

2015-01-01

La Lutte pour L'Azawad: MNLA Public Relations Responses to Conflict in Northern Mali, 2011-2014

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LA LUTTE POUR L'AZAWAD: MNLA PUBLIC RELATIONS RESPONSES
TO CONFLICT IN NORTHERN MALI, 2011-2014

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Sean Neil Curtis

2015

LA LUTTE POUR L'AZAWAD: MNLA PUBLIC RELATIONS RESPONSES TO CONFLICT
IN NORTHERN MALI, 2011-2014

by

SEAN NEIL CURTIS

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Intelligence and National Security Studies Program

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2015

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my thesis committee, the faculty and staff of the University of Texas at El Paso's National Security Studies Institute, my parents, my friends, Steven Seagal, and Jean-Claude Van Damme for all of their help and support during my graduate education. Thank you to Dr. Gerard Prunier and his work which was my introduction to the world of African studies.

Abstract

This thesis examines the Internet public relations content of Mali's Tuareg rebel group, the Mouvement National de la Liberation de l'Azawad (MNLA). Content analysis grounded in speech act securitization theory is applied to the 259 posts on the MNLA's primary French language website in order to determine if MNLA website posts correlate with the events occurring in the northern Mali conflict. The data reveals that various characteristics of MNLA statements do correlate with events in the conflict. What the MNLA says provides important insight into the organization and the conflict itself. The identified correlations allow for MNLA rhetoric and activity to be predicted by analysts based on what events may occur or are occurring related to the northern Mali conflict.

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1. Introduction

Mali is located in the highly volatile Sahel region of Africa. The Sahel sits roughly between the Maghreb to the north and sub-Saharan Africa to the south, stretching from Senegal in the west to Eritrea in the east. Mali, as well as several of its neighbors in the region, is the modern remnants of French colonialism in Africa. Its borders are drawn in awkward geometric shapes which reflect Berlin Conference-style colonial interests as opposed to the actual distribution of pre-colonial ethnic and socio-political communities. These miscalculated borders led to the separation of many ethnic groups, particularly in Mali, and pushed previously unconnected or already conflicting groups to clash with one another. The road to effective self-governance and territorial integrity for Mali continues to be a difficult one, due in no small part to these ethnic fractures.

Ethnic and political conflict in Mali is not evenly split but the main division tends to be between black Africans in the southern part of the country and Arab populations in the northern portion. Figure 1 displays the distribution of various ethnic groups in Mali. Despite the fact that Mali is almost universally Muslim (primarily Sunni), Arab populations in the North have felt disadvantaged, ignored, and abused by the central government in the southern capital, Bamako.¹ These issues are further exacerbated by a lack of representation in government, including the fact that every Malian president has been black and was born in the southern portion of the country, a region dominated by the Mande people, specifically the Bambara ethnic sub-group.

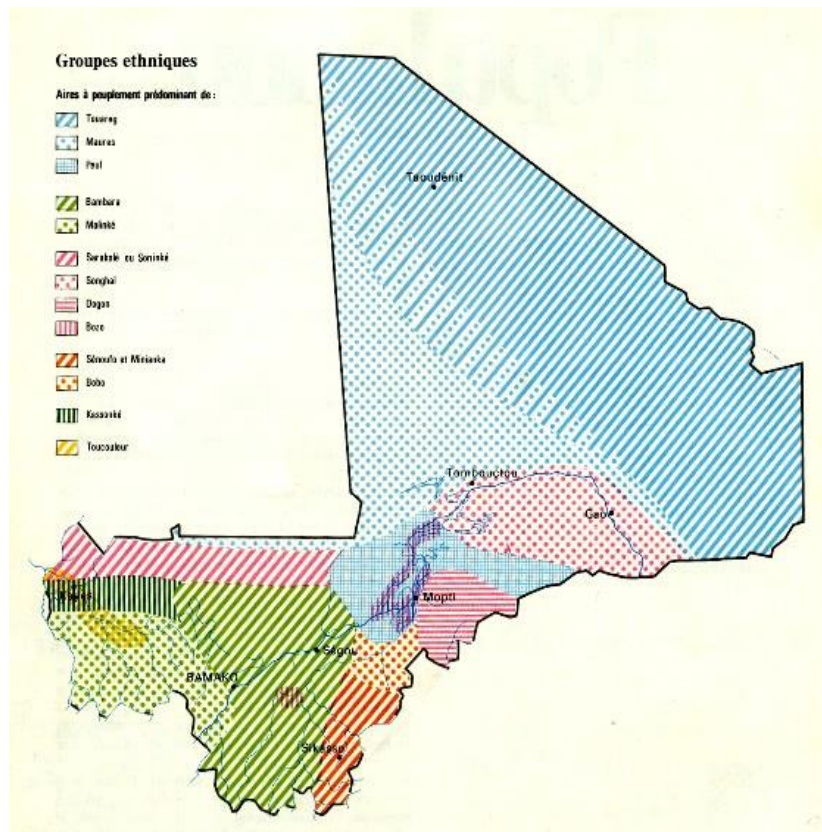


Figure 1. Ethnic Map of Mali

Source: United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, October 2003.

The primary Arab ethnic group that has taken up cause against these perceived injustices in Mali are the Tuaregs, a nomadic pastoralist people with Berber ancestry. The Tuareg people inhabit several countries including Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Morocco, Niger, and Tunisia, as shown in figure 2, but have been involved in direct conflict against government rule most prominently in Mali. The Tuaregs have revolted against French colonial rule in the French Sudan (in the 1910s and 1920s) and have risen up several times against the Malian government during the post-colonial period (in the 1960s, 1990s, and 2000s). However, these revolts have been accompanied by violent repression compounded by a history of droughts in region.² The most

recent Tuareg conflict took place in 2011-2014 with confrontations continuing, albeit on a smaller scale, into 2015.



Figure 2. Area of Tuareg Population in the Sahel

Source: British Broadcasting Corporation: Mali Crisis, Key Players, March 12, 2013.

While many Tuaregs express similar frustrations with the Malian government, the populations of Northern Mali are hardly a united front. Tuareg clans have conflicts with one another as well as with regional terrorist organizations who are at present considered enemies of Tuareg liberation.³ Tuareg clans and other groups have fought amongst each other for control of contraband (primarily drugs) and smuggling lanes in Mali. They have also fought both for and against the Malian government as their situation in relation to other groups has changed.⁴ The most active terror organizations challenging the Malian government and Tuareg organizations for control of security and political space in northern Mali are Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Dine, and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). The Tuaregs have had brief working relationships with the various northern Malian rebels and

terrorist organizations but they broke down largely due to ideological and territorial disagreements.⁵

The primary Tuareg organization to emerge amidst the groundswell of active groups in northern Mali in 2011 was the *Mouvement National de la Libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA). The MNLA claims to represent Tuaregs as well as several other beleaguered ethnic groups in northern Mali. The organization seeks to ease socio-political problems in Mali by forcing the secession of the entire northern region of Mali into a state called Azawad. Other organizations such as *Le Front National de la Libération de l'Azawad* (FNLA) and Ganda militias fight for similar concerns related to northern Mali's ethnic groups but have largely been overtaken in the past three years by the MNLA. The "Fifth Tuareg Rebellion" from approximately 2011 to 2014 was put down by a combination of Malian government forces and a strong, highly effective military campaign by France.⁶ However, the MNLA was not destroyed or dissolved and continues to be involved in skirmishes with various sub-state groups and Malian forces.⁷

The Malian military and its allied forces continue to have little to no operational control in most of northern Mali. A lack of effective security control in the Azawad region and the unstable political atmosphere in Bamako contribute to an environment in northern Mali and the Sahel that is conducive to the development and proliferation of rebel militias and terrorist organizations. This environment has allowed Tuareg rebels, now represented primarily by the MNLA, to present themselves first as anti-colonial rebels battling France and then as insurgents challenging Mali's abusive government.⁸

2. Literature Review

2.1 Non-State Violence in the Sahel

The literature on non-state violence can help explain the behavior of rebel groups such as the MNLA. Violence against governments, other organizations, and even civilians cannot be reduced to opaque madness. Civil war, or any other sort of domestic uprising, is a transformative phenomenon.⁹ Rebels have intentions and goals, albeit sometimes vague and fluid, and parties to domestic conflicts do not commit wanton violence simply for its own sake. A study of Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)¹⁰ manifestos showed that the group, despite non-governmental organization (NGO) efforts to prove otherwise, was not an insane cult characterized by madness with no political objective. Identifying power relations and analyzing political rhetoric of parties involved in a conflict can help contextualize, but not excuse, such groups' atrocities and explain bloody, protracted battles.¹¹ Contextualization is important to understand how local conflicts can have significant effects on the broader region in which they take place. Transnational mechanisms of regional conflict and instability can also have impacts on local conflicts but these effects can be lesser than those the local conflict has on the region as well.¹² From this perspective, conflict in Azawad may have an important influence on Sahelian security while also influencing trans-Sahelian events and actors at the same time. Trans-Sahelian events and the MNLA battle for an independent Azawad are intrinsically connected.

2.2 The Malian Context

The plethora of domestic issues faced by Malian authorities has often forced them to treat trans-Sahelian problems as peripheral. The Malian government is more concerned with controlling its own territory and preventing coups than with earmarking significant resources for addressing

transnational issues in northern Africa. The lack of strong and effective government in Sahelian states has been considered as the reason for the evolution of opportunistic rebellions.¹³ Mali is a weak state lacking effective government and sufficient provision of services and resources in most sectors, particularly in its northern territories.

Rather than labelling the MNLA as opportunistic, it is more accurate to describe the organization as the most recent rejuvenation of a long-standing ethnic and regional opposition to the Malian government. The MNLA can be considered opportunistic in how it filled a power gap in the early 2010s in northern Mali after the failure of Tuareg opposition groups to break and overturn the Malian government several years before. However, the issue of simply gaining power for the sake of ruling over Mali does not appear to be at the MNLA's core. Rather the movement seeks sovereign control of its own section of the country, or at least securing greater provision of resources and political representation from Bamako. There is no certainty that the MNLA or any other group in Mali will necessarily turn the country into a participatory democracy or strengthen the fibers of what remains a weak state.¹⁴ Part of the difficulty and incompatibility between the government and the MNLA can be attributed to the difference between the largely settled, urban lifestyle in the capital as compared to the rural, nomadic lifestyle not only of the northern Malian ethnic groups but of rebel groups in general. Additional factors such as the bulk of the national population and the center of the Malian political arena being based in the south around Bamako play critically divisive roles as well.¹⁵ This can explain why Mali/EU military victories and fragile, weakly enforced treaties between the government and the Tuaregs have been the only answers to conflict in northern Mali thus far. These factors prevent the Tuaregs and other disadvantaged ethnic groups in the North from ever having a sustained peace or mature political relationship with the southern government.

Decentralization has remained a primary concern of the MNLA. Spreading control over influence and resources from the political center in Bamako to the periphery has been a long-standing issue in Mali. Government legislation has so far been highly complex and has had limited effects. Yet where decentralization has taken place local communities have gained more control over natural resources and land usage rights.¹⁶ However, this has not taken hold across Mali and most of the benefits are seen in the periphery of the southern part of the country. This localization of efforts can be explained by ease of access and cost of transportation from Bamako to the southern part of the country, lack of government security in the north, and some degree of racism towards Arabs. Government efforts and rulings often clash with local customary law and conventions related to ownership of land and resources. These clashes contribute to the failure to effectively decentralize government control of resources and to general socio-political tensions.¹⁷ The Malian government's efforts, based largely on modernized ideas of law, often do not mesh with entrenched local customs, which for the nomadic Tuaregs, can date back hundreds if not thousands of years.

Predictions that decentralization programs tested by the Malian government in the early 2000s would help relieve socio-political and ethnic tensions were wrong.¹⁸ In the decade since these programs were launched, improvements largely failed to reach northern Mali and have clearly not eased tensions with the Tuaregs. Different policies are needed in different geographic and demographic regions in order to effectively implement decentralization policies in Mali. Nuanced policy analysis is required to make any sort of decentralization plan work, during peacetime or wartime.¹⁹ If a better political situation or relationship exists, cooperation on socio-economic policies may be easier, leading to less need for top-down reforms. However, if the politicization of northern Malian conflicts continues to center around open or latent ethnic

divides, decentralization is unlikely to ever proceed.²⁰ The government will not so willingly negotiate control over resources with those they are fighting with, especially if the opponent has arguments based on long-standing ethnic issues. If the Malian government wants to genuinely extend socio-economic and security reforms to northern Mali, both to aid the population and ease the continuous conflict, it will have to concurrently address the political situation and develop a more comprehensive policy.²¹

Tensions in Mali are not eased by the lack of regional security and stability in the region. Stability in northern Mali is linked to that of Libya as well as to the presence of terrorism and organized crime in the region. The Sahelian security is strongly linked to political conflict in Mali.²² Porous borders and clandestine networks and routes that pre-date the colonial era allow for traditional nomads to ignore contemporary state boundaries. They also facilitate transnational terrorism, crime, and rebellion; for instance Tuaregs who used Libya as a rear base. The Sahel presents a regional security challenge not only because of the numerous difficulties of individual states but also due to its size. The vast region contains swathes of near-empty desert but also roads, pathways, and cities traversed by a wide variety of individuals.²³ Concerns about religious and ideological radicalism persist in the region due to the movement of terrorist groups from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region into the Sahel. These concerns are compounded by the fact that individuals from the Sahel were known to have gone through Al-Qaeda training camps alongside the large Islamic population of most states in the region.²⁴ These regional demographic and geographic factors are outside of Mali's control and play a critical role in defining the MNLA's separatist conflict.

2.3 The Transnational Nature of Malian Conflicts

Existing research in transnational conflict suggests that the regional presence of terrorists, weak states, porous borders, and radical Islam in the Sahel have empowered Malian separatists.²⁵

Researcher Ersel Aydinli suggests that apoliticization, informality, and demonopolization of international security cooperation are the main themes in the expansion of state and sub-state entities into the transnational realm.²⁶ The Mali-Sahel relationship is different because of the presence of several functioning NGOs and regional organizations in the Sahel and a high degree of transnational movement among the populations who reside there.²⁷ Yet the Sahel continues to fail at state security cooperation, particularly regarding rebels and terrorists, which opens the way for French military influence. Transnationalism certainly exists in the Sahel but security has failed to successfully emerge in the region, casting doubt upon Aydinli's analysis.²⁸

Foreign influences, both African and non-African, are important to understand the northern Mali conflict. The Mali-Sahel security relationship therefore is not simply one where Azawad separatists drive regional security responses by themselves or one where EU and Sahel states control every aspect of the response to the threat posed by these militants. Rather, power is traded off intermittently between Mali, Malian militants, and outside actors; and therefore various forces drive the geopolitical narrative at different times. France has demonstrated this ability in the 2011-2014 rebellion by responding to the Malian government's request for military aid. The French subsequently crushed the Tuareg rebellion and began giving direction and training to Malians on how to handle security affairs.²⁹

Similar to the current state of affairs, a major aspect of the weakness of intra-African relations during the Cold War was its fragile autonomy in regards to stronger foreign powers who could impose themselves on the weak system of political relations in Africa.³⁰ French and

British military interventions as well as the significant economic involvement of countries such as China and Russia in Africa have demonstrated the continuing relevance of this analysis. A strong regional coalition benefits weak states such as Mali who have trouble successfully negotiating on their own. It is unlikely that Malians who were already opposed to the Tuareg rebellion were unhappy with France's timely and effective intervention. However, those same Malians were left to ponder what the status of the Malian government and its security relationships, or lack thereof, with neighboring states was when the 2011-2014 rebellion was allowed to become so dangerous to the state. Assistance by outside powers in civil wars is a typical aspect of war, stressing ideological and material rather than national competition.³¹ The situation of Mali, and possibly that of the entire Sahel, indicates that the phenomenon of ideological motivation for foreign intervention in developing world conflicts is not dead. Other drivers have replaced communism, including fears of Islamism, terrorism, or Tuareg-style liberation movements.

The upsetting of international or regional order is still a major concern for world powers, with France demonstrating how keen it is to help preserve political-military order in central Africa.³² The fact that military capabilities have been at the center of African socio-political dynamics and foreign interventions attests to the role outside powers play. International and regional organizations have been willing to intervene in certain African conflicts but when extreme emergency responses are required for those conflicts, foreign states often take the lead in protecting vulnerable governments and civilian populations.³³ This pattern has been true for Mali which, since its independence, has never really been able to consistently maintain state control over the entirety of its territory. Transnationalism in the Sahel can either be a source of

empowerment or of weakness, depending on how Malian authorities prioritize domestic and Sahelian security challenges.

2.4 State Reformation and Conflict Resolution in Mali

Achieving long-term success after an intervention or even simple conflict reduction requires addressing the three primary concerns of security-building in troubled regions of Africa: resource capability [or management], sovereignty, and subgroup political demands.³⁴ These security-building concerns in Africa are evident in Mali and are visible pillars in the liberation argument of the MNLA. If Tuaregs are not afforded adequate resources by their national government, remain able to effectively control territory in Mali in direct opposition to the national government, and have legitimate complaints about their political representation at the national level, then they will be more likely to attempt to build security for themselves in the form of fighting for their own state. Sovereignty, or pseudo-sovereignty in Azawad, is wielded as a socio-political and military rallying concept against the government but is used concurrently as an argument to convince northern Malian inhabitants and the international community that the MNLA is a better and legitimate leadership option in the region.

Mali's government has so far been unable to manage a significant amount of rebel and terrorist on its own soil and it relies on foreign actors to address issues that arise during serious domestic upheavals. This dependence keeps Mali in a weak position because challenges to effective governance are only temporarily fought off and not permanently removed. The Malian government and Tuareg separatists have entertained a difficult relationship since the colonial era. This stalemate between two actors who cannot control security over the entire country is causing greater instability in the Sahel than if one side simply won out. Gilbert M. Khadiagala similarly

posits that militaries will become less important in Africa if deep-seated conflicts can be resolved or managed, allowing regional institutions and organizations to better promote development and security in those regions affected by conflict.³⁵ The question is how those deep-seated conflicts can be resolved if even managed. Strengthening state security in Africa has been a hallmark feature of interventions but has yet to really take hold in states like Mali. Until effective change is made, the role of the military will remain the decisive factor in Sahelian conflicts. In order to bring an end to ongoing civil conflict, the Malian military or the Tuareg rebels will likely need to conquer the entirety of Mali. The victor will ideally lead an effective transition into a capable national government. Even then, military victory does not assure such successful socio-economic development or political organization.

Mali and the Sahel are inextricably linked in terms of regional security and development. Regionalism can be considered as a project or policy designed to bring order and not just an analytical frame used to explain conflict.³⁶ The combined political machinations of international and regional organizations, national governments, and sub-state groups such as the MNLA will all impact on the future of “Sahel regionalism.” The influence of non-regional powers, particularly France, plays a considerable role in this state – region relationship. The decision to intervene and the result of any intervention are predicated on the nature of the intrastate conflict, the nature of the intervener and their intervention, and whether that intervention is slanted towards the government or the rebels.³⁷

3. Research Questions

The answers to the who, what, and why questions of conflict in northern Mali can be addressed by examining the nature and motivations of the Malian government, active rebels and terrorists in northern Mali with an emphasis on the MNLA and the French government. Determining how the MNLA orients its narrative at different stages of the conflict is beneficial to understanding not only the nature and motivations of the MNLA but also how future clashes may play out. The MNLA, in the regional security context, acts as a lens to examine the situation of Mali, and more broadly, that of the Sahel.

This thesis seeks to answer the following central research question: Are there any correlations between MNLA statements and conflict-related events in northern Mali? Two secondary research questions complement this first question: What factors elucidate the correlations or lack thereof between MNLA statements and conflict in northern Mali? Are there general themes across MNLA statements that explain correlations between those statements and conflict-related events?

To answer these questions one main hypothesis is made: **(1)** MNLA post content will correlate with major events in the northern Mali conflict. This hypothesis is made because the MNLA are the first Tuareg resistance movement in Mali's long history of rebellions to establish a large online information apparatus. Since there is three years' worth of content to examine, the purposes of the MNLA's online presence are not easily or quickly discernable. However, it would behoove the MNLA to post content during and around events related to the conflict in which they are fighting in order to support their politico-military efforts through the use of information. Three secondary hypotheses are made to add depth to the main hypothesis: **(2)** there will be a greater number of statements during months with more events. The logic here is that

there are more events during a particular time frame then there will be more opportunities for the MNLA to publicly anticipate or react to them; (3) there will be more statements and harsher rhetoric around the times of events related to the French intervention. The French intervention was undoubtedly a watershed moment in the conflict. Since the French supported the Malian government in the intervention and the French are a dominant politico-military power in the Sahel, the MNLA will want to speak frequently and aggressively towards this perceived neo-colonialist force; (4) the MNLA will put forth more statements regarding their politics and human rights than on the specifics of battlefield operations. Since the MNLA is much smaller than its opponents it will prioritize political and diplomatic victories with powerful external actors. The MNLA will also want to minimize information coming from the battlefield, especially if they suffer losses at the hands of larger and better-equipped militaries.

If confirmed these hypotheses will help explain how rebel groups respond to changes in their security environment. The three secondary hypotheses will be easily confirmed or disconfirmed through basic calculations once the data is collected. The central hypothesis will be confirmed if the various quantitative and qualitative aspects of MNLA public statements correlate with what is happening in the northern Mali conflict. In other words, will what happens in Mali during the Tuareg rebellion explain what the MNLA chooses to say? The central hypothesis will be disconfirmed if what the MNLA chooses to say does not correlate with the events in Mali during the Tuareg rebellion. There are two primary ways this could occur. Either there is a lack of any identifiable correlations or patterns between events and MNLA rhetoric or the same themes occur almost universally across MNLA statements and there is little identifiable difference between what is said and what is occurring on the ground.

4. Methodology

The research method used for this thesis is content analysis. The analysis focuses on MNLA public statements from their primary French language website from 2011 to 2014.³⁸ The MNLA French language website was selected because it is the most comprehensive and thorough body of statements directly from the organization. Analyzing modern internet content connects the interests of producers and consumers while also exploring how these roles can be challenged and re-explored.³⁹ The purpose of internet content analysis is to re-explore an old conflict with a new, rigorous methodology on a new media platform. To facilitate these methods, a descriptive approach is taken in the content analysis. This approach limits conclusions to the content being studied, promotes clarity and parsimony, and aims to reveal the relationship between Azawad separatist militancy and the larger Sahelian security context.⁴⁰

The examination also draws upon frame analysis. Frames are “cognitive schematas that guide social interaction through communication.”⁴¹ A frame can be linguistically analyzed as a speech act using four categories: the **(1) promoter**, or the person or organization who functions as the speaker. The **(2) target** is the person or entity that forms the audience. The **(3) referent**, or topic, forms the propositional content of the speech act. The final category is the particular **(4) intention** in making the speech act.⁴² The framing method covers each aspect of a message or document while allaying the concerns of propaganda analysts and methodologists who argue that content analysis, particularly research that examines the frequencies of certain characteristics, cannot strongly generalize to larger contexts. This research bridges existing policies to the characteristics displayed in the content of a person or organization’s messages.⁴³ Content analysis in this thesis is conducted without any type of electronic software or automated data analysis. The analysis is done in person so that characteristics will not be assigned to messages

without sufficient context. Conducting content analysis in person allows the context and brevity of the message to be conveyed in a richer manner.

Posts from the MNLA website are sorted into separate timelines based on the four framing categories (promoter, target, referent, intention) and then further into sub-categories. The use of frames and timelines allows for an original and more comprehensive analysis of the MNLA Internet public relations content. This approach allows for an examination of the evolution of the website content over a specific period of time and aims to identify and compare patterns. Particular attention will be paid to specific events that have marked the conflict in Northern Mali from 2001 to 2014. This method essentially takes into account two datasets in producing a single set of conclusions, thereby strengthening the findings. At the end of the analysis there will be a qualitative observations sub-section where noticeable trends that emerged in the data outside of the framing categories are discussed. This allows for a more nuanced analysis by highlighting some additional patterns in the posts that are only partially revealed in the quantitative analysis.

The framing analysis is broken up into the four main categories which are further divided into several sub-categories.

(1) Promoters are sub-categorized as follows:

(a) names without a listed association are MNLA representatives in varying positions within the organizational hierarchy;

(b) names with a listed association are members of that specific media, government, or organization;

(c) all posts listed as the “MNLA”, “*Le congrès*”, “*Fils de l’Azawad*”, or any variation upon these are authorized by unnamed MNLA representatives.

(2) Targets are sub-categorized as follows:

(a) international community denotes a general global audience with particular emphasis on their governments;

(b) African community: Citizens in every African country across the continent with particular emphasis on their governments;

(c) Malians denotes the general populations of Mali including Azawadis;

(d) Tuaregs are the Tuareg people in all countries, particularly in the Sahel;

(e) a country denotes that specific country with particular emphasis on its government;

(f) international organizations, both governmental or non-governmental;

(g) specific organizations denotes the leadership and members of the listed organization;

(h) media refers all media organizations across the world but in particular those regional and international media organizations who have focused on Mali recently;

(i) Malian government denotes the leadership of the interconnected Malian government and military; and

(j) regional community, or those countries, and specifically their leadership bodies, in the general Sahel or northwest African region.

(3) Referents are sub-categorized as follows:

(a) human rights which generally refer to the plight of the Azawadi people or any other peoples specifically mentioned as being mistreated, typically their respective governments;

(b) politics-international relations refers to the MNLA's relations with other groups, governments, or organizations anywhere in the world;

(c) history-philosophy which refers to the MNLA's history or socio-political/military philosophy;

(d) personnel announcements refer to the death of or the gaining of new MNLA members;

(e) military refers to military operations of the MNLA;

(f) religion refers to any mention of any religion.

(4) Intentions are sub-categorized as follows:

(a) activism, or an effort by the MNLA to promote its goals and gain popular support of all kinds;

(b) politics-international relations, or an effort by the MNLA to make a political statement or to clarify or explain a political position regarding any group, state, or organization;

(c) military, or an effort by the MNLA to promote and/or justify its military operations;

(d) military victory, or when the MNLA communicates or specifically explains a positive result for the MNLA in a military operation;

(e) military loss, or when the MNLA communicates or specifically explains a negative result for the MNLA in a military operation.

At the start of each section, timelines displaying the frequency of each sub-category of the four primary framing categories will be displayed in a chart format. Dates of selected critical events regarding conflicts in northern Mali during the 2011 to 2014 period are highlighted along the timeline. These events, inserted on the horizontal axis along the timeline, are called “transition points” and can be seen in figure 3.⁴⁴

- **January 2012** – First Tuareg attacks in northern Mali
- **March 2012** – President Amadou Toumani Toure deposed by military; African Union (AU) suspends Mali
- **April 2012** – Tuareg rebels seize northern Mali, declare independence; President Dioncounda Traore takes over in military to civilian transition of power
- **May 2012** – MNLA and Ansar al-Dine merge to declare northern Mali an Islamic State; Al-Qaeda in North Africa endorses arrangement
- **June 2012** – Ansar al-Dine and Al-Qaeda turn on MNLA, recapture and enforce fundamentalist Islam in major northern cities of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal
- **December 2012** – Prime Minister (PM) Cheick Mobido Diarra resigns, President Traore selects Mr. Django Sissoko to succeed him; UN and US threaten sanctions
- **January 2013** – Islamists capture Konna and prepare for assault on Bamako; President Traore requests French help, In Operation Serval French forces re-capture, Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal – the last major rebel-held cities, EU pledges to help retrain Malian army
- **April 2013** – French forces begin withdrawal, regional African force keeps peace in Mali
- **June 2013** – Tuareg rebels and government sign peace deal
- **July 2013** – Ibrahim Boubacar Keita wins presidential elections
- **September 2013** – Mali government and Tuareg separatist clashes return in the north
- **April 2014** – President Keita appoints July 2013 election rival Mr. Moussa Mara to PM to help curb growing instability in the north
- **May 2014** – Government-Tuareg truce falls apart and rebels capture Kidal among several smaller cities
- **September 2014** – New rounds of government-Tuareg rebel talks in Algeria; an Azawad embassy is opened in the Netherlands
- **October 2014** – Nine United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) peacekeepers killed in northeastern Mali, worst attack on UN workers in Mali conflict
- **November 2014** – Ebola virus reaches Mali

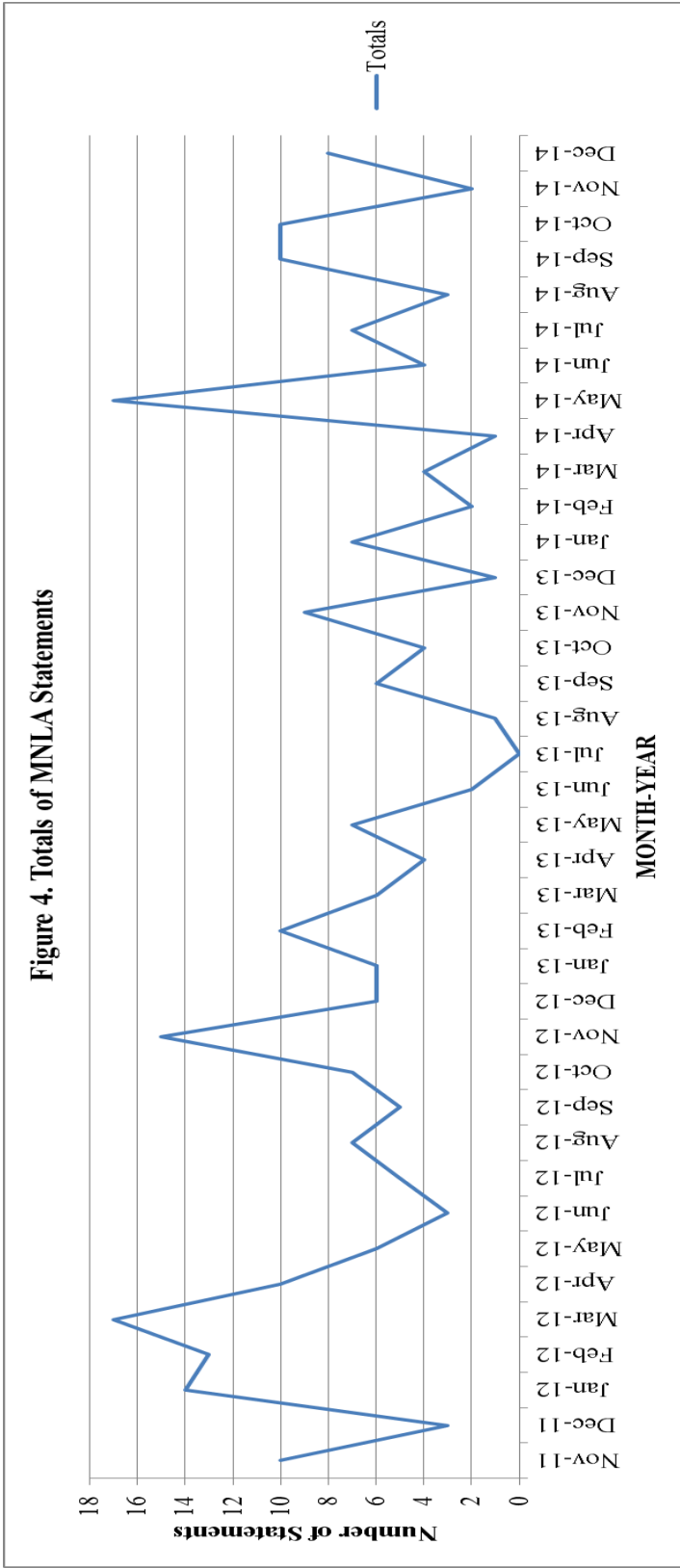
Figure 3. Transition Points in the 2011-2014 Northern Mali Conflict

Sources: “Mali Profile,” *BBC News Africa*, November 12, 2014; “Timeline: the Malian crisis,” *France 24*, January 25, 2013.

Examining the types and frequencies of MNLA messages that were sent at the times of these events will help measure the MNLA reaction to changes in the Malian security environment. An examination of the changes in rhetoric surrounding the transition points follows the content analysis. This process helps describe the strength and depth of the links between the observed characteristics of the messages and the antecedent political conditions within the relevant constructs of the MNLA, Azawad, and Mali proper. This methodology has been broken into six distinct tasks: (1) read all MNLA posts on their primary website; (2) organize each post by the four main categories; (3) organize each post into appropriate sub-categories; (4) create a timeline for each category – sub-category combination; (5) place each timeline underneath the transition points; (6) analyze correlation, or lack thereof, between transition points and categories, sub-categories, and total posts.

5. Analysis

The analysis is divided into six sub-sections, starting with an overview of all of the posts, then an examination of the four securitization frames, and finally a sub-section on some additional qualitative observations. The first five sub-sections will look at each category and sub-category in a quantitative fashion followed by a summary of what the overall data indicates. The final qualitative examination will address general trends in MNLA public statements noted during the data collection phase of this research. A graph of the category and sub-category totals precedes each of the first five sections. A complete list of all of the posts on the MNLA website which comprise the dataset can be found in the Works Cited section.



5.1 Total Posts

The analysis of total posts is intended to reveal characteristics of MNLA public relations by examining how frequently the movement posts on the website, regardless of the topic. Between November 2011 and December 2014 the MNLA posted 259 times. There are thirteen total posts in 2011, 108 posts in 2012, 56 posts in 2013, and 75 posts in 2014. With the exception of five posts in Arabic and two in English, all posts were written in French. Regarding total monthly posts, there were ten months with ten or more posts, nineteen months with four to nine posts, and ten months with three or less posts. The average number of total posts per month is approximately 6.4 posts. During all ten of the months with three or less posts there were only zero to one significant events related to the northern Mali conflict. During the ten months with ten or more posts four months had zero events, three months had one event, and three months had two events.

While there is a correlation between fewer events and fewer posts there is not a clear connection between more events and more posts. While less need for commentary during a lull in action is not unexpected, the MNLA does not always appear to be motivated to respond to all events in a similar fashion. The first five months with ten or more posts, December 2011 and January through April 2012, are explained by the beginning of the rebellion and the associated early victories of the MNLA. The movement needed a strong start both militarily and for information operations purposes. The overthrow of Malian President Toure by the military and subsequent suspension of Mali from the African Union was capitalized upon by the MNLA. They released flurries of public statements and won a series of military victories across northern Mali which included the capture of considerably large swathes of territory. In December 2012 Malian Prime Minister Diarra resigned, and President Traore selected the new PM Sissoko. At

the same time the government weathered UN and U.S. threats of sanctions. The MNLA saw the deterioration and attempted to anticipate the reshuffling with more public relations statements. February 2013 was the seventh month and came after the French “Operation Serval” intervention that, along with re-trained and re-organized Malian forces, recaptured almost all of the critical areas away from the Islamist terror groups and the MNLA. The MNLA had a good relationship with the intervention forces and did not see much combat with them.

It was not until May 2014 that ten more posts were made in a month again. These posts coincide with the collapse of a set of tenuous agreements between the MNLA, other rebel groups, and the Malian government. As fighting continued and the MNLA scored some small victories, more information efforts aimed to support military operations on the ground. The MNLA needed to justify its return to arms and the breakdown of the previous peace agreements. The final two months with ten or more total posts in the dataset are September and October 2014. In September new talks were started between northern Mali rebels and the Malian government in Algeria and an Azawad embassy was opened in the Netherlands. More posts appeared discussing the talks and making the argument for greater concessions in the MNLA’s favor. In October, jihadist attacks on MINUSMA peacekeepers led to the deadliest period for UN forces in Mali. The MNLA sought to separate themselves from these jihadist organizations as much as possible, particularly MUJAO who took responsibility for the killings.

Several months in the dataset feature lesser numbers of posts. The first month with three or less posts was December 2011. The website started only one month before and the rebellion commenced one month later. The larger number of posts in November indicated the launch of the website. These postings also communicated to the regional and international community the pertinent issues that would be related to the upcoming conflict. December featured fewer posts;

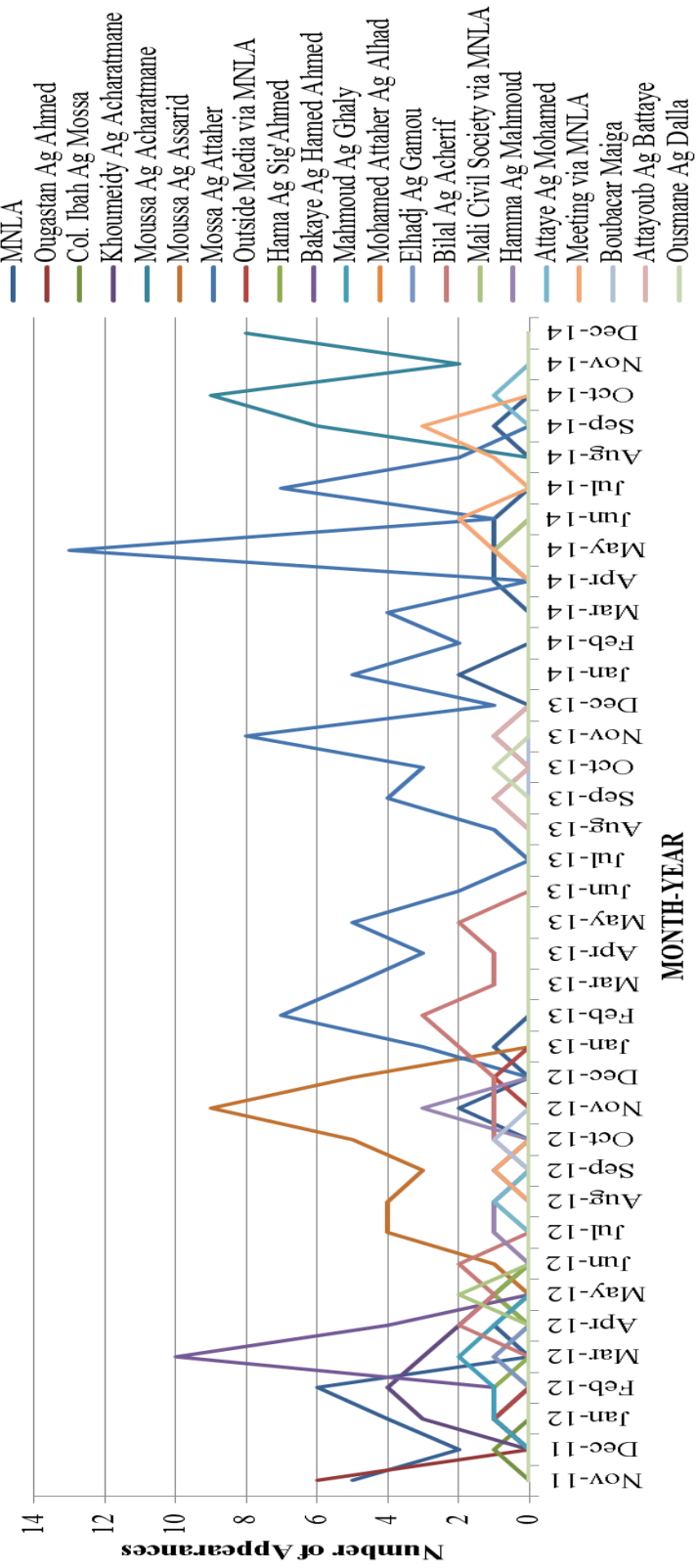
the MNLA appearing hesitant to post as frequently in light of the impending conflict. The second month was June 2012. This month featured the breakdown of some tenuous alliances with AQIM and Ansar al-Dine and some significant losses of territory for the MNLA. The two surrounding months of May and July had no more than six posts each. It would not be until the summer of 2013 that a major decrease in the number of monthly posts occurred. June through August 2013 featured a combined total of three posts. The only major events to occur in this three month span were the signing of a peace deal between the rebels and the Malian government in June and the election of President Keita in July. The majority of the French forces had largely withdrawn by the summer of 2013 and government-rebel relations were calmer, but not completely stable. The MNLA did not feel the need to keep making public statements during this lull in action but their postings picked back up towards September, when clashes between the rebels and the Malian government returned.

As 2013 came to a close more low posting months began to appear. The next three months with three or fewer postings are December 2013, February 2014, and April 2014. After initial clashes in the beginning of fall 2013, the winter and spring of 2014 saw few posts until May 2014 when the conflict resumed on a large scale. The MNLA was waiting until this return to conflict to restart larger scale information dissemination. The final two months with ten or less posts are August and November 2014. August came just before the new rounds of peace talks between the MNLA, other rebels, and the Malian government in September while November saw the Ebola virus reach Mali. The MNLA may have felt their bargaining position was relatively clear and held off on making too many statements before seeing what approach the Malian government was taking to the negotiations. It could be argued that the MNLA were playing a close hand but since the MNLA did not bring anything particularly new or surprising to

the negotiating table in Algeria, it is more likely they felt openly comfortable in their particular situation before the talks began. Ebola was never explicitly mentioned as an issue by the MNLA nor was Mali as a whole significantly affected by the virus. The lack of posts for November may be better explained by the MNLA simply staying quieter as the negotiations in Algeria unfolded and limited combat left less to report on.

At the most general level, a pattern emerges in the dataset that explains the total number of posts per month and deviations from the average number of posts per month can be explained. The MNLA tends to post less when it experiences military and political losses and when it is anticipating the recurrence of conflict or the beginning of new talks relevant to the conflict between rebels and the government. Once the conflict restarts the MNLA posts more frequently. The MNLA attempts to post more when on-the-ground operations increase, most likely to win over the “hearts and minds” of local, national, regional, and international audiences while establishing and documenting their right to rebellion against the Malian government. These findings regarding total posts confirm the central hypothesis, that posting by the MNLA does correlate with events on the ground in northern Mali. The MNLA posts more often or less often, regardless of the topic, based on the frequency and timing of various conflict-related events. The analysis now moves to the study of the four main securitization categories.

Figure 5. Promoters of MNLA Statements



5.2 Promoters

MNLA promoters are the movement's members empowered to write on the MNLA's online public relations apparatus. There are 21 different MNLA promoters across the MNLA website postings. The vast majority are MNLA members of varying rank. The MNLA also communicated the proceedings of negotiations, meetings, or interviews with journalists. Some posts are directly credited to more than one promoter but the majority of posts only had a single promoter. This section of the analysis will primarily focus on the peaks of certain promoters as opposed to periods of time where many promoters only posted once or twice. Seeing who is entrusted to have their messages posted the most frequently not only gives insight into which actors or leadership positions generally have the most access to MNLA website posting but could also reveal a correlation between the most active promoters and events on the ground.

The six promoters who had at least one month with five or more posts are the MNLA, Ougastan Ag Ahmed, Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, Moussa Ag Assarid, Mossa Ag Attaher, and Bakaye Ag Hamed Ahmed. With the exception of Ag Ahmed, all of these promoters have at least ten total posts over the entirety of the dataset. Two promoters who have more than ten total posts but never have five or more in a single month are Khoumeidy Ag Acharatoumane and Bilal Ag Acherif. The generic MNLA promoter is used sparingly throughout the dataset with the largest concentration between November 2011 and February 2012. Starting out the uprising, the author of the posts most likely wanted to develop a greater cohesion among the MNLA and its audiences, showing solidarity by not signing individual names. The two most active individual promoters within this four month time frame are Ag Ahmed and K. Ag Acharatoumane with Ag Assarid and Ag Attaher also getting a post in each. Any of these leadership members could have written the post but there is no way to actually know for certain. Therefore, whoever the writer

was may have desired to instill at the beginning of the uprising, and at occasional points throughout the years, a sense of solidarity and unification under the MNLA banner rather than ceding rhetorical authority to individual leaders.

All that is known about **Ougastan Ag Ahmed** is that he was *chargé de communication* with the MNLA. Ag Ahmed posted six times in November 2011 and has not been credited with a posting since. While there were no events during this month, it was the time of the formation of the MNLA and the start of the rebellion in 2012. Ag Ahmed was clearly playing an important role in the formative days of the MNLA and the rebellion but the reasons for the cessation of his posts, as with almost all of the other promoters, are relatively unknown and probably lie within the internal decision-making structure of the organization. He was replaced by a new *chargé de communication* but no specific explanation for the change was given.

Khoumeidy Ag Acharatoumane wrote 13 posts between January and May 2012. During this time K. Ag Acharatoumane wrote a weekly piece, among a few others, entitled “A week in Azawad,” covering a wide slate of issues related to the conflict in northern Mali.⁴⁵ It remains unclear what K. Ag Acharatoumane’s position was or if he was simply an MNLA member with communication skills that the organization exploited in the early months of the conflict. Given that K. Ag Acharatoumane signed most of his posts “For the MNLA” and then his name, the latter appears more likely. There is a possibility that M. Ag Acharatoumane and K. Ag Acharatoumane are the same person or are somehow related. Alongside Ag Ahmed, K. Ag Acharatoumane appears to have been an important part in getting the MNLA’s information apparatus off the ground at the start of the rebellion.

Moussa Ag Acharatoumane had one post each in January and May of 2012 while the rest of his postings are confined to September through December 2014 with a combined posting

total of 25 for that period. M. Ag Acharatoumane has held both *chargé de communication* and *chargé des droits humains* positions. M. Ag Acharatoumane's first two posts coincide with the beginning of conflict in January 2012, and the failure of the MNLA's relationships with terrorist groups in the region and subsequent loss of territory in May 2012. These events were critical stages in the early development of the uprising. As a communications and human rights leader of the MNLA, M. Ag Acharatoumane was entrusted to make important statements during this period to the general public. With the exception of a handful of posts, M. Ag Acharatoumane also wrote all of the posts from September to December 2014, totaling 25. All of these posts were signed either *chargé de communication* or "For the coordination", signaling that M. Ag Acharatoumane had likely been appointed head of public relations as the peace talks started in September 2014 and more conflict-related events unfolded in the region, including attacks by terrorist groups. The "For the coordination" signature that began to appear near the end of 2014 refers to the MNLA attempting to make statements on behalf of the variety of separatists and rebels in northern Mali who formed a loose rebel conglomerate with which to negotiate with the Malian government. The reason for his absence between May 2012 and September 2014 is unclear but, to this day, he continues to be the primary MNLA *chargé de communication*.

Moussa Ag Assarid is a Malian-French author and actor who is an active MNLA supporter. With the exception of one post in January 2012, Ag Assarid wrote all of his posts between July and December 2012. Ag Assarid's single, compelling piece in January 2012 was part of the information surge at the beginning of the conflict entitled "The profound reasons for my revolt and my adhesion to the MNLA."⁴⁶ Ag Assarid was one of the primary *chargés de communication* for the MNLA from June to December 2012 as well. He wrote a number of press communiqués and meeting summaries for the MNLA and specifically for the Conseil Transitoire

de l'Etat de l'Azawad (CTEA), the main governing body of the organization. This period featured a number of significant events in the northern Mali conflict including losses to terrorists, political turbulence in Bamako, and the general course of conflict only about six months after the start of the uprising. The reason for his posting absence from after 2012 is unknown. It is possible that the CTEA no longer wanted to keep him on as a *Chargé de Communication* or that he wished to spend more time on some of his own career pursuits, particularly given the MNLA's politico-military outlook at the time.

Mossa Ag Attaher posted with the highest frequency and consistency relative to his MNLA promoter counterparts. Ag Attaher posted in 19 of the 38 total months and accumulated 77 posts, more than twice the amount of the next closest promoter (Ag Assarid with 32). Ag Attaher posted once in January 2012 and then posted in bursts from January 2013 to August 2014. Ag Attaher is identified as yet another *chargé de communication* and as a *porte-parole*, or spokesperson. The reasons for a number of individuals being listed with these official titles are to spread out responsibility and permit those leaders to have transferrable skills in case a current *chargé de communication* becomes incapacitated. It also allows for individuals within the leadership to experience different roles in the organization to create more well-rounded leaders. His initial post, in January 2012, was likely part of the initial round of introductions into the MNLA's online public relations apparatus. Getting all the leaders to post was likely important to the MNLA to establish communication and confidence at the outset of the conflict. His posts varied in monthly totals between January 2013 and August 2014 but missed posting at all during only two months.

Ag Attaher's posts covered a wide variety of topics and coincided with a number of important events. Four of Ag Attaher's peak posting months contained significant events or were

right around the time of significant events. He had seven in February 2013 which was the month following the French intervention and re-capturing of territory from Islamist groups. Having been given some time to take effect, Ag Attaher was charged with taking stock of the intervention and the place of the MNLA at this important crossroads in the northern Mali conflict. November 2013 saw eight posts from Ag Attaher and was the month which followed the return of clashes between the Malian government and separatist forces. Likewise, Ag Attaher had 13 posts in May 2014 which was the month when another Malian government-rebel truce fell apart and conflict resumed. The two times tenuous peace agreements failed and conflict restarted, Ag Attaher was leading the frontline of public relations. His final peak month was July 2014, roughly two months into the latest round of hostilities. This period began to see an increased presence of Islamist groups that damaged both MNLA and Malian government efforts. Alongside K. Ag Acharatoumane and Ag Assarid, Ag Attaher was the leading voice for the MNLA at some of the watershed moments in the organization's history.

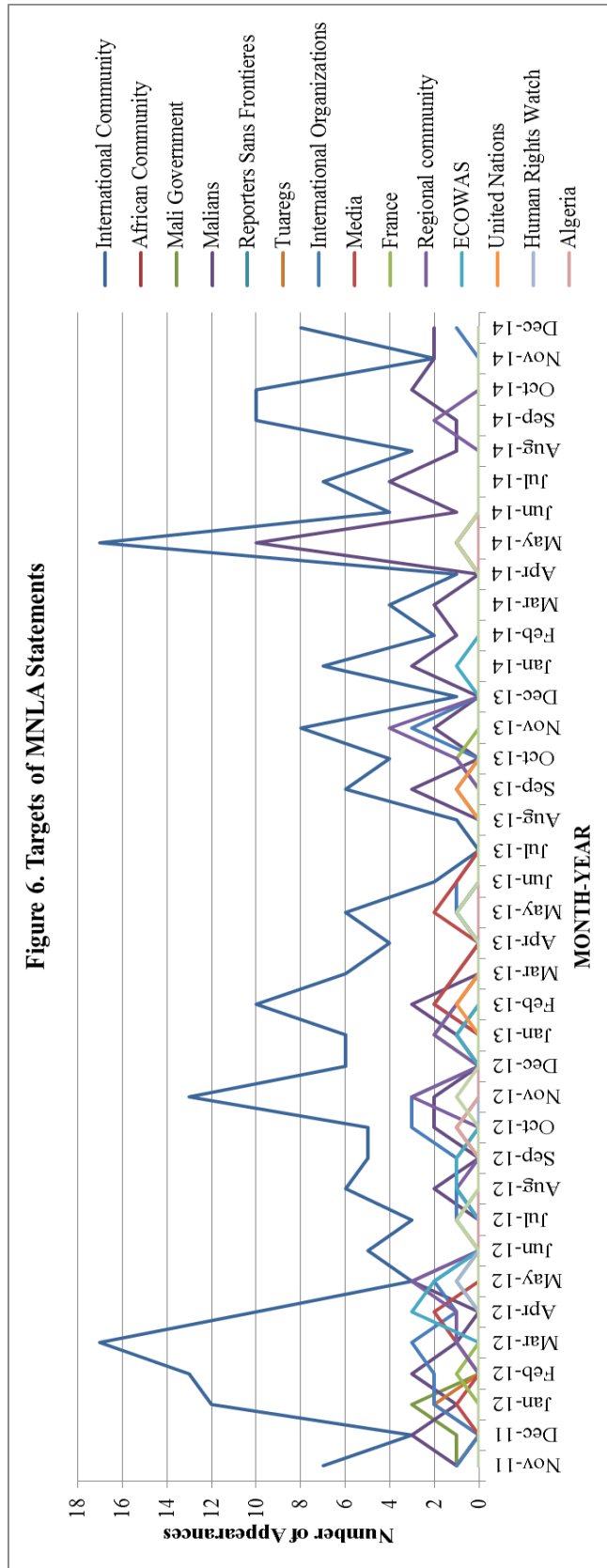
Another promoter worth mentioning is **Bakaye Ag Hamed Ahmed**. All of Ag Hamed Ahmed's postings were in a four month period in 2012 with one post each in January and February, ten in March, and four in April. As yet another *chargé de communication*, Ag Hamed Ahmed contributed two early 2012 posts in the information surge at the outset of the uprising. The rest of Ag Hamed Ahmed's posts in March and April 2012 coincide with Malian President Toure being deposed by the Malian military, the suspension of Mali from the AU, and then the MNLA's consequent major seizures of territory across northern Mali. At the time, Ag Hamed Ahmed had either been in the role by coincidence, in a sort of rotation, or was specially selected to write the messages for this period. Either way he made considerable headway in the four month period, writing 16 total posts.

The final individual who was a significant promoter is **Bilal Ag Acherif**, Secretary General of the MNLA. Ag Acherif had 19 total posts but never more than three posts in one month. Ag Acherif had five total posts between April and June 2012, twelve total posts between October 2012 and May 2013, and one post each in September 2013 and May 2014. The April through June 2012 posts coincide with the early turmoil in the Malian government, the consequent MNLA victories, and then the failure of the disastrous relationship with the local and regional Islamist groups. The latter two months of September 2013 and May 2014 directly coincide with the MNLA's return to arms after ceasefires and treaties with the Malian government failed. Ag Acherif's posts are primarily major MNLA announcements and declarations related to core stances of the organization in relation to the conflict and other states and groups. Furthermore, occasional posting on the part of Ag Acherif lent the organization a helpful media presence and provided the MNLA's audiences with evidence of active leadership.

There were a number of other promoters besides the ones discussed in this sub-section. However, the content and number of posts on the MNLA website from these individuals were too insignificant or low to warrant extended discussion here. It will suffice to say that the promoters were primarily a combination of military and civilian MNLA leadership. What emerges from this analysis is a clear trend in promoters. With the exception of a crowded promoter field in the earliest months of the dataset there are one to two promoters posting at any given time with one dominant promoter at all times. There are small overlaps at certain points but some of the changes occur precisely by the month. In November 2011 Ag Ahmed was the dominant promoter and adopted the generic MNLA signature. The MNLA signature was then the dominant promoter until February 2012 when an overlap with K. Ag Acharatoumane and Ag Hamed Ahmed began. K. Ag Acharatoumane and Ag Hamed Ahmed were co-dominant

promoters until mid-2012. This early congestion was likely due to the MNLA organization trying to manage the intense start-up of the rebellion. From mid-2012 onward the pattern became clearer. From mid-2012 to late 2012 the dominant promoter was Ag Assarid with Ag Acherif as the secondary promoter, 2013 features Ag Attaher as the dominant promoter with Ag Acherif as the secondary promoter, early to mid-2014 featured Mossa Ag Attaher as the dominant promoter, and in late 2014 M. Ag Acharatoumane took over as the dominant promoter. The slew of promoters not featured in this sub-section can be considered a variety of co-secondary promoters throughout the respective time periods in which they had messages posted.

This pattern indicates that the *chargé de communication* is a rotating position in the MNLA and changes as the organization's leadership sees fit, based on the current, prevailing situation. This pattern also means that the history of the MNLA public relations posts is divisible into roughly five eras according to dominant promoters or the dominant *chargé de communication* of the time period: from 2011 to early 2012 (Mixed MNLA, Ag Ahmed); early to mid-2012 (K. Ag Acharatoumane, Ag Hamed Ahmed); mid-2012 to late 2012 (Ag Assarid); early 2013 to mid-2014 (Ag Attaher); and late 2014 to present (M. Ag Acharatoumane). The pattern in promoters is yet another step in confirming the central hypothesis that the MNLA intentionally posts in concert with particular events. Not only is this correlation present but the promoter responsibility is so highly organized over different periods of the rebellion by the MNLA that it is highly unlikely the pattern is a coincidence.



5.3 Targets

The MNLA targets a variety of groups in its postings. Fourteen different target audiences were identified in the MNLA's website posts from November 2011 to December 2014. These audiences fell into two groups based on total posts. The first group is made up of the four targets appearing in more than 20 posts: the international community; Malian citizens; international organizations; and the regional Sahel community. The other ten groups appeared in one to ten posts over the entirety of the dataset.

237 out of the 259 total MNLA posts in the dataset included the **international community** as a target audience. The data reveals that the MNLA genuinely wants to dispel its narrative beyond Mali, the Sahel, and France to the rest of the world. Bringing the MNLA's message to this level shows a desire to elevate the current uprising above local and national concerns to the regional and international stages. Noticeable peaks for the international community are between January and April 2012, November 2012, February 2013, May 2014, and September to October 2014.

The early months of 2012 have a number of posts whose target audience is the international community. Early in the uprising the MNLA saw the opportunity for a transformative change in this conflict compared to historical precedent, by taking their narrative to a global audience in a way the movement largely had not been able to do before via the Internet. The MNLA released 52 posts with the international community as a target between January and April 2012 alone. During the early stages of the conflict this was an important audience to reach out to not only to justify their actions and attempt to garner support but also to capitalize upon military victories on the ground. The posts during the brief alliance with AQIM and Ansar Al-Dine, from May to June 2012, and the MNLA's military difficulties in the months

after the failure of the alliance also suggest that the MNLA probably wanted to significantly reduce the publicity of this tumultuous relationship. It did not take long for the MNLA to work diligently through their public relations posts to separate themselves from these Islamist groups as much as possible after the brief alliance failed. the MNLA realized that these relationships would not be conducive to earning the sympathies of outside states and international organizations.

The November 2012 spike in the international community target came after the large series of MNLA and Malian government losses to Islamist groups. This spike also came just before the December 2012 Mali government tumult and the January 2012 French intervention, as the Islamists closed in on Bamako. The February 2013 spike came just after the successful French intervention and likely resulted from the MNLA attempting to re-establish good relations with the intervention forces and the rest of the on-looking international community. Getting public relations with the outside world back on track after losing ground and legitimacy to the Islamists for the several months was an MNLA priority. Another spike in May 2014 directly correlates with the collapse of the rebel-Malian government truces and the return to conflict. Justification for a return to conflict and an attempt to convince the international community that the MNLA should get more concessions in future negotiations based on the government's unwillingness to avoid conflict were major themes. Finally, September to October 2014 was the beginning of the new round of rebel-government talks in Algeria, the opening of the new Azawad embassy in the Netherlands, and some clashes between Islamists and UN forces. The spike of international community-targeted posts was likely meant to support the MNLA's position in negotiations and continue to put distance between themselves and the Islamists.

The second target audience of MNLA posts are **Malian citizens**. The MNLA frequently referred to Malian citizens in Azawad but also included Malians who lived in the South to target a wider audience. Malians as targets, in 57 total posts, are spread fairly evenly across the dataset but there were a few larger pockets of posts during certain months. From November 2011 to May 2012 there are approximately twelve posts with Malian citizens as a target audience. This series of posts was intended to inform Malian citizens about the events of the early uprising and get the citizenry with access to the Internet on board with the MNLA's ideals and operations. There was a relatively small grouping of posts with Malians as targets from late 2012 to early 2013, correlating with the Malian government's political difficulties and then the entrance of France into the conflict to stave off the Islamist advance. Late 2013 saw Malians targeted by the MNLA, particularly in the period after the September return to conflict. The MNLA apparently had a brief public relations surge in this period to get their countrymen to support their efforts in the renewed conflict. May 2014 was the next significant month of Malian-target posts and the highest for Malians with ten posts. This coincides with the May 2014 truce failure and the MNLA capture of Kidal and other territories. From June to December 2014 there were 14 more posts in a final MNLA surge trying to reach their Malian audience. This likely means that the MNLA was working to convince Malian citizens, among other stakeholders, to support their negotiating position in Algiers. The posts also express how the MNLA found the attacks on UN peacekeepers completely abhorrent.

International organizations were targeted 30 times across the dataset either in a larger list of international organizations or simply under the term "international organizations" itself. There is a group of posts from 2011 to mid-2012 when the MNLA was drawing attention from almost all available audiences to gain support at the commencement of the rebellion. A second

grouping from late 2012 to early 2013 occurred when the conflict shifted rapidly from MNLA success to losses, as a result of the Islamist advances and the French intervention. From mid-2013 to the end of 2014 there were few appeals to international organizations. The MNLA appears to have had less focus on convincing international organizations that their fight and their socio-political stance was correct and decided to put more effort into anyone in the international community who could have sympathy on their struggle. Appeals to state-level leaders willing to aid the MNLA against a far less appealing contingent of Islamist organizations like AQIM were also a probable focus.

The final target with a significant number of posts was the **regional community** with 21 total posts. The regional states and non-state actors which comprised the community were targeted fairly evenly across the dataset with spikes of three in May and November 2012 as well as of four in November 2013. May and November 2012 coincide with the MNLA's brief alliance with AQIM and Ansar al-Dine in northern Mali. May and November 2012 were also in the period leading to the December Malian government turmoil which saw leadership change hands and Islamist groups make significant territorial gains, respectively. Finally, November 2013 was one of the first months after the failure of a government-rebel truce and a return to hostilities. The MNLA was then attempting to reach out to regional states in an effort to gain support for their stance in the conflict and to justify their various alliances. The MNLA also called for intervention from regional organizations, particularly ECOWAS and the AU, to help in the conflict itself both before and after the major interventions by France and the UN.

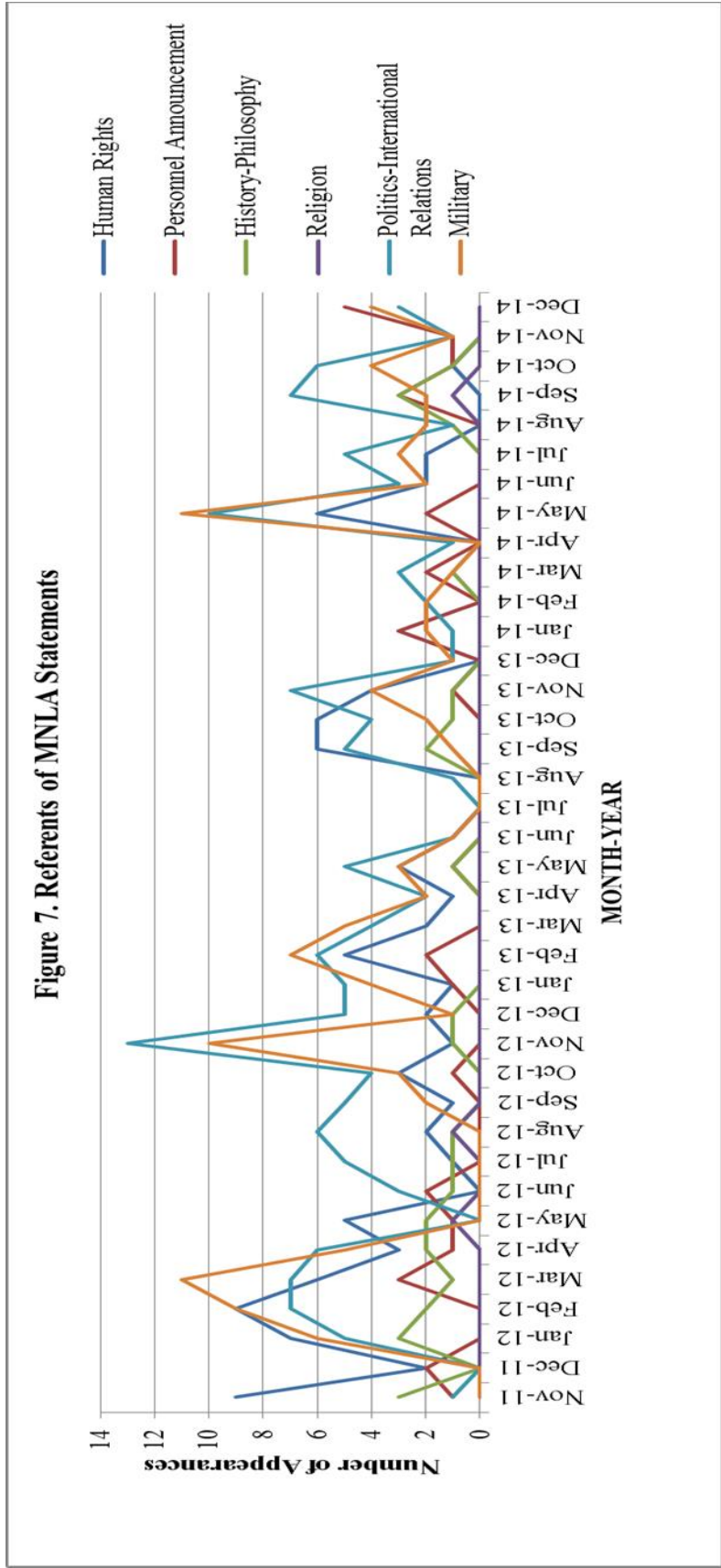
With the exception of the very general international community, which was targeted consistently over the dataset, the three specific target audiences the MNLA was concerned with were Malians, international organizations, and the regional community. It is possible that these

three targets were some of the most important actors the MNLA call upon for attention and support. The MNLA needs Malians, both Azawadis and southerners, to support their cause. Without the “hearts and minds” of their local populations the MNLA will have trouble holding and governing territory. International organizations like the UN have long been concerned with African conflicts and the potential for states, such as France, to get involved if they feel national interests are challenged. This occurs less often regarding rebels like the MNLA than Islamist groups like AQIM. The MNLA’s noticeable efforts to separate themselves from the Islamists, particularly after mid-2012, shows a much more globally nuanced approach by the organization’s leadership. Alliances with groups like AQIM may have short-term benefits but large-scale support is unlikely to come from international organizations and states if they are too closely associated with terrorist and Islamist groups. Such alliances may also attract unrequested foreign interventions.

Finally, the regional community has always been a fluid but critical stakeholder in the northern Mali conflict. State and non-state group stability and willingness to fight may ebb and flow but the porous borders and transnational ethnic identities that characterize the Sahel mean conflicts rarely stay completely localized. The Tuareg fighters who returned to help the MNLA after fighting in Libya and Algeria attest to this fact. Based on the data, the MNLA appears to call upon these internal and external stakeholders at a time of crisis or when it anticipates an impending crisis. This is not wholly unsurprising but large gaps between surges in posting targets for the individual categories suggest that the MNLA pursues anyone who may be able to help in that moment rather than appeal consistently to certain targets across the course of their struggle. This indicates a lack of strategic vision to some degree for the MNLA in their fight.

Limited targeting of states such as France, Algeria, and the United States as well as

specific organizations such as ECOWAS and various NGOs (Human Rights Watch and Reporters Sans Frontières, for example) indicates that either the MNLA can only afford to post in a more blanketed fashion or it is unsure of who to publicly appeal to given the ever-changing nature of the northern Mali conflict. However, the emphasis on the four major sub-categories highlighted in this sub-section indicates that the MNLA's generalized, blanketing strategy correlates regularly across the dataset with conflict-related events. If the movement is unsure who to specifically target at certain moments then it trusts that as major events occur, that it can anticipate or respond to those events with regular appeals to the international community, Malian citizens, international organizations, and the regional community.



5.4 Referents

The referents, or topics, of the MNLA's posts fell broadly into six categories: human rights, personnel announcements, history-philosophy, religion, politics-international relations, and military. Human rights, politics-international relations, and military were the three most common referents across the dataset with personnel announcements, history-philosophy, and religion appearing far less often. The gap between the two groups of categories is noticeable and may reflect genuine priorities.

Human rights were a major MNLA referent from November 2011 to March 2012, totaling 30 posts. The early months of the MNLA formation and the uprising required the organization to use its information apparatus to create and disseminate the narrative of Malian government abuses against Azawadis. Starting this dialogue and presenting the movement firmly as the victim was a goal for the MNLA in order to gain support and militarily challenge the Malian government. This strategy was necessary to counter the rhetoric emanating from Bamako as the hostilities ensued. September and October 2013 saw a combined twelve posts on human rights which came exactly at the point when rebel-government hostilities resumed in Mali, once the majority of the French intervention force had pulled out. Re-establishing the narrative of just cause and righteous rebellion was important in justifying a return to arms after a somewhat brief cessation in conflict. The final spike of human rights referents was in May 2014 with six posts. That month a recent government-rebel truce had fallen apart and conflict started back up again. Justifying the return to conflict and instilling in the memory of all audiences the abuses suffered by the Azawadi people at the hands of the Malian government was needed to inspire support for the struggle over the two years since it began.

Politics-international relations had several spikes across the dataset, yet again reflecting the MNLA's deference to different topics. The first grouping of politics-international relations posts contains 20 posts and runs from February to April 2012. In this three month period the AU suspended Mali, President Toure was deposed, President Traore came to power in the military-civilian transition, and the MNLA was able to seize the majority of northern Mali. Having captured swathes of territory, the MNLA anticipated further conflict and some form of negotiations in the future involving other states and international organizations. The MNLA needed to clarify their policy goals, the actors to request help from, and their stance towards other stakeholders in the conflict in order to achieve the movement's objectives. Peaks in August 2012 and November 2012 comprise the period of the Islamist takeover of northern Mali but before the period of the French intervention. A spike in February 2013 came during the period of the French intervention. The months with higher numbers of posts about politics and international relations did not coincide with months during which major events occurred. It is possible that the MNLA saw opportunities during these two watershed periods to try and strengthen their political relations with other states and organizations, while working diligently to oppose the actions of both the Malian government and the Islamists in order to earn a more favorable position with outside actors when military interventions or peace talks took place. This strategy appeared to work as the MNLA had a rather good relationship with France during its intervention.⁴⁷ Further spikes occurred in November 2013, May 2014, and from September to October 2014. November 2013 was in the period of renewed conflict a few months after the French intervention force left and the brief rebel-government truce fell apart. The May 2014 spike directly coincides with the dissolution of the later truce and another return to hostilities. The September to October 2014 peak coincides with the beginning of the Algiers talks, the

opening of the Azawadi embassy in the Netherlands, and the major attack on MINUSMA peacekeepers. All of these periods were important junctures for the MNLA to renew communications and strengthen public ties with outside stakeholders, particularly states, and to shore up support in a conflict that evolved on a monthly basis.

Military referents in MNLA posts had three main peaks across the dataset. The first was January to April 2012 with a combined 31 posts, approximately November 2012 to March 2013 with 27 combined posts, and May 2014 with eleven posts. These three spikes are correlated with the major stages of conflict across the dataset. January to April 2012 was the outset of hostilities that saw the MNLA take large swathes of territory, including major cities. It is likely that the MNLA wanted to advertise their presence and their victories to any audiences willing to listen, particularly domestic ones to gain further support for their movement. November 2012 to March 2013 was the period of the Islamist surge towards southern Mali up to the French intervention. This period saw considerable fighting and the MNLA had to carefully balance its military operations against the Malian government and competing Islamists groups with the French intervention. The MNLA balancing act appeared to work. After the French intervention, the MNLA kept fighting with the government and the Islamists. But, the movement managed to stay in a relatively strong position given the power and precision of French operations as evidenced by the maintenance and effective return to conflict by the MNLA several months later. The final peak was in May 2014 after the truce fallout with the government. Hostilities ensued and posts about military operations restarted so that the MNLA could inform the public of operations as well as justify them given the length of the conflict at that point.

The final three referent categories appeared far less frequently but deserve some brief attention. **Personnel announcements** occurred in relatively low but consistent numbers across

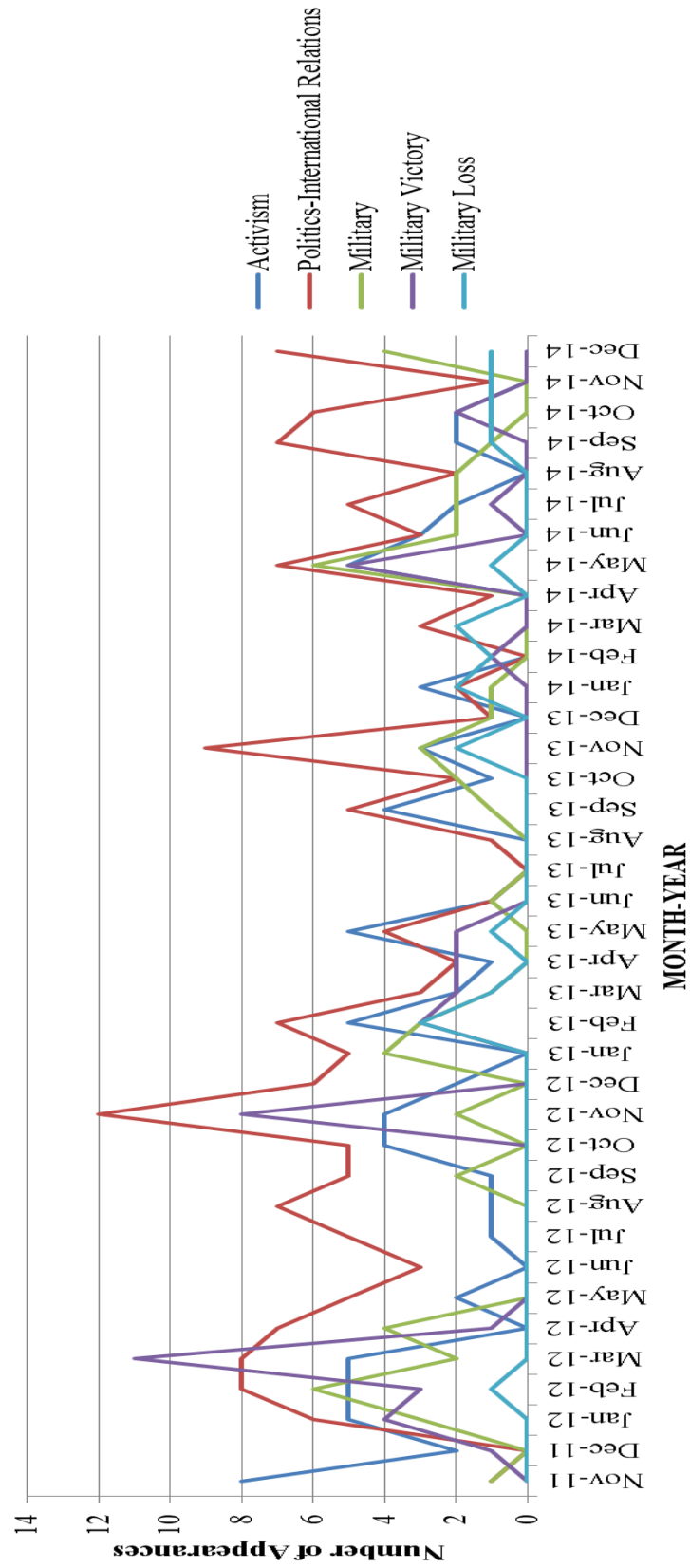
the dataset. These announcements largely regarded the defection of certain personalities and fighters to the MNLA cause as well as the deaths of a few individuals. Such announcements are apparently reserved for high ranking MNLA members and sympathizers who were well-known in northern Mali. The most noticeable peak for these announcements was in December 2014 when five posts mentioned the deaths of MNLA members and sympathizers.⁴⁸ Several of these deceased individuals were senior founders or historically important people associated with the MNLA.

History-philosophy was also mentioned a few times in a relatively consistent manner across the dataset. The highest number of posts was early in the conflict (2011-2012) when the MNLA was working to establish its public narrative and claim to victimhood. Otherwise there is little in the way of correlation with major events. Finally, **religion** was only mentioned in three posts across the entirety of the dataset. All three posts were relatively innocuous and contained no radical language. On May 1, 2012, a post celebrated the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr, or the end of Ramadan. On August 18, 2012, the publication of a letter by the Ulemas, or holy leaders, of Azawad which demonstrated support for the independence of Azawad and encouragement for Islam to be the official religion of the new state. Another post, on September 26, 2014, celebrated Tabaski, a major Malian and Sahelian Muslim religious festival also known as Eid al-Adha. The two holiday posts both included notices that fighting would cease at least for a few days to prepare for and honor the occasions. These religious posts are consistent with the MNLA's long-existing character of being comprised almost entirely of Muslims but running their organization and operations in a highly secular fashion.

Referents of MNLA public statements correlate with events in the conflict, providing further support for the central research hypothesis. There is a strong connection between events

and the topics that the movement chooses to discuss, particularly with the dominant human rights, politics-international relations, and military referents. These three topics almost entirely encapsulate the aims of the MNLA and are therefore employed frequently but strategically to serve the movement's goals and objectives.

Figure 8. Intentions of MNLA Statements



5.5 Intentions

The intentions behind the MNLA postings in the dataset were the strongest reason for not conducting automated content analysis. Promoters, audiences, and referents could have been given reasonable attention by software but intentions would have been difficult for a program to pick up on, creating the necessity for a human reader to make accurate determinations about the core reasons for posting content. Five types of intentions in MNLA postings are examined: activism; politics-international relations; military; military victory; and military loss.

Activist intentions were dominant from November 2011 to March 2012. Establishing a victimhood narrative and justifying a movement to arms against the Malian government was apparently important to the MNLA's operations and political relations. Activism for the MNLA cause, usually purported in the form of the suffering of northern Malian Muslims and various ethnic groups, was a natural starting point to getting the international community on the side of the MNLA at the outset of the conflict. Peaks in February and May 2013 occurred during the French intervention period and the MNLA's efforts to develop positive relations with foreign intervention forces and observers. Such activism not only helped to grant more legitimacy to the MNLA's arguments but put the organization on a positive footing with stakeholders involved in the negotiations. The final spike of activist intention posts was May 2014, the month of the rebel-government truce failure and return to arms. Gaining support for the MNLA cause was especially important then, since the conflict had dragged on for over two years and the breaking of a peace deal would certainly not have been taken lightly by most stakeholders or observers. In between these peaks there was a small but steady stream of activist intention posts to continuously remind all audiences of why the MNLA's fight was just and important both in Mali and beyond.

The most common intention posts were related to **politics and international relations**. It is not surprising that a public relations platform was used primarily by the MNLA for issuing political statements, clarifying stances on different political issues, and establishing relations with other sub-state, state, and international entities. Politics-international relations saw peaks in January to May 2012, from November 2012 to February 2013, September to November 2013, and May to December 2014. To avoid rehashing the oft-repeated events during and around these periods it suffices to say that posts clarifying political stances towards other actors coincided directly with the most noticeable periods of conflict across the timeline. Early 2012 featured rebel victories against the government, late 2012 to early 2013 was the period of the Islamist surge into southern Mali which necessitated the French intervention, late 2013 saw the post-intervention peace fall apart and clashes return in northern Mali, and mid to late 2014 was the collapse of another truce and a return to hostilities before major negotiations started in Algeria.

Given that conflict occurred fairly regularly across the timeline and various truces and peace deals were negotiated, only to fall apart, and be considered once again, the MNLA needed to use its public information platform to tell its constituents and international actors what its demands and positions were. The MNLA desired to make clear their opinion towards the stances of other states and international organizations regarding the northern Mali conflict. The movement continued to counter-balance the rhetoric from Bamako to try and win information battles against the Malian government when the MNLA may not have been winning tangible victories. The movement issues statements with political intent quite frequently but primarily when fighting is actually taking place not only to counter Bamako and regional Islamist efforts but also to empower its own political identity. The MNLA does not want to be categorized as another Islamist rebel group simply trying to use violence to pry power away from state entities.

The movement wants to establish strong political relations with states and international organizations, albeit on favorable terms. By pushing the Azawad narrative the MNLA intends to force the identification and recognition of a different state deserving of separation from an abusive government, mimicking that of South Sudan's independence process.⁴⁹

Since conflict occurred regularly across the timeline, leading to several thousand deaths, it is not surprising that posts with **military** intentions were present. However, these posts were limited in number compared to activism and politics-international relations intentions. The point of a military intention post is to promote and explain not necessarily the MNLA's cause and demands but their military operations. A basic military intention can be accompanied by posts communicating a military victory or loss but it does not have to be so. Military intentions are scattered across the dataset, but February 2012 and May 2014 stand out as brief spikes. These were critical fighting months during the conflict and unsurprisingly the MNLA found the need and opportunity to release statements on military operations. Smaller peaks are seen in the data and represent the same pattern of information release regarding the evolution of military operations. As the Malian government experienced turmoil, the MNLA and Islamist groups battled, or negotiations were imminent, the MNLA chose to remind its audiences that their armed wing was constantly ready for battle.

The final two intentions of MNLA posts are to communicate military victories and losses. **Military victory** posts clearly coincide with the brief periods of noticeable MNLA success in the conflict. From January to March 2012 there were 18 posts regarding MNLA victory during their sweeping early-conflict success. One more spike reached eight posts in November 2012, when there were several battles between the MNLA, Islamist forces, and the Malian government. May 2014 saw a brief spike of victory announcements for the MNLA after the truce fell apart. Besides

these peaks, military victories in reality and in MNLA public relations were few and far between. It does appear that the MNLA were quick to capitalize on battlefield victories with public statements in order to further convince audiences, particularly domestic ones, of their righteousness and success. The MNLA needed to do this given the limited number of clear victories they had over the entirety of the conflict.

Military losses were announced highly infrequently. There was a peak of three in February 2013 as the MNLA lost ground and notoriety to the French and Islamists, either by force or by the decision to not militarily engage the intervention troops. One or two posts per month are scattered across the dataset and a clear pattern does not necessarily emerge. Given the MNLA's various standings throughout the conflict it is likely that some losses were not reported while the ones that were reported were likely able to be spun into a positive public relations post for the organization. Simply losing ground to Malian forces at various points would not support the MNLA's efforts but reporting on executions by the Malian forces or bombings by Islamist organizations could serve to strengthen the MNLA's moral and socio-political standing to observers.

The findings in this sub-section strongly support the central hypothesis. Military loss and military victory posts were neatly correlated with the battlefield situation the MNLA faced. The three dominant intentions of activism, politics-international relations, and military correlated with the relative situation of the MNLA as well. Activist posts were authored when the MNLA felt the need to alert the domestic and international communities of their plight in order to garner further support particularly during the start of the rebellion and difficult events during the conflict. Politics-international relations posts were authored when the MNLA needed to develop

stronger formal ties with various actors related to the conflict and military posts reflected the MNLA's operations on the ground during major battles, interventions, and offensives.

5.6 Qualitative Observations

General qualitative observations of MNLA posts can bring more light and depth to this research. The 2011 to early 2012 period was dominated by impassioned human rights rhetoric and a strong effort to delegitimize the Malian regime under President Toure. The effort to delegitimize and debase consequent Malian regimes did not change but the human rights rhetoric was somewhat less impassioned as the conflict went on, referring to historical injustices less and less. It appears the MNLA began to focus more on its struggle and the abuses it received as part of the Azawad population. It is also important to note that there was minimal reference in the posts to the coup by General Amadou Sanogo, who ousted President Toure. This was despite the human rights concerns leveled against the Malian military, the Toure regime, and Sanogo's coup.⁵⁰ President Toure came up sporadically as an example of the dysfunction in Bamako but was rarely a topic of central attention. The MNLA may have been attempting to strike a balance between any topic or event that drew too much attention away from their fight but could also be used in the right proportion to strengthen the rebel cause.

A point that began to crop up in early 2012 and took flight across mid-2012 postings was the issue of Islamist terror organizations, specifically AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar al-Dine. After a short-lived and ill-conceived "alliance" with these groups to counter the Malian government, the MNLA turned quickly to lambasting them, distancing itself as much as possible from these groups which were obscuring their legitimate efforts.⁵¹ One point made *ad nauseum* by the MNLA about these Islamist groups was that they worked with the Malian government to move

drugs and other illicit materials across Mali and the larger Sahel. It is not unlikely that narcotics helped fund some of these militants' operations but there is little in the way of evidence connecting the trafficking with the Malian government.

In mid to late 2012 the MNLA began to repeatedly ask for negotiations with the Malian government while maintaining a slight battlefield advantage at the time. What may have caused this was not necessarily the loss of ground to Islamists but a combination of two other factors. First, the MNLA may not have been receiving the media coverage, regionally or internationally, that it wanted and wanted to avoid being burdened with the blame for all of the conflict. Second, periods of relatively severe famine and drought across the Sahel affected pastoralism, agriculture, and migration in a destabilizing way. Having already lost refugees to Mauritania, Algeria, and other nearby countries, the MNLA needed talks to show to Malians and international organizations that they were making positive progress and to attract support for their fight. Late 2012 was a dark period for the MNLA as all of the aforementioned factors came together coupled with the general conflict. Accusations by the MNLA of massacres against Tuaregs by the Malian military and the MNLA belief that Radio Mali was being used in a genocidal fashion, reminiscent of the Radio Mille Collines in Rwanda in 1994, was causing great fear among MNLA leadership all the way down to the average Azawadi.

The highlighting event of 2013 in the conflict was easily France's intervention against Islamist groups in Mali. The anti-terror rhetoric from the MNLA continued and victories against Islamist groups were heavily emphasized. For brief periods the Islamists were a temporarily larger concern than the Malian government in terms of conflict for the MNLA. This situation was exacerbated once the French left Mali and the MNLA was once again left with only other small rebel groups and the Malian government to counter the Islamist threat. A final highlight in

late 2013 was the MNLA pulling out of Kidal and fully respecting the 2013 Ouagadougou Agreements, which did not last long, as well as some other agreements that the MNLA was rather vague about. They may have been small or unofficial agreements made in private sessions not heavily covered by the media. This emphasis on the French intervention and the anti-terror and anti-narcotics struggle was the MNLA's primary method of conveying the importance of their struggle during the tumultuous year of 2013.

From 2013 into 2014 the MNLA addressed issues of women's rights, youth support, and a host of civil society and socio-political issues connected to the conflict and ongoing negotiations. The MNLA has an extensive bureaucracy with officials tasked specifically with these aspects of governance among countless other areas. The constant reiteration of a desire for dialogue with the Malian government was also a noticeable theme. Referring to peace talks throughout 2014 may have been a tactic to put the organization in a good position if conflict or negotiations returned. Conflict came first and the negotiations started a few months later. A general roadmap was even agreed on by the Malian government, the MNLA, and two of the other major northern Mali rebel groups but like many previous agreements it never came to fruition.⁵² However the MNLA's insistence on being treated as the main rebel group in northern Mali and various other divisions between the MNLA and other Tuareg rebels made this agreement a fairly rare occurrence. The final notable series of posts marked the deaths of several prominent MNLA sympathizers who appear to have been civil society leaders in northern Mali who had historically opposed the central government in Bamako. These posts were unique compared to the rest of the dataset and the few deaths at once were certainly an interesting development considering many MNLA members and northern Malian citizens died over the course of the conflict and almost none were given individual mention.

6. Conclusions

The material that the MNLA publicly posts is valuable open-source information. Their website is not a typical spout of terrorist or rebel rhetoric aimed at whoever will pay attention in a poor attempt to coordinate what is said with what is done on the ground or at the negotiating table. The MNLA's public relations apparatus closely reflects events on the ground and its commitment to secularism, highlighted by the distance the movement has, for the most part, kept from Islamist organizations. While good information operations and media platforms have benefits, these benefits can be difficult to translate into battlefield successes given the size and financing of the French or Malian militaries relative to the rebels, the asymmetric forms of warfare utilized by terrorist organizations, and extremely low levels of internet access in Mali.⁵³

The secondary hypotheses were not confirmed by the analysis. The results of brief tests of these hypotheses will shed more light on the confirmation of the central hypothesis. The first secondary hypothesis, that months with more events would contain more statements, was correct but only by a small margin. There were 138 posts in 22 months without events averaging 6.2 posts per month. There were 114 posts in 16 months with events averaging 7.1 posts per month. Arguments can be made about adding or removing certain events from the timeline but the synthesis of media sources used to create the timeline in this research intended to highlight the major events in the conflict. That said, there were more posts on average during months with events, indicating that anticipation or experience of major conflict-related events sparked online public relations initiatives for the MNLA.

The second secondary hypothesis was that the months of the French intervention would generate more statements and harsher rhetoric. Both aspects of this hypothesis were disconfirmed. The French intervention lasted from January to April 2013. There were 26 posts

across this 4 month period averaging 6.5 posts per month. The remaining 34 months in the dataset contained a total of 226 posts averaging 6.6 posts per month. The MNLA did not post an average of more statements per month during the French intervention. As mentioned earlier in this research the MNLA were viewed rather favorably by the French military during the intervention and had a somewhat positive relationship with them. Harsh rhetoric against the French was not used during this period or at all across the dataset. Furthermore, the MNLA's rhetoric against Islamist groups and the Malian government was not harsher than at any other time in the dataset. Despite the French intervention, the MNLA did not experience any transformation in the way they publicly felt about their opponents.

The third secondary hypothesis posited that the MNLA will put forth more statements regarding their political and human rights concerns than on the specifics of their battlefield operations. For referents, human rights and politics-international relations totaled 245 posts over the course of the dataset while personnel announcements and military totaled 144 posts. Regarding the intentions behind posts, activism and politics-international relations totaled 241 posts over the course of the dataset while military, military loss, and military victory posts totaled 118 posts. This hypothesis was confirmed by the fact that posts related to MNLA politics and human rights concerns were nearly double those related to military operations either as a referent or as an intention. This makes sense for the MNLA, a rebel group challenging state authority. Communicating certain aspects of military operations is important, but bringing the narrative of the conflict beyond the local microcosms of northern Mali is what the MNLA need to reach broader audiences and convince them of the righteousness of its actions and goals.

The main hypothesis, which stated that the content of MNLA posts will correlate with events in the northern Mali conflict, brings together all five parts of the analysis: total posts;

promoters; targets; referents; and intentions. There are recognizable patterns in the data that confirm correlations between what statements the MNLA disperses to the public and what is happening in the conflict. The confirmation of this hypothesis is the strongest evidence that MNLA public relations postings are valuable for predicting how the organization will respond to and publicly address conflict-related events in the future.

The analysis of total posts, the most general level, revealed that the MNLA posts more frequently when it is anticipating future conflict or new peace talks. The MNLA also posts more frequently when operations are underway but a victor has not emerged from said operations yet. Likewise the MNLA posts less when experiencing both military and political losses. The organization is careful to strike the balance between supplying its audiences with information but not directly displaying weakness in the form of losses and failed negotiations. As with many rebel political organizations' information apparatuses losses, political or military, are spun into positives or explained by the pre-existing rebel narrative of state abuse.

The evolution of promoters authoring MNLA posts followed a relatively clear pattern. Five eras of primary *chargés de communication* were identifiable with different primary and secondary promoters throughout each section of the conflict. As the conflict progressed those tasked with public communications stayed on longer and dominated the public relations landscape more so than their predecessors. This pattern likely resulted from the MNLA needing time to figure out how they would organize communications and their efforts in this domain clearly improved over the years. Furthermore, the variety of MNLA officials charged with communication points to a rotating system of leadership where the higher echelon take on different responsibilities in order to become better informed and trained leaders while also

getting to know different stakeholders and constituents in the conflict through different organizational roles.

Patterns among the targets of MNLA posts emerged in relation to events in the conflict as well. The international community was a consistently frequent target, highlighting the MNLA's desire to take their narrative to the global stage. Likewise, the MNLA aimed their messages at international and regional organizations in an effort to gain political and diplomatic support that could potentially lead to financial or military aid. The MNLA also targeted Malians, both Azawadis and southerners. Without convincing northern Azawadis they were the best group to represent their socio-political interests the MNLA could never maintain gains. Without pressure from southerners, the government in Bamako would be more complacent regarding socio-economic and political complaints from the northern populations.

The primary referents in MNLA postings were human rights, politics-international relations, and military affairs. These topics dominated the group's posts because MNLA believes alleviating human rights suffering requires a combination of military resistance to form a new state of Azawad and developing positive relations with other states and international organizations to gain support for their endeavors. Personnel announcements and history-philosophy were also scattered throughout to provide updates on the deaths and recruitment of MNLA members and to periodically remind Azawadis and outside MNLA supporters of the historic injustices exacted on northern Mali by the South. Religion as a referent was limited to almost nothing beyond the popular Muslim holidays celebrated in northern Mali. The focus on current human rights and political issues over religious and historical grievances highlights the primary concern of the Tuareg rebels.

Finally, the analysis of intentions revealed that activism and politics-international relations were the most significant reasons for posting for the MNLA. Reaching new audiences with a global narrative and establishing positive relationships with individual citizens and state officials and international organization leaders were key priorities of the MNLA information campaign. Aside from these major factors, communicating military information and battlefield wins and losses was also a purpose that the website served.

It can therefore be said with relative certainty that there are correlations between MNLA statements and conflict-related events in northern Mali. Clarifying these correlations are the analyses of total posts and the more specific aspects of each post highlighted by the four primary securitization categories of promoter, target, referent, and intention. Qualitative observations across the available data also indicate several themes that were prevalent across MNLA posts and give further aid to identifying and explaining correlations between the movement's posts and events in the conflict.

The implications of this research for U.S. national security are worth taking into account. While the MNLA is not a direct threat to U.S. citizens or territory, the movement is a potential ally against terrorists in the region. It is unlikely that the U.S. will intervene in the Sahel in the near future in the way France has done. However, the MNLA's support of France during the intervention to counter Islamist advances in Mali shows that American allies can benefit from the MNLA's presence in the region. If the specific situation of northern Mali is not a national security priority, anti-terrorism efforts in the Sahel do create more desirable conditions for the U.S. and western Europe, and therefore are worth supporting.

The method developed in this study and the findings could be replicated to other rebel groups in the region and elsewhere. Better understanding a group's intentions and activities can help the U.S. select potential allies to provide support to, in the form of aid or military advisors. The ability to accurately predict the responses of groups in the volatile Sahel will give the U.S. and its allies analytical, political, and operational advantages among difficult and complex human and physical terrain.

The advancement of localized, rural, and urban rebels in cyber space, mainly via the Internet, is not necessarily a groundbreaking observation but this advent of information dissemination has a significant impact upon state and sub-state responses to conflicts. Any increase in a group's information capabilities brings more public attention to the conflict in general but also to government or coalition mistakes, human rights abuses, and conflicting narratives. Before, rural citizens would often have to wait for news to get out by telephone and be published or for word of mouth to spread the information. Mali's Tuareg rebels may not achieve the state of Azawad they so desperately desire but they have found new ways to compel local, regional, and international stakeholders to consider their viewpoint and actively support it, changing what conflict in Mali and the larger Sahel might look like in the future.

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List of Acronyms

AQIM: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

AU: African Union

CMA: La Coordination des Mouvements de l’Azawad

CTEA: Conseil Transitoire de l’Etat de l’Azawad

EU: European Union

FNLA: Le Front National de la Libération de l’Azawad

LRA: Lord’s Resistance Army

MINUSMA: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

MNLA: Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad

MUJAO : Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest

NGO: Non-governmental organization

UN: United Nations

Vita

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