Arguably, while Horne was relatively known prior to his arrest, his reputation increased with the number of hunger strikes he launched.

Overall, both these comparisons corroborate the notion that ideational oligarchs increase their chances of exercising informal leadership when their contributions align with values and norms and are therefore perceived as legitimate by militants. This could also contribute to explain the limited influence that Breivik had on far-right movements when it comes to target selection.¹⁵¹ While channels of communication can play a major role, the case studies reveal that, even when deprived of means of written and/or oral communication, oligarchs can still communicate through actions. Rather than ownership and control over the “hyperlinks” or the means of communication, reputation appears to play a more crucial role. This reputation can hail from the perceived legitimacy of the oligarch's deeds and messages or by their evident commitment to the cause, as evidenced through the cases of Cospito and Horne. The informal leadership underlying the oligarchy is, however, contextual, and temporary. Moreover, as the case of Kaczynski also highlights, informal leadership emerges spontaneously if, when, and where it is of mutual benefit. Finally, militants selectively dissect the oligarchy to adopt the aspects that are perceived as legitimate and of mutual interest. Informal leadership is thus not monolithic and can be viewed as a disaggregated phenomenon affecting different milieus and movements in different modes, times, and spaces. The last paragraph will now sum up this paper's main contribution and highlight lessons for counterterrorism.

Conclusion

This paper investigated leadership dynamics in leaderless resistance. By resorting to the notions of “ideational oligarchy” and “autonomist leadership”, it identified the tasks and characteristics of ideational oligarchy in leaderless movements to then conduct a case study on the Informal Anarchist Federation and Alfredo Cospito. Thereafter, a brief comparison between Cospito, Kaczynski, and Horne offered some additional in-

¹⁵⁰ Michael Loadenthal, “Appendix: Methodology—Database Construction,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 11, no. 2 (July 1, 2017): 56–64, doi.org.

¹⁵¹ Macklin and Bjørgo, “Breivik's Long Shadow?,” 23.

sights Overall, this study suggests that ideational oligarchies do emerge in leaderless resistance contexts and that, under certain circumstances, they can substantially influence leaderless movements. For certain individuals to emerge as ideational oligarchs, their deeds or messages need to reside within the boundaries of the core values and norms that characterize the specific milieus and/or movement and resonate with its militants. Channels of communication can contribute to determining the rise of the oligarchs, but their sole availability does not guarantee success. Therefore, informal leadership in leaderless movements emerges spontaneously and without any fixed role. It is not crystallized in any form of governance and is temporary. This also implicates that, potentially, anyone can take up leadership within a leaderless movement but, if they want to do so, they have better chances when they do not transgress the core values and principles of the movement – an aspect which the negative cases demonstrate clearly. Similarly, the fact that followers appoint individuals as oligarchs against the latter’s desire contributes to corroborating this notion. It follows from this that informal leadership is ubiquitous in leaderless resistance. A leaderless movement is full of potential leaders. Oligarchs will emerge and disappear with contexts and with the individual, but also collective, agency. Through a diffused and decentralized process of filtering and natural selection, the leaderless movement selects those aspects – and those informal leaders – that conform to these values and norms. So, while charisma and/or intellect might contribute to the making of an ideational oligarch, adherence to pre-existent – but ideologically flexible – frameworks of *modus operandi* is equally important. The following paragraph returns briefly to the case study to demonstrate why the dynamics discussed in this paper can have significant implications for those who seek to counter leaderless movements.

The 41-bis regime was introduced to fight organized crime, such as the Mafia – that is, cohesive, structured, and hierarchical organizations where bosses and leaders play a preponderant role. Now, whether Cospito is successful as an ideational oligarch or not, to claim that he directs or leads the Federation in the same way a Mafia boss rules appears hyperbolic. What also appears certain is that the ongoing FAI campaigns are a by-product of this judicial escalation. The very emergence of Cospito as an ideational oligarch can be partially interpreted as a consequence of this. While fear of retaliation should not stop justice from taking its course, a more sensible approach might have been illuminating in clarifying two aspects. First, Alfredo Cospito’s grip on the FAI is of a different nature when compared to that of other forms of organizations. Informal influence and participation in intra-milieus debates cannot be equated to Mafia bosses sending *pizzini*¹⁵² to their associates. The second aspect to emphasize is that resorting to a harsher prison regime made Cospito an even more influential figure – if not a martyr – that could contribute to radicalizing and recruiting new members to the FAI’s cause. An idolization of Cospito is already occurring. Whereas the Adinolfi

¹⁵² *Pizzini* is a word used to refer to small pieces of paper that Mafia bosses use for high-level communication.

kneecapping was critiqued back in 2012, anarchists are now glorifying this action. For example, in February 2023, a poem praising the Adinolfi attack as a “pure, simple, and genuine act against the radioactive shaman” started circulating on the Internet. Understanding both the leadership dynamics of leaderless resistance and the operational boundaries of the ideational oligarchy is thus not just an intellectual and academic exercise. On the contrary, it can contribute to avoiding heavy-handed responses that seek to eradicate the problem rather than learn to live with it – a recurrent shortcoming of counterterrorism policies.¹⁵³ Moreover, while the sole availability of, or control over, channels of communication does not suffice to determine one’s status as ideational oligarch, monitoring such channels can nonetheless contribute to identifying figures that have reputation and that champion causes that can potentially resonate with the movement(s). Therefore, understanding informal leadership is ultimately also a way for policymakers and governments to identify appropriate countermeasures and avoid shooting themselves in the foot.

Disclosure Statement

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¹⁵³ Richard English, *Terrorism: How to Respond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 120–32.

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