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April 9, 2018

Framing Azawad in the Age of Facebook: The MNLA, Social Media, Narrative, and Identity

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Abstract

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This thesis quantitatively and qualitatively analyzes the public-facing Facebook discourse during the period from 2012 through 2015 of officials and supporters of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a group seeking the secession of the northern region of Mali as the state of Azawad through armed struggle against the Malian state. Although during this period the MNLA officially conceptualized Azawad as a non-ethnic state, members and fighters of the MNLA were predominantly from the Tuareg ethnic group, and the MNLA's uprising was presented both by the MNLA and by others as a continuation of previous Tuareg-led rebellions in northern Mali. After introducing the history of northern Mali and the MNLA through the end of the survey period, this thesis presents and analyzes a dataset drawn from the Facebook postings of MNLA communications officials and other pro-MNLA Facebook accounts, set against the backdrop of offline events relevant to the MNLA. Next, drawing on Robert Entman's conception of framing, three dominant narrative frames present in pro-MNLA Facebook discourse are identified and analyzed. Finally, further elements of pro-MNLA Facebook discourse relevant to the peace process in Mali, ongoing at time of writing, are discussed. This thesis aims to contribute to the scholarly literature on social media communications by armed groups, especially groups that do not espouse an Islamist ideology and groups that operate on the African continent.

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List of Acronyms

ADC: Alliance démocratique du 23 Mai pour le changement (May 23 Democratic Alliance for Change). Tuareg rebel group founded and led by Ibrahim Ag Bahanga in 2006; effectively restricted in goals and operations to Kidal Region.

AQIM: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Formed in 2007 after Al Qaeda's central leadership recognized the Algerian GSPC as an official franchise of Al Qaeda.

ARLA: Armée révolutionnaire pour la libération de l'Azawad (Revolutionary Army for the Liberation of Azawad). Rebel group formed in 1991 by splitting from the MPA; dominated by Imghad Tuaregs and led by El Hadj Ag Gamou.

ATT: Amadou Toumani Touré, President of Mali 2002-2012

CMA: Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements). Umbrella group composed of the MNLA, the HCUA, the MAA, and smaller pro-secessionist groups since October 2014.

CM-FPR: Coordination des mouvements-Front patriotique de résistance (Coordination of Movements-Patriotic Resistance Front). An umbrella group composed of a number of smaller militias, most notably the ethnic Songhai Ganda Koy and the ethnic Peul Ganda Izo; contains a faction in the CMA, a faction in the Platform, and factions not officially in either group.

CPA: Coalition du peuple pour l'Azawad (People's Coalition of Azawad). An Algerian-backed group that splintered from the MNLA in March 2014; not a member of the CMA or Platform.

CNRDRE: Comité national pour le redressement de la démocratie et la restauration de l'État (National Committee for the Recovery of Democracy and the Restoration of the State).

Governing body created by putschists in the aftermath of the March 2012 coup; formally ceded power to Interim President Dioncounda Traoré on April 6, 2012.

CTEA: Conseil transitoire de l'état de l'Azawad (Transitional Council for the State of Azawad). Body set up by the MNLA in April 2012 to govern the territory under its control; aimed to eventually become the recognized government of the state of Azawad.

DDR: Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; as applied to former fighters of the CMA and Platform, one of the central planks of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation.

ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States

FIAA: Front Islamique armé de l'Azawad (Armed Islamic Front of Azawad). Arab-dominated group during the 1990 rebellion; signed the Tamanrasset Accords but later engaged in large-scale retaliation against sedentary civilians in the north in retaliation for Ganda Koy's attacks against Arab and Tuareg populations.

FPLA: Front populaire de libération de l'Azawad (Popular Liberation Front of Azawad). Rebel group of the 1990 rebellion dominated by Tuaregs from outside the Adagh; rejected the Tamanrasset Accords as granting insufficient rights and recognition to northern Mali.

GATIA: Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés (Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies). An armed group founded in August 2014, dominated by Imghad Tuaregs and led by Malian general El Hadj Ag Gamou; member of the Platform.

GSPC: Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat). Algerian jihadist group founded in 1998; was officially recognized as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2007.

HCA: Haut conseil de l'Azawad (High Council of Azawad). Group founded by Mohamed Ag Intallah in May 2013; almost immediately merged into the HCUA.

HCUA: Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (High Council for the Unity of Azawad). The product of a May 2013 merger between Alghabass Ag Intallah's MIA and Mohamed Ag Intallah's HCA. Later a member of the CMA.

IBK: Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, Prime Minister of Mali 1994-2000 and President of Mali 2013-present.

MAA: Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad (Arab Movement of Azawad). An armed group formed in mid-2012 dominated by members of northern Mali's Arab community dedicated to protecting the interests, especially commercial interests, of that community; includes a pro-secession faction that is a member of the CMA and an anti-secessionist faction that is a member of the Platform.

MFUA: Mouvements et fronts unifiés de l'Azawad (Unified Movements and Fronts of Azawad). An umbrella group formed after the Tamanrasset Accords to negotiate on behalf of all the various rebel groups of the early 1990s.

MIA: Mouvement Islamique de l'Azawad (Islamic Movement of Azawad). Group founded by Alghabass Ag Intallah in January 2013 as a splinter from Ansar Dine, ostensibly to seek a negotiated end to the war.

MINUSMA: Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation au Mali (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali). UN peacekeeping force officially deployed to Mali on July 1, 2013.

MNA: Mouvement nationale de l'Azawad (National Movement of Azawad). A group founded in 2010 in northern Mali advocating for the independence of northern Mali as Azawad, to be achieved through peaceful, political, and legal means.

MNLA: Mouvement nationale de libération de l'Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad). Main rebel group examined in this survey; seeks secession or, since July 2013, autonomy of northern Mali as Azawad.

MPA: Mouvement populaire de l'Azawad (Popular Movement of Azawad). Rebel group of the 1990 rebellion led by Iyad Ag Ghali and dominated by Kel Adagh Tuaregs; signed the Tamanrasset Accords.

MSA: Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad (Movement for the Salvation of Azawad). Armed group that splintered from the MNLA in September 2016; originally composed of Idaksahak and Chamanamas Tuaregs around Gao and Ménaka; founded and led by former MNLA founder and spokesman Moussa Ag Acharatoumane.

MUJAO: Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa). Al Qaeda-linked jihadist group founded in 2011; merged into a new jihadist group in 2013. Controlled Gao from June 2012 through January 2013.

RDA: Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (African Democratic Assembly). Pan-Africanist, leftist political party active throughout West and Central Africa prior to the countries of the region gaining independence from France.

US-RDA: Union Soudanaise-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (Sudanese-Union-African Democratic Assembly). The branch of the RDA active in French Sudan, which became the independent country of Mali.

Glossary of Non-English Terms

Alfellaga: The Tamasheq name for the First Tuareg Rebellion, 1963-1964.

al-frud al-halal: Crossborder smuggling in ordinary consumer goods, such as foodstuffs and clothing.

al frud al-haram: Crossborder smuggling of socially unacceptable cargoes, such as narcotics and weapons.

aménokal: Recognized traditional leader or chief of a Tuareg clan confederation.

cercle: administrative region of Mali; multiple *cercles* constitute a region, while multiple communes constitute a *cercle*.

imushagh: Traditional Tuareg code of honor informing broad swathes of social interaction.

ishumar: Tamasheq term for émigrés of the 1970s and 1980s; derives from the French *chômeur*, meaning unemployed person. *Ishumar* is a plural term; the singular, referring to an individual, is *ashamor*.

shurafa: Claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad; a major factor in the establishment of religious legitimacy throughout the Islamic world.

teshumara: The unique culture that emerged in *ishumar* communities outside northern Mali.

Introduction

On January 17, 2012, fighters affiliated with a group called the Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad¹ (MNLA) attacked army outposts around the city of Ménaka² in northeastern Mali. The MNLA, founded several months previously, was dominated by ethnic Tuaregs,³ a traditionally nomadic people found across a wide swath of the Sahara and Sahel regions of northwestern Africa. In Mali, various Tuareg groups had launched, depending on count, either three or four previous armed rebellions against the Malian government since Mali won independence from France in 1960. However, the MNLA's rebellion was radically different from its predecessors in at least two main respects. First, it was the first Tuareg-led rebellion to insist on the outright independence of Mali's vast but sparsely populated northern region (as the state of Azawad), and the MNLA claimed to advocate on behalf of not just Tuaregs but of all allegedly marginalized populations in northern Mali/Azawad.⁴ Second, it was the first Tuareg-led rebellion in which the rebels attempted to carry their messages to national,

¹ Somewhat confusingly, the MNLA's precise name is unclear. The organization's official website lists it in different places as both "Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad" and "Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad." The first of the two appears to be more frequently used and will be used in this piece.

² A note on spelling: alternate spellings exist for practically every name and term relating to northern Mali/Azawad. In general, in this work, I use the most common English spelling for a given term, if one exists (thus Tuareg rather than the French Touareg or the Arabic-transliterated Targui). If the name or term in question does not have a sufficient presence in English-language media and literature to have a conventional spelling, I generally opt for the spelling used by the preponderance of my sources, including French accents where applicable (thus Ménaka rather than Menaka and Anéfif rather than Anéfis or Anefis). Ultimately, however, any choice of spellings is inevitably arbitrary and should not be taken as definitive.

³ Exactly who is and who is not a Tuareg is extremely hard to pin down. One common definition is linguistic—Tuaregs are those who speak variants of Tamasheq as their primary language. Under this definition, Tuaregs are more properly referred to as Kel Tamasheq, or those who speak Tamasheq. However, the term "Tuareg" is used to such an overwhelming extent in scholarly literature and media reports and by the MNLA itself that it is used throughout this work.

⁴ Names are fraught with political controversy. In this work, the terms "northern Mali" and "Azawad" refer to the same geographic area. In an attempt to avoid choosing sides politically, I generally use "northern Mali" to refer to areas under the formal control of the Malian government (including prior to the MNLA's declaration of independence in April 2012) or in reference to anti-secession groups who oppose giving the term "Azawad" political significance. I use the term "Azawad" when referring to territory under the MNLA's political and military control and in reference to pro-secession groups. I use the term "northern Mali/Azawad" when the area in question is actively contested at the moment in question.

regional, and international audiences via the internet. In their media campaigns, MNLA officials and supporters utilized both traditional and social media; on social media, Facebook was the MNLA's platform of choice.

Although the MNLA's military rebellion started on January 17, 2012, it does not have a neat end point. By April 2012, the MNLA had defeated the Malian army in northern Mali/Azawad to the point that the MNLA formally declared Azawad's independence on April 6. However, in June, the MNLA was in turn militarily defeated by a collection of Islamist groups with ties to Al Qaeda, who took effective control of Azawad. The threat posed by these groups to central and southern Mali eventually prompted a French-led international military intervention in January 2013, forcing the Islamist groups underground and allowing the MNLA to make a partial resurgence. However, the international intervention, which resulted in a lasting French and United Nations troop presence on the ground in northern Mali/Azawad, was quickly followed by the start of a formal peace process between the MNLA and the Malian government. After two years of negotiations and sporadic fighting, in June 2015, the MNLA (by now part of an umbrella organization of pro-Azawadian secession groups), the Malian government, and a collection of anti-secession groups signed the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. In the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, the MNLA formally agreed to respect the territorial integrity of the state of Mali, meaning that the MNLA's goal of Azawadian independence was, on paper, no more. However, the MNLA openly continued to harbor separatist aspirations. Furthermore, the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation did not spell the end of fighting between the signatory groups in northern Mali/Azawad or any kind of improvement in the security climate in the area. At time of writing, the peace process, now focused on implementing the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, continues at a slow and inconsistent pace; the

MNLA remains a crucial player, both politically and militarily, in northern Mali/Azawad. Thus, the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation is not entirely suitable as an end point for the MNLA's rebellion. More broadly, any end point chosen for a study of the MNLA will inevitably be arbitrary.

This thesis aims to examine how MNLA communications officials and other MNLA supporters used Facebook as a public-facing platform during the period from January 2012 through December 2015. More specifically, it presents a two-pronged research question. The first prong is quantitative in nature: what types of content did public MNLA-linked Facebook accounts post, and how did their patterns of posting respond to offline events of relevance to the MNLA? The second prong is qualitative in nature: what are the predominant narrative frames constructed and activated by pro-MNLA Facebook posters during this period?

The first chapter, "Repression, Rebellion, and Nationalism: Northern Mali/Azawad Through 2011," maps out the broad contours of the history of northern Mali from the French colonial era through the founding of the MNLA in late 2011. This chapter seeks primarily to portray events from a Tuareg perspective. It places special focus on the Tuareg rebellions that erupted in 1963, 1990, and 2006, and it traces the evolution of Tuareg irredentism vis-à-vis the Malian state from its origins as narrowly based discontentment with Malian rule grounded in racial, cultural, and economic animus to its development into a more broadly based national independence movement.

The second chapter, "War and Peace in Northern Mali/Azawad: The MNLA, October 2011-December 2015," provides a detailed account of events of relevance to the MNLA (predominantly but not exclusively developments on the ground in northern Mali/Azawad) from the MNLA's founding in October 2011 through December 2015, the end of the survey period.

This chapter aims to provide context for the paper's analysis of Facebook posting by pro-MNLA accounts.

The third chapter, "The MNLA on Facebook: Social Media Outreach by the Numbers," lays out research methodologies for the quantitative prong of the paper, introduces the Facebook accounts that comprise the dataset, and discusses the content-based categories and sub-categories into which the posts published by these Facebook accounts are sorted. Post data is then presented, and trends that appear within the data are identified and analyzed. Finally, this chapter discusses the paper's quantitative findings more generally and offers some preliminary conclusions about the MNLA's use of Facebook.

The fourth chapter, "Dominant Pro-MNLA Discourse Frames and Identity on Facebook," introduces the scholarly concept of frames, first fully articulated by Robert Entman in 1993. The chapter then discusses three dominant frames observed across multiple accounts in the dataset, all of which relate to a major aspect of the MNLA's identity. The first is the Genocidal State frame, through which members of the pro-MNLA Facebook community sought to portray the Malian state as having colonized the north since 1960 and, more importantly, having never treated the peoples of Azawad and their cultures and ways of life as anything other than a problem to be destroyed. The second is the Anti-Jihadist frame, through which the accounts in the dataset sought to portray Tuareg identity and even true Islam as incompatible with the jihadism espoused by Al Qaeda-linked groups in Azawad. The third is the Long Struggle frame, through which the accounts sought to present the MNLA as the successor to a long history of Tuareg resistance stretching back to the first Tuareg uprising against the Malian state in 1963 and even back to the French colonial era. After discussing how each frame was constructed, or laid out in full, and activated, or referenced without being fully articulated, by the pro-MNLA

Facebook community, I draw on Charles Tilly's work to explore how the three dominant frames factor into the identity of the pro-MNLA Facebook community, its individual members, and the MNLA as a whole.

The final chapter, "Pro-MNLA Facebook Discourse and the Peace Process in Mali," offers preliminary conclusions on three further elements of the discourse of the accounts in the dataset that are especially relevant to the ongoing peace process in Mali, now concerned with the implementation of the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. The first element is the massive outpouring of anger from the accounts in the dataset against the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation before it was signed by the MNLA in June 2015. The second element, tied to the Genocidal State frame, is the notion that the Malian military is good for nothing but menacing civilians and cannot either fight or provide security. The third element, tied to each of the previous two, is the pro-MNLA Facebook community's deep suspicion of the main international actors involved in the peace process. A final section suggests some potential directions for further research not mentioned in previous chapters.

Overall, this thesis has two primary goals. First, by offering some potential insight into the nuances of how the MNLA's officials and supporters present the MNLA to the world, it seeks to contribute to a better scholarly understanding of contemporary dynamics in northern Mali/Azawad. Second, through the case study of the MNLA, this paper aims to shed light on the use of social media communications by non-jihadist rebel groups and groups operating on the African continent. These topics have thus far received scant attention in the English-language scholarly literature.

Chapter 1: Repression, Rebellion, and Nationalism: Northern Mali/Azawad Through 2011

For centuries prior to Malian independence in 1960, society in what is today northern Mali was organized and mobilized based on ethnic, tribal, and racial identities and classifications. However, over the course of the half-century between 1960 and the formation of the MNLA in late 2011, northern Mali experienced three serious uprisings against the Malian state. While each uprising was distinguished by the actors involved, the goals of the rebels, and the results of the rebellion, combined with two cataclysmic droughts, contributed to the development of a strain of northern Malian nationalism that sought the national independence of northern Mali in the name of all the peoples of the north as its goal and espoused armed struggle against the Malian state in northern Mali as its method. However, this strain of nationalism could neither eradicate nor supersede the older norms of ethnic, racial, and tribal identities. These two paradigms would ultimately continue to interact and compete through the founding of the MNLA and beyond.

From French Sudan to Mali

French colonial armies entered what is today northern Mali from the south in the 1890s. The French quickly attempted to impose themselves militarily on the inhabitants of the area, overcoming heavy local resistance to capture Timbuktu in 1893 and Gao in 1898.⁵ The region, though, had traditionally escaped being incorporated into durable, centrally controlled states, and military resistance against the French by the nomadic peoples of the area, especially the Tuaregs, continued until 1912.⁶ French colonial administrators attempted to make sense of the social systems they encountered in what they officially organized into French Sudan. The area was

⁵ Stephen A. Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013* (Burlington: VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*

populated by four main ethnic groups. The Songhai, who accounted for a plurality (an estimated 45%) of the total population of the area, lived primarily along the Niger River. The Fulbe (Peul) were concentrated in and around Timbuktu, while Arab and Tuareg populations were spread throughout the area and into what are today neighboring countries.

Although a full analysis of the intricacies of the social composition of northern Mali's ethnic groups is beyond the scope of this thesis and has in any case been extensively covered by other scholars, especially by Lecocq, Grémont, and Claudot-Hawad, a brief treatment of these groups is necessary. All four groups divided themselves, by varying degrees, into classifications of tribe and clan, class, socioeconomic occupation, and race.⁷ Boundaries between these classifications were frequently fluid, and perceptions of race often had little to do with actual skin color. Instead, social groups that considered themselves "free" came to see themselves as non-black, while groups that were deemed "slaves" were labeled as black.⁸ Although the reality was of course more complicated, Tuareg society, in particular, can be thought of as divided into three tiers consisting of nobles, freemen, and slaves. A code of honor known in Tamasheq as *imushagh* dictated social norms, although only nobles and freemen followed *imushagh*. Status was accorded not to individuals but to tribes, and certain tribes of freemen and slaves were traditionally subservient to particular noble tribes. Among both the Tuaregs and Arabs, certain noble tribes and clans derived status from their ostensible prowess as warriors, while others gained legitimacy from their purported religious authority. The area had been thoroughly Islamized centuries previously, and a great many lineages of religious elites, both Arab and Tuareg, claimed *shurafa* status, or descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Freemen were traditionally thought of as artisans and shepherds, while slaves performed other duties.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*

When the French arrived in the area, the dominant Tuareg clan federation had for decades been the Iwellemeden. However, in 1916, as French forces fought in World War I, a number of Tuareg tribes revolted, led by the Iwellemeden. The next year, a Tuareg leader from modern-day Niger named Kaocen Ag Kedda launched a revolt against colonial rule (in the process allying himself with Ottoman forces and elements of the Sanusiyya Sufi order).⁹ Kaocen's rebellion, combined with that led by the Iwellemeden, persisted until it was finally snuffed out in 1920. These intertwined rebellions had long-lasting effects. The first was to create the impression in the minds of French colonial authorities that the Tuaregs were always bordering on revolt; this impression endured past independence in the minds of post-colonial authorities, including the Malian government.¹⁰ The second effect was more concrete. The only major Tuareg group that did not rise in revolt was the Kel Adagh,¹¹ the dominant group of what is today Kidal Region.¹² Instead, the Kel Adagh fought on the side of the French against the rebels.¹³ As a result of the failed uprising, the power of the Iwellemeden as the dominant tribal group in the area was broken. The French forced the Iwellemeden to sign a series of treaties with many of their former tributary tribes, granting former Iwellemeden subordinates political privileges. The Kel Adagh were the biggest winners of this tribal reshuffle: they were recognized as an official independent

⁹ Baz Lecocq, *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms, and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010), 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

¹¹ A note on names: Tuareg tribes and clans have specific names, but names tied to place are also used. The Adagh (also seen as Adrar des Adagh) is a rugged, mountainous area northeast of the city of Kidal. "Kel Adagh" literally translates from Tamasheq as "the people of the Adagh." Especially through the mid-20th century, Tuareg group identity was strongly tied to place, leading to a conflation of geographic and political terms. However, dominant political groups have attempted to change geographic names to reflect their dominance. For example, the Ifoghas tribe, the traditional leaders of the Kel Adagh, have referred to the Adagh Mountains as the Adrar des Ifoghas, despite the presence of other tribes there.

¹² Mali is subdivided administratively into Regions (*régions*), which are in turn divided into Circles (*cercles*). Regions are named for the largest city they contain.

¹³ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 129.

federation under their *aménokal*, or traditional leader, Attaher Ag Illi, leader of the Ifoghas tribe.¹⁴

French rule over the area was not seriously challenged for the remainder of the colonial era. However, the French did little to bring centralized governance to the nomadic peoples of French Sudan, instead merely aiming to keep order. By the late 1950s, independence for all of France's colonies in West Africa appeared inevitable. However, the form that post-colonial states would take was highly contested. The strongest pro-independence political movement in French Sudan was the national branch of the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA), with a political party called the Union Soudanaise-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (US-RDA). The RDA as a whole was characterized by a socialist, pan-African ideology, although the precise meaning of both terms was contested by various branches and factions of the party. The US-RDA, for its part, led by Modibo Keita, did not advocate for the independence of French Sudan as its own state but rather for a confederation of Francophone West African states. In this, the US-RDA was joined by the main branch of the RDA in Senegal. In February 1959, French Sudan and Senegal united to form the Federation of Mali, still under the umbrella of the *Communauté Française*, which sought to achieve full independence from France.¹⁵ However, Modibo Keita's US-RDA fell out with Senegalese leaders for personal and political reasons, and on August 20, 1960, Senegal seceded from the federation, deporting US-RDA leaders to Bamako.¹⁶ A month later, on September 22, 1960, French Sudan became the Republic of Mali, and Modibo Keita became Mali's first president.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The Tuaregs and the Keita Regime: Rebellion and Repression

The peoples of northern Mali played little role in the events that led to Mali's independence. However, a number of factors immediately challenged the relationship between the new Malian state and the nomadic peoples of the north, especially the Tuaregs.

First, the US-RDA, now the leader of Mali's national government, had only a tenuous presence in the north. Furthermore, the US-RDA's ideology inclined it to view traditional leaders in the north with suspicion; the Malian state began attempting to curtail the power of traditional leaders as soon as it believed itself strong enough to do so.¹⁷ The traditional leaders naturally saw the Malian state as a threat to their power.

Second and more importantly, because the US-RDA had not intended Mali to become an independent state outside of a pan-African federation, it had given little thought before independence toward how to create a uniquely Malian sense of national identity, shared history, and culture.¹⁸ The Malian government's nation-building efforts were concentrated almost exclusively around the histories and cultures of the Mandé-speaking peoples, who dominated southern Mali and constituted most of Mali's population. Aside from the Songhay Empire, northern populations received almost no mention in post-independence schoolbooks, and many northerners felt marginalized in the new state.¹⁹

Third, in the years leading up to Mali's independence, France had come to regard the Sahara region with new eyes. Hydrocarbon reserves had been discovered in Algeria in 1954, and it seemed that similar discoveries could follow in the French Sudan.²⁰ The French supported a

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁰ Hélène Claudot-Hawad, "La « question touarègue », quels enjeux ?," in Michel Galy, ed, *La Guerre au Mali: Comprendre la Crise au Sahel et au Sahara, Enjeux et Zones d'Ombre* (Paris, France: Editions La Découverte, 2013), 134.

series of attempts to retain some degree of influence over the Sahara through various supranational political organizations. Some Saharan leaders supported these initiatives, leading the new Malian government to distrust northern ethnic groups as potential facilitators for the return of French colonialism.

Fourth, racial suspicions and stereotypes played a major role in undermining relations between northern nomads and the Malian government. During the colonial era, the French authorities, instead of unpacking the full complexities of local concepts of race, social division, and hierarchy, often viewed local realities through European conceptions of race and social theory. As a result, French officials sharpened and amplified distinctions between purportedly black and white populations, as well as distinctions between nomadic and sedentary populations.²¹ Over time, these French notions came to influence the thinking of both southern Malian leaders and nomadic Tuareg populations in the north, to the point that certain Tamasheq terms for racial difference shifted radically in their meaning, and others fell out of use entirely.²² Additionally, French Sudanese politicians saw the liberation of former slaves in the north, whose status was conflated with race, as both a moral imperative and, due to the former slaves' numbers, the key to winning majoritarian support in the north.²³ The enhanced perception of race-based differences between southern Malians and northern nomads, especially the Tuaregs, led southern Malian leaders to doubt the loyalty of northern populations, especially the Tuaregs, even before national independence.²⁴ On their part, Tuareg and other northern leaders questioned their future in a state they perceived as being run by inferior blacks.²⁵

²¹ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 60.

²² *Ibid.*, 99.

²³ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

Fifth, the Tuaregs did not necessarily view the French colonial period negatively. The Kel Adagh, in particular, gained reputation and status from fighting alongside the French. Economically, the 1940s and 1950s were something of a golden age for the northern nomads. Rains were good, allowing the herds of animals on which the nomads depended to expand.²⁶ The period of World War II and thereafter also saw a boom in cross-Sahara trade, as traffickers took advantage of price differentials created by the existence of wartime rationing in French Algeria (but not in French West Africa) to move all manner of consumer goods.²⁷ The French were also associated with reducing the level of intercommunal and economic violence in the region, allowing for better economic conditions.

Finally, Tuareg leaders made it clear that they felt that both the French and, later, the Malian government had made false promises to the Tuaregs with respect to independence. Specifically, Tuareg leaders believed that French officials had guaranteed that the Tuaregs would not be subordinated to an independent Malian state if the Tuaregs did not so desire. Tuareg chiefs also claimed that Malian leaders, prior to independence, had sworn that they would not try to “command” the Tuaregs. This, too, was seen as a false promise as soon as Malian government officials arrived in the north.²⁸

On May 15, 1963, a spark touched off the tinder accumulated by these tensions, and the first Tuareg rebellion against the Malian state began. The First Tuareg Rebellion, known to Tamasheq speakers as *Alfellaga*, began with the single act of a man stealing weapons from two local policemen, whom he blamed for the death of his father. However, the revolt also erupted due to several other factors. First, in 1962 and 1963, the Malian government had made several

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 102-103.

²⁷ Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 89.

²⁸ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 104-105.

attempts to regularize the cattle export trade, which took place outside the formal economy, and to tax northern nomads. Neither attempt was particularly successful but further damaged relations between Tuaregs and the central government and contributed to a climate of distrust.²⁹ Second, a succession dispute gripped the Ifoghas. Former *aménokal* Attaher Ag Illi died in 1962. He had two sons, Intallah and Zayd, who sought to succeed him. Intallah favored cooperation with Malian national authorities; Zayd had never supported the inclusion of the Adagh (roughly modern Kidal Region) into Mali in the first place. The two both sought to take their father's place as *aménokal*, and the question of succession became intertwined with the question of the place of the Tuaregs in the Malian state.³⁰

In the early phases of the rebellion, the rebels made a series of hit-and-run raids against government targets, hoping to acquire arms and materiel, which the rebels severely lacked. Although local pro-government Tuareg forces met with some success, they proved unable to contain the rebellion, and in August 1963, the full Malian military was deployed. Negotiations were never an option. Malian president Modibo Keita summed up his position succinctly: "We do not negotiate with armed bandits."³¹

However, the Malian military found itself unable to catch and defeat the rebels militarily, as the camel-mounted rebels could move along terrain that the more motorized Malian army could not traverse. The rebels also frequently retreated into Algeria to avoid pursuit. Unable to win conventionally, the Malian military turned to other means, arresting women, children, and noncombatants, and poisoning wells to deny the rebels freedom of movement.³² The military officer in charge of the Kidal area (which then had the status of a *cercle* and was part of Gao

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 168, 176.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

³¹ Harmon 25.

³² Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 207.

Region) was nicknamed “the butcher,” and the entire region was placed under martial law.³³ In February 1964, the government of Mali concluded an agreement with Algeria allowing Mali’s military to pursue rebels across the international border. This allowed Malian forces to begin inflicting more serious casualties on the rebels. Combined with harsh measures against civilians, including summary executions, this military pressure led to the effective quashing of the rebellion by the end of 1964.³⁴ Many rebel leaders, including Zayd Ag Attaher, were captured, tortured, and imprisoned.

Military events aside, several other aspects of the First Tuareg Rebellion are worthy of attention. First, the rebellion was almost entirely confined to the Kel Adagh and modern Kidal Region; the rebels failed to attract real support from other segments of Tuareg society, and little combat took place outside the rugged Adagh area. Second, while the rebels were united by their desire to escape the Malian state as it then existed, they did not explicitly seek an independent nation-state of their own. Their notions of Tuareg independence did not fall within Western territorial understandings of sovereignty and social structure.³⁵ Third, as Lecocq convincingly argues, the leaders of the First Tuareg Rebellion did have a plan in place before fighting began, but that plan did not rest on military victory. Military victory was impossible in any case; the rebellion never boasted more than a few hundred lightly armed fighters. Instead, the rebels sought to attract the support and intervention of either France or Algeria on their behalf. However, they failed to understand the bigger geopolitical picture, in which the Malian and Algerian governments had excellent relations and France, having recently been forced out of

³³ Harmon 26.

³⁴ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 218.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

Algeria, saw no reason to risk its remaining assets in the Sahara, especially its nuclear test sites in southern Algeria, in order to support the Tuareg rebels.³⁶

The *Ishumar* Generation: Drought, Emigration, and Territoriality

In 1968, a military coup led by General Moussa Traoré toppled President Modibo Keita, and Traoré assumed rule over Mali. The Traoré regime did not entirely follow the Keita administration's approach to dealing with northern Mali, but Traoré's government was overall no more prepared to meaningfully address northern and Tuareg grievances vis-à-vis the central government. For example, Traoré did not lift the state of martial law in the Kidal area that had been imposed during the *Alfellaga* rebellion; martial law remained generally in effect until 1986.³⁷ However, the next major chapter in northern Mali's history was written by nature, not man. After good rains throughout the 1940s and 1950s, conditions became increasingly arid through the 1960s, and in 1972, a major drought struck northern Mali. It is hard to overstate the degree to which the drought devastated Tuareg communities. By the mid-1970s, an estimated 80% of livestock had been lost. Unlike other northern populations like the Songhai and the Peul, the Tuaregs could not easily fall back on cultivated agriculture to balance the loss of their herds.³⁸ The Malian government and international aid agencies proved utterly incapable of mustering the necessary resources to avoid a vast human catastrophe, and aid agencies estimated that hundreds of thousands of people died.³⁹ The Malian government's response to the catastrophe was so incompetent, ineffective, and corrupt that even some Western reporters

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 190-191.

³⁷ Georg Klute, "Post-Gaddafi Repercussions in Northern Mali," *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 35, no. 2 (November 2013): 58.

³⁸ Harmon 27.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

suspected them of trying to let the drought provide a solution to the “Tuareg problem.”⁴⁰ Many Tuaregs also believed this.⁴¹

Additionally, the droughts of the 1970s and a second wave of drought in 1984-1985 wrought massive cultural and economic changes on the Tuaregs. Thousands upon thousands of Tuaregs emigrated to neighboring countries, while still others abandoned a nomadic lifestyle and moved to towns and cities in Mali. Much of the present-day Tuareg diaspora originated during this time period. For the first time, Tuareg society was no longer tied to a specific geographic region and way of life.⁴² As a result of these changes, the 1970s and the 1980s saw a reappraisal of the bases of Tuareg culture, nationhood, and nationalism. The economic realities of life outside of northern Mali provided the first challenge for Tuareg émigrés. Generally lacking in legal status, most of the work they could find was temporary and poorly paid. The Tuareg émigrés as a whole became known as *ishumar*, a Tamasheq rendering of the French word *chômeur*, or “unemployed person.” Available jobs often did not match up with traditional Tuareg norms of what was appropriate for a free person, which had been limited to pastoralism, trade, religion, or war. Although the *ishumar* attempted in some ways to hold on to these codes of behavior, for example seeing being a mechanic working with vehicles as the modern equivalent of pastoralism, old social norms nevertheless came under intense pressure.⁴³ The *ishumar* developed an entirely new cultural code, called *teshumara*, that was in many ways a conscious rejection of traditional norms.

Politically, the droughts pushed both the Tuareg who stayed in northern Mali and the *ishumar* who traveled abroad to reject many former patterns of thought as well. By the late

⁴⁰ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 237.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁴² Harmon 28.

⁴³ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 243.

1970s, many in both groups were thinking of Tuareg identity and nationhood less in terms of kinship linkages and tribal and clan affiliations, but increasingly in terms of territory.⁴⁴ As Charles Grémont lays out, drought conditions induced many Tuaregs who remained in Mali to abandon full nomadism and settle in permanent villages, tying them more closely to the land.⁴⁵ Among the politically engaged *ishumar*, the events of *Alfellaga* also weighed heavily; many had grown up amidst the traumatic events of the early 1960s.⁴⁶ Members of the diaspora increasingly began asking themselves where *Alfellaga* went wrong. They ultimately reached several conclusions. The first lesson learned by the *ishumar* was that hopes for international support were misguided. The *ishumar* concluded that the Tuaregs could not depend on neighboring countries or powers further afield to aid them in their cause.⁴⁷ The second and more important conclusion was that a lack of unity had hamstrung the uprising: the rebels of *Alfellaga* failed to effectively reach out beyond a few specific tribal and clan groups. Budding Tuareg nationalists among the *ishumar* thus attempted to foster a new sense of unity among the community. Some even went so far as to refuse to mention tribal and clan affiliations at all with each other, using only personal names instead.⁴⁸ Many *ishumar* activists also believed that casting identity in terms of physical space and territory could reduce the fracturing power of tribe, clan, and social class. As a result, the Tuareg nationalist movement that emerged in *ishumar* communities took the presence of a nation-state in northern Mali as a given and sought to replace the oppressive Malian state with a better state of their own, one run by northerners for northerners.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 228-229.

⁴⁵ Charles Grémont, "Villages and Crossroads: Changing Territorialities Among the Tuareg of Northern Mali," in James McDougall, ed., *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 138-139.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴⁹ Grémont 140.

By the mid-1970s, groups of *ishumar* had begun to form concrete political movements dedicated to turning their new forms of political thought into reality. However, the methods and goals of Tuareg political revisionism continued to be debated. Two trends crucial to the eventual formation of the MNLA and the 2012 rebellion emerged during these years. First, some Tuaregs believed that the Tuareg struggle for national identity would fail unless they also fought on behalf of other marginalized groups in northern Mali.⁵⁰ Second, in 1976, for the first time, the term “Azawad” was explicitly linked to the Tuareg political struggle; this was followed by the creation of a movement dubbed the “Mouvement de libération de l’Azawad.”⁵¹ Previously, Azawad was solely a geographic term, referring to a large valley stretching across the borders of Mali and Niger; it did not encompass all of northern Mali, much less all core Tuareg lands. Now, Azawad was fast becoming the proposed name for an independent nation-state.

Abroad, many *ishumar* émigrés joined regional military forces, most notably Libya’s Islamic Legion, founded by Muammar al-Qaddafi in 1972.⁵² Some joined simply for reasons of economic expediency; others sought to acquire military training that they could then use fighting the Malian government.⁵³ Some Tuaregs fought in Qaddafi’s wars in Chad, Uganda, and Lebanon. The Libyan government, hoping to use the Tuaregs as proxies, opened training camps for Tuareg fighters in southern Libya, and a second wave of severe droughts in the 1980s provided the camps with many recruits from northern Mali.⁵⁴

The political and military groups of *ishumar* existing in neighboring countries became increasingly organized, resourced, and operated in concert. By the late 1980s, members of the

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁵² Grégory Giraud, “Cinquante ans de tensions dans la zone sahélo-saharienne,” in Michel Galy, ed., *La Guerre au Mali: Comprendre la Crise au Sahel et au Sahara, Enjeux et Zones d’Ombre* (Paris, France: Editions La Découverte, 2013), 29.

⁵³ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 280.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 288.

new Tuareg nationalist movement began to move back into Mali and recruit locally, and three combat brigades based on tribal affiliation were formed in the areas of Kidal, Ménaka and Gao.⁵⁵ In early 1990, the Malian authorities, who were generally aware that an uprising was in the making, uncovered and largely dismantled the Kidal and Gao battalions.⁵⁶ However, the Ménaka battalion, which comprised only about 30 fighters,⁵⁷ survived and, on June 27, 1990, began attacking army and government posts around Ménaka. The Second Tuareg Rebellion had begun.

The 1990s: Revolution, Democracy, and Illusory Peace

As had been the case in 1963, the rebels were initially small in number, lightly armed, and poorly supplied. The first actions of the fighting saw the rebels attempt to seize supplies from the Malian government and international organizations operating in the area. As the ranks of the rebels swelled with recruits, they carried out attacks across northern Mali against Malian military and administrative posts. The rebels won victory after victory; unlike in 1963, many of the Tuareg fighters were seasoned veterans, having fought in Chad, Lebanon, and elsewhere. Rebel battle tactics also proved highly effective against the Malian military.⁵⁸ At a broader strategic level, in 1990 the rebels demonstrated that they had learned from the events of *Alfellaga*. Instead of striking Malian government targets and fleeing into Algeria, the rebels set up a number of bases around areas with formidable natural defenses. They then broadcast to the Malian army where the bases were, inviting the Malian army to fight.⁵⁹ As Lecocq discusses, the bases served four main purposes. First, they were supply depots for the rebels. Second, by publicizing the location of the bases, the rebels aimed to deny the Malian military an excuse to oppress the local civilian population. Third, the bases served as potential centers for new recruits

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

to join the movement. Fourth, the rebels hoped that by not retreating into another country, they would convey to the local population that they would not abandon civilians to the Malian military.⁶⁰

Militarily, the 1990 rebellion was highly successful. The Malian military attacked rebel bases multiple times. In some cases, the rebels chose to simply abandon a base until the Malian military left, and then reoccupy it. At other times, the rebels repulsed the Malian army's attacks, inflicting dozens of casualties through sniper fire.⁶¹ On September 4, 1990, the rebels won their greatest victory with a surprise attack on the Malian military base at Toximine; a rebel force dispersed a Malian unit ten times its size, inflicted heavy losses, and seized substantial quantities of materiel.⁶² New recruits flocked to the rebels, and the Malian military was effectively confined to the larger towns and cities in the north, abandoning the countryside. The Malian military conducted reprisals and atrocities against civilians, but by October, President Moussa Traoré, who was facing his own problems in the south, decided that negotiating with the rebels was his best option. The rebels, themselves running dangerously low on supplies, agreed to open negotiations.⁶³

Negotiations were conducted in Tamanrasset, Algeria. The head of the rebel delegation was the military leader Iyad Ag Ghali, a former *ishumar* who had gone to Libya, joined Qaddafi's Islamic Legion, and fought in Chad and Palestine. On January 6, 1991, the Tamanrasset Accords were signed. The document called for a ceasefire, economic development in the north, an end to the state of emergency, integration of former rebel fighters into the Malian military, and broad but unspecified autonomy for the north; in addition the *cercle* of Kidal, then

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 305-306.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 307-308.

part of Gao Region, was upgraded in status to a full region.⁶⁴ Independence for the northern regions was never on the table because of decisions made by Ag Ghali at the negotiations.⁶⁵

The Tamanrasset Accords ultimately caused more confusion than they resolved. First, it was unclear who exactly were the parties to the agreement. Prior to negotiations, the rebel movement did not go by any fixed, consistent name. However, Ag Ghali signed the Tamanrasset Accords on behalf of two organizations, the Tuareg Mouvement populaire de l'Azawad (MPA) and the Arab Front Islamique armé de l'Azawad (FIAA).⁶⁶ In February 1991, rebel fighters attacked several villages, and the attacks were claimed by the Front populaire de libération de l'Azawad (FPLA), a name sometimes used by the rebels before the Tamanrasset Accords.⁶⁷ It only later became clear that the FPLA had effectively emerged as a splinter group within the rebels that rejected the Tamanrasset Accords, while the MPA, led by Ag Ghali, continued to negotiate with the Malian government. Moreover, the split between the FPLA and the MPA also involved a tribal component: the MPA was dominated by Kel Adagh in the newly created Kidal Region, while the FPLA drew most of its members from other Tuareg groups outside the Adagh. The tribal split also impacted combat operations. Prior to the Tamanrasset Agreement, most battles had taken place in the Adagh. With the Kel Adagh largely out of the FPLA, however, the FPLA concentrated its attacks in other regions of the north.⁶⁸ In November 1991, the MPA itself split up as most of its fighters from the Imghad class, traditionally free artisans subservient to the Ifoghas, formed their own group called the Armée révolutionnaire pour la libération de l'Azawad

⁶⁴ Harmon 97-98.

⁶⁵ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 312-313.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 311-312.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 314.

(ARLA), led by another veteran of Qaddafi's Islamic Legion, El Hadj Ag Gamou. ARLA and the MPA quickly began skirmishing, with ARLA initially gaining the upper hand.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, the situation had changed radically in the rest of Mali. Starting in December 1990, opposition parties and civil society groups staged ever-larger protests against President Traoré and his regime. By March 1991, the protests had grown to such a scale that the army was called out to fire on the protesters, resulting in hundreds of deaths. On March 26, the commander of a paratrooper unit in Bamako, Lieutenant-Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré, staged a coup against Traoré. Instead of taking power himself, though, Touré allowed presidential elections to be held in which he did not run. These resulted in the 1992 election of Alpha Omar Konaré as President of Mali and the organization of a National Conference that brought together representatives from across the political spectrum. Although Iyad Ag Ghali attended the Conference as a representative of the northern rebellion, the Conference rejected the Tamanrasset Accords, in particular the provisions that called for decentralization.⁷⁰ Instead, new negotiations were proposed.

The next round of talks was once again mediated by Algeria, and the rebels, by now splintered into the MPA, FIAA, FPLA, and ARLA, were convinced by the Algerians to agree to be jointly represented by an umbrella group called the *Mouvements et fronts unifiés de l'Azawad* (MFUA) which, as time progressed, became more independent and distant from the movements themselves.⁷¹ This new round of negotiations ultimately resulted in the National Pact of April 1992. The National Pact had six main planks: (1) special socioeconomic and administrative status for northern Mali; (2) tax exemptions for the people of the north; (3) funds to reconstruct the north; (4) the drawdown of Malian military forces in the north; (5) the gradual return of

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 316-317.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 320.

refugees who had fled into neighboring countries; and (6) the integration of former rebels into the Malian military and local government.

The National Pact was never fully implemented, however, and it did not end the fighting in northern Mali. In 1994, further fighting between the MPA and ARLA erupted and escalated. In March 1994, ARLA fighters led by Ag Gamou abducted Intallah Ag Attaher, *aménokal* of the Ifoghas since the time of *Alfellaga*. Until that point, Intallah Ag Attaher had not been directly involved in the fighting; however, despite his release a short time later, his abduction marked the start of what functionally became a war of annihilation between the MPA and ARLA. By the end of 1994, the MPA, along with Intallah Ag Attaher's personal entourage of fighters had, with the support of the Malian military, effectively destroyed ARLA's military power.⁷²

The other former rebel groups all underwent a similar splintering process, and by mid-1994, the entire movement had thoroughly fractured along tribal and kinship lines—exactly the fate the original *ishumar* ideologues had sought to prevent back in the 1970s and 1980s. In May 1994, still another player entered the picture. Sedentary populations around the Niger River, mostly in Gao Region, had never embraced the Tuareg and Arab populations' dislike of the Malian state. Although some elements of these populations acquiesced to the rebels' original claim of fighting on behalf of all northerners, they had never directly approved of either the Tamanrasset Accords or the National Pact and saw the National Pact's call for integration of former fighters into the security forces as rewarding rebels for taking up arms. After a violent incident involving armed Tuareg criminals left 11 residents of Gao dead, the Ganda Koy movement was founded.⁷³ Ganda Koy, which translates to “masters of the land” in Songhai, was explicitly formed to protect the sedentary populations of northern Mali against the nomadic

⁷² *Ibid.*, 333.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 337.

populations. A document that purported to be Ganda Koy's founding text and was widely circulated vowed to "send the nomads back to the sands of the Azawad" and "create insecurity for the nomads as they have created it for the sedentary populations."⁷⁴ Ganda Koy was backed financially by wealthy Songhai merchants from around Gao,⁷⁵ and it also enjoyed support from the Malian state; its founders were former Malian army officers.⁷⁶ The Malian military and Songhai communities from as far afield as Nigeria and Ghana contributed arms to Ganda Koy,⁷⁷ and Ganda Koy militiamen soon began committing atrocities against nomadic civilians around the Niger River. This caused former rebel groups to retaliate against sedentary populations, creating a cycle of violence against civilians that left hundreds dead and marked the bloodiest stage of the conflict. The atrocities and reprisals also caused the implementation of the National Pact to grind to a halt, as most former rebels who had integrated into the Malian military promptly deserted from their new posts.⁷⁸

By the end of 1995, the fighting had largely burned itself out. A new plan to offer financial incentives for fighters to disarm induced nearly 3,000 fighters to decommission, effectively buying peace. In March 1996, on the anniversary of the fall of Traoré's dictatorship, thousands of the weapons turned in by demobilizing rebels were ceremonially burned in Timbuktu. The various movements, including the MPA, ARLA, FIAA, FPLA, and Ganda Koy, were officially declared to be dissolved.⁷⁹ Contemporary writings by an officer of the Malian

⁷⁴ Quoted in Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 337.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁷⁶ Giraud 39.

⁷⁷ Nicolas Florquin and Stéphanie Pézard, "Insurgency, Disarmament, and Insecurity in Northern Mali, 1990-2004," in *Armed and Aimless: Armed Groups, Guns, and Human Security in the ECOWAS Region*, edited by Nicolas Florquin and Eric G. Berman (Geneva: Small Arms Survey), 51-53.

⁷⁸ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert.*, 339.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 363.

army reveal that the Malian government believed “the resentments that provoked the Tuareg rebellion seem to have been largely attenuated.”⁸⁰

Unfortunately, this optimism proved unwarranted. Many fighters chose not to demobilize in the final peace efforts, and the best, newest, and heaviest weapons were not turned in. Underlying grievances were not addressed in the peace program, and the elements of future conflict in northern Mali remained.

The ATT Years: Simmering Rebellion and Institutional Decay

In 2002, Mali experienced for the first time the peaceful transfer of power from one democratically elected leader to another. Amadou Toumani Touré, the officer who had led the coup against President Moussa Traoré before supervising the restoration of democracy and withdrawing from politics for a decade, campaigned for and easily won the presidency. In dealing with northern Mali, President ATT, as he was generally known, extrapolated from the decentralization begun under the 1992 National Pact and adopted a hands-off approach, reducing state presence, especially state security forces, in the area. With the state no longer maintaining the presence necessary to guarantee security in northern Mali, tribal militias rose to fill the void.⁸¹

More problematically, from the 1992 National Pact through the final ceremonial burning of weapons in Timbuktu in 1996, conflict resolution methods of the 1990s had set the precedent of effectively buying off violent anti-state actors with government jobs and funds. This soon created perverse incentives which, combined with a lack of central security and the devolution of power to local government in line with the National Pact, served to undermine democratic

⁸⁰ Kalifa Keita, *Conflict and Conflict Resolution in the Sahel: The Tuareg Insurgency in Mali* (U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, 1998), 23.

⁸¹ Abda Ag Kazina, “Pouvoirs d’état et partis politiques : Quelle place pour la société civile, les associations et les résistances locales ?,” in Richard Zink *et al.*, *Mali: Les Enjeux de la Reconstruction* (Bamako, Mali: Editions Tombouctou, 2016), 41.

institutions and created what a local tribal leader dubbed “demokalashi”: a situation in which disputes were sometimes resolved with democracy and sometimes with Kalashnikov rifles.⁸² For example, in June 1999, even before the start of ATT’s presidency, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, a fighter from a relatively minor tribe of the Ifoghas clan, abducted an entire local electoral committee to press a claim that a locality should be moved from the jurisdiction of one local administrative region to another.⁸³ After Ag Bahanga’s demands were ignored by the central Malian government, in December 2000, he upped the ante by attacking a Malian army patrol, killing an officer and taking hostages. Former rebel leader Iyad Ag Ghali was called in to negotiate, and in February 2001, the hostages were released in return for Ag Bahanga getting what he wanted—a new administrative region dominated by his tribe and of which he became the mayor.⁸⁴

In 2006, Ag Bahanga and his band joined with a group of former Tuareg rebels, who had been integrated into the Malian military but had recently deserted for reasons related to inter-Tuareg politics. The group branded itself the Alliance démocratique du 23 Mai pour le changement (ADC).⁸⁵ The ADC then launched what was dubbed by some as the Third Tuareg Rebellion. The actual fighting mainly consisted of the ADC and a later offshoot group staging attacks against Malian army patrols, seizing hostages, and then retiring into the desert to negotiate for concessions in return for the hostages’ release. However, the ADC had no demands beyond those relating to local issues in Kidal Region and never attracted broad support even among the Tuareg community in northern Mali, much less among other northern communities. The ATT government resisted the urge to try to crush the rebels militarily, which prevented the rebellion from spiraling in response to the army’s oppression, as had happened in the 1963 and

⁸² Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 382.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 392.

1990 uprisings.⁸⁶ Algeria once again offered to mediate, and an agreement was hammered out by 2007 under which the rebels turned over some weapons and agreed to stop attacking the government in exchange for more financial handouts.⁸⁷

Despite the agreement, in April 2008, Ag Bahanga launched a new offensive against the Malian military, killing dozens of soldiers and taking dozens more hostage. Ag Bahanga still had neither real political goals nor meaningful popular support, but this time, Libya's Muammar Qaddafi offered to mediate.⁸⁸ Diplomatic efforts peeled away many fighters from Ag Bahanga's movement. To deal with the holdouts, the Malian government outsourced military operations to local allies, most notably El Hadj Ag Gamou, the former leader of ARLA, who had been integrated into the Malian military after the National Pact but still kept his own extra-legal militia of former ARLA fighters. In January 2009, Ag Bahanga's fighters were defeated and scattered, while Ag Bahanga himself escaped into Libya.⁸⁹

During ATT's presidency, two other phenomena served to destabilize northern Mali: terrorism and trafficking. Although a full analysis of jihadist groups in the Sahara and Sahel is beyond the scope of this thesis, starting in the early 2000s, elements of the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), an offshoot of groups that had fought the Algerian government in the 1990s, increasingly moved into northern Mali. There, they married into local tribes and used the area as a base of operations from which to launch operations. Much to the annoyance of both the Algerian and American governments, President Touré's government showed little interest in aggressively targeting the GSPC, even after the group formally pledged alliance to Al Qaeda and changed its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 396.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 399.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 401.

AQIM soon became flush with cash after abducting Western hostages and releasing them in exchange for lucrative ransoms. This hostages-for-cash scheme increasingly enmeshed local communities in northern Mali, as local potentates served as mediators between AQIM and Western governments; Iyad Ag Ghali played an especially important role. A U.S. diplomatic cable described Ag Ghali as having become “the proverbial bad penny” who “turns up whenever a cash transaction between a foreign government and Kidal Tuaregs appears forthcoming.”⁹⁰ The cable claimed that Ag Ghali likely received a cut from a ransom payment made by the German government to the GSPC in 2003, as well as payments rendered to smooth the Libyan-mediated release of Malian soldiers taken hostage by Ag Bahanga’s group in 2008.⁹¹ AQIM became ever more deeply rooted in parts of northern Mali. Western perceptions of the threat posed by AQIM took on a life of their own, and stereotypes of the Sahel as a “swamp of terror” emerged among Western governments and security agencies.⁹²

Arguably, even more pernicious than the presence of internationally linked terrorists in northern Mali was the corrosive effect of trafficking. Smuggling has always been a way of life in northern Mali. The region is economically far more contiguous with southern Algeria than with southern Mali—there is still no paved road to Kidal from the south, and Timbuktu and Gao have until recently been extremely difficult to access. Indeed, so dependent is northern Mali on cross-border trade with Algeria for even the most basic goods that local officials admit that without it, many people in northern Mali would likely starve.⁹³ Additionally, the governments of Algeria and Libya, flush with petrodollars, have for decades subsidized a wide range of consumer goods, while the government of Mali has not. These subsidies created a price

⁹⁰ Mary Beth Leonard, “Follow Up on Tuareg Insurgents in Mali (C-AL8-00949),” U.S. Department of State, October 3, 2008, accessed via Wikileaks, https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BAMAKO824_a.html.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Scheele 233.

⁹³ Scheele 104.

differential across the border. Although the border between Mali and Algeria has been officially closed by one side or the other for much of the past sixty years, neither country has been able to deploy the resources to stop trafficking across the border. In practice, those who seek to cross the border simply make private arrangements with customs officials. In addition to the trade in ordinary consumer goods such as foodstuffs, medicines, and, somewhat more controversially, petrol and cigarettes, known as *al-frud al-halal* (from the French *fraude*), illicit goods have also long transited the border. This trafficking in illicit goods, called *al-frud al-haram*, has included everything from narcotics, to people, and to arms.

However, despite the fact that it can be incredibly lucrative, *al-frud al-haram* has always carried with it some degree of social stigma among the communities of northern Mali.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, since the 1990s, *al-frud al-haram* has, in the wake of the violence of the 1990s and decentralization of democratic power that followed the National Pact, served as a vehicle for formerly low-status groups to challenge the status quo in northern Mali. An excellent example is the so-called “Kunta War” of the early 2000s. The Kunta clan traditionally constituted the elite of the Arab community in northern Mali. (Although the comparison is not perfect, the Kunta in many ways occupy a position analogous to that of the Ifoghas in the Tuareg community, and it is no coincidence that the two have traditionally been strong allies.) As a result of their social status, the Kunta traditionally collected a form of tribute from other Arab tribes in the area and felt themselves above engaging in *al-frud al-haram*, at least openly and on a large scale. Other Arab groups subservient to the Kunta faced less social pressure to refrain from trafficking in illicit goods, however, and many became quite wealthy as a result of *al-frud al-haram*. This wealth translated into increased social standing and influence, and in the early 2000s, these Arab

⁹⁴ Scheele 96.

groups refused to pay their traditional tax to the Kunta. In what was even more of an affront to the old social order, they stood a candidate of their own in local elections, and their candidate won. Violence broke out as the Kunta attempted to reassert their social dominance, and several dozen people died.⁹⁵ Similar dynamics played out in the Tuareg community as well.

In the mid-2000s, the scope of the problem posed by trafficking in northern Mali vastly increased. One of the most important flows in global drug trafficking involves cocaine moving from Latin America to Europe. Initially, the drugs were shipped directly, usually by sea. When national counter-narcotics task forces began interdicting shipments on this route, the route shifted. More cocaine began moving from Latin America to West Africa and then on to Europe, still all by sea. However, authorities became more vigilant on this route as well. In response, different groups of traffickers moved cocaine across the Atlantic to West African ports, then overland across the Sahara, and then across the Mediterranean into Europe. According to UN estimates, in 2004, approximately three tons of pure cocaine transited West Africa. Three years later, in 2007, the estimate was 47 tons. Not all of this volume passed through Mali, of course, but nevertheless, the amount of money involved was absolutely staggering: at the time, the entire national defense budget of Mali amounted to slightly more than the European street value of just two tons of cocaine.⁹⁶

Needless to say, nothing else in northern Mali, legal or illegal, could offer profits on this scale, and the effect of narcotics trafficking on local institutions was devastating. Drug money bought power, swayed elections, and elected officials at every level of government and greatly raised the stakes in intercommunal power struggles. Two incidents are illustrative of the corrosive effects of narcotics trafficking. In November 2009, a Boeing 727 landed near the town

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁹⁶ “Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, February 2013, 18.

of Tarkint in Gao Region and disgorged between seven and ten tons of cocaine into pickup trucks that then disappeared into the desert. The plane was allegedly met at the landing strip by an official delegation, including the local mayor. The subsequent investigation into what was dubbed “Air Cocaine” went nowhere, likely due to the interference of state security officials close to President Touré.⁹⁷ Later, in 2010, a group of armed Ifoghas Tuaregs and Kunta Arabs seized a large cocaine shipment being moved by Imghad Tuaregs and Tilemsi Arabs, both lower-status groups who wished to challenge the social status quo through trafficking. In response, a group of Tilemsi Arabs abducted the leader of the Kunta in Gao Region, sparking a crisis.⁹⁸ In addition, attempts to launder drug money into legitimate businesses and activities wreaked havoc on the local economy and society. In 2006, for example, a trafficker decided to launder his money through cattle and bought up all the cattle in a market near Gao, severely disrupting traditional local relationships between Peul herders and Songhai agriculturalists.⁹⁹ Elsewhere, drug money was channeled into infrastructure projects, such as wells, which only served to raise the stakes on existing disputes between groups over resource access and use.¹⁰⁰

By 2010, although northern Mali was largely peaceful on the surface, its capability to withstand external shocks had been eroded away to nothing. President Touré’s *laissez-faire* approach to governing the north, relying heavily on local proxies and managing crises at the lowest immediate cost rather than resolving them (a style dubbed “precariocracy” by one Western commentator) had sapped the central government institutions present in the area of their

⁹⁷ “Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present, and Future,” The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, January 2014, 12.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Wolfram Lacher, “Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region,” *The Carnegie Papers* (September 2012), 13.

strength and legitimacy.¹⁰¹ What was left of these institutions had been thoroughly corrupted by money from trafficking. Local democratic institutions had been so subverted by a combination of clan politics and money from trafficking that they, too, had little or no legitimacy. The influx of illicit funds derived from trafficking and terrorism had also increasingly complicated social relations between groups and communities in the area.

In October 2010, a group of young, mostly Tuareg intellectuals gathered in Timbuktu. On November 1, they announced the creation of a new organization, the Mouvement nationale de l'Azawad (MNA). The MNA declared that it sought to pursue the independence of northern Mali as Azawad through peaceful, legal, and political means. Furthermore, the MNA declared that it worked on behalf of all groups in the region, regardless of ethnicity or tribe. The Malian government promptly arrested two of the founders of the MNA, Boubacar Ag Fadil and Moussa Ag Acharatoumane. Although the two were subsequently freed, the arrests promptly made them into heroes, especially among members of the Tuareg diaspora who followed events online.¹⁰²

Meanwhile, to the north, an uprising against dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi had begun in February 2011 and rapidly developed into a full-blown civil war. As NATO forces intervened against Qaddafi's army, some of the Tuaregs of Malian origin still serving in Qaddafi's military, along with other Malian Tuaregs in Libya, began trickling back into Mali. These returnees were predominantly members of non-elite social groups, and they found themselves outside the intertwined systems of tribal and government patronage fueled by trafficking money that dominated northern Mali. More importantly still, many of the returnees were heavily armed, making them a force that could not be immediately dismissed or coerced into line. The returnees

¹⁰¹ Bertrand Badie, "Préface," in Michel Galy, ed., *La Guerre au Mali: Comprendre la Crise au Sahel et au Sahara, Enjeux et Zones d'Ombre* (Paris, France: Editions La Découverte, 2013), 11.

¹⁰² Andy Morgan, "The Causes of the Uprising in Northern Mali," *Think Africa Press*, February 6, 2012, <https://thinkafricapress.com/causes-uprising-northern-mali-tuareg/>.

thus constituted a shock to the status quo in northern Mali, one that the area's social and political institutions, attenuated by a decade of corruption and enjoying little or no popular legitimacy, proved utterly incapable of managing. More pointedly, the interests of the returnees largely aligned with preexisting elements in northern Mali also seeking to challenge the status quo, both socially and politically, including the nascent MNA. Change was in the air.

**Chapter 2: War and Peace in Northern Mali/Azawad: The MNLA, October 2011-
December 2015**

Following the death of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi in August 2011, the return of Tuareg soldiers of Malian origin from Libya accelerated. Crucially, the returnees brought with them heavy weapons, including anti-tank missiles, anti-aircraft guns, and artillery pieces. Prior to his death in a desert car crash in August 2011, unreconciled Malian Tuareg rebel Ibrahim Ag Bahanga had begun reaching out to the returnees with the hope of integrating them into plans for a future rebellion. These contacts served to connect the heavily armed returnees with existing movements in northern Mali, most notably the MNA. A series of gatherings quickly gathered momentum as the returnees, the MNA, and others began to coalesce around the idea of renewing armed struggle against the Malian state. On October 15, 2011, at a meeting at Zakkak in Kidal Region near the Algerian border, the MNLA was officially born.¹⁰³

From its inception, the MNLA had separate military and political wings. The MNLA's military wing was led by Colonel Mohamed Ag Najim, a former officer in the Libyan army who had returned to Mali with men under his command in July 2011.¹⁰⁴ It included a mix of Libyan returnees, local recruits, and deserters from the Malian army. Deserters from the Malian army, not Libyan returnees, likely comprised the most numerous group; an MNLA founder later said that only 700 fighters joined the MNLA from Libya.¹⁰⁵ The MNLA's political wing, for its part, was dominated by former activists from the MNA and relatives of Ibrahim Ag Bahanga. One of Ag Bahanga's cousins, Bilal Ag Achérif, was chosen as secretary-general of the movement. The formation of the MNLA was not without drama: former rebel leader Iyad Ag Ghali participated

¹⁰³ Abdoulaye Tamboura, *Le conflit touareg et ses enjeux géopolitiques au Mali: Géopolitique d'une rébellion armée* (Paris, France: L'Harmattan, 2016), 134.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Tamboura 135.

in the meetings and made a bid for leadership of the nascent movement. He was rebuffed, however, due to his controversial past and his alleged links to both international Salafist groups and the Algerian intelligence services.¹⁰⁶ Instead, the MNLA declared its support for Azawad as a secular national state representing all the peoples, not just the Tuaregs, in the region.

The initial demographic composition of the MNLA is disputed by scholars. The MNLA was without doubt the most ethnically and tribally diverse movement to arise in northern Mali to challenge the Malian state. Although ethnic Tuaregs dominated the group, some influential founding members were of other ethnicities; for example, the vice president, Mahamadou Djéri Maïga, was Songhai. It is less clear, however, exactly which Tuareg clans and tribes comprised the MNLA in its early stages; the inherent difficulties in categorizing northern Mali's Tuareg population into sub-units make determining this especially difficult. According to Abdoulaye Tamboura (2016), most of the MNLA's members were Kel Adagh,¹⁰⁷ Chamanamas, and Iwellemeden Tuaregs.¹⁰⁸ Georg Klute (2013) claims that while the group recruited from all Tuareg clans, it was dominated by Chamanamas, Idnan, and Kel Intessar.¹⁰⁹ Military commander Colonel Mohamed Ag Najim is Idnan, while Secretary-General Bilal Ag Achérif is Ifoghas (Kel Adagh). However, the MNLA did not initially attract the support of the most influential branch of the Ifoghas clan, the family of Intallah Ag Attaher, the *aménokal*, or recognized traditional leader, of the Ifoghas. As a result, the MNLA's strongest area of support was not initially Kidal Region, where the Ifoghas dominate local Tuareg politics, but instead were in Timbuktu and Gao Regions.

¹⁰⁶ Harmon 176.

¹⁰⁷ Again, Kel Adagh refers simply to the inhabitants of the Adagh region of Kidal Region and is not a clan in the same precise sense as the other clans mentioned.

¹⁰⁸ Tamboura 134.

¹⁰⁹ Klute 62.

The MNLA's first major act was to organize a series of popular protests in northern Mali in November 2011. At these demonstrations, protesters called for autonomy or outright independence for the entirety of northern Mali as Azawad. No prior movement had explicitly advocated for the independence of the entire region of northern Mali as Azawad; thus, the MNLA was already in territory uncharted by previous northern rebellions.¹¹⁰

The Malian government attempted to respond to the return of Tuareg soldiers from Libya. Colonel El Hadj Ag Gamou, another former leader of a rebel group from the 1990s who had accepted integration into the Malian military in 1996 and was the highest-ranking Tuareg member of the Malian army's general staff, was put in charge of efforts to integrate armed Libyan returnees into the Malian army. However, while hundreds of returnees, predominantly members of Colonel Ag Gamou's group, the Imghad,¹¹¹ were indeed integrated into the Malian army, many others were not. In December 2011, amid concerns from Western countries that arms from Libya could find their way into the hands of Al Qaeda cadres in Mali, the Malian government opted to reinforce its sparse military presence in the north.¹¹² At the same time, the Malian government attempted to reach out to the nascent MNLA movement. The meetings at Zakkak and elsewhere in the north at which the MNLA was created were not in any way secret, and envoys from the government attended and observed the proceedings. However, all the Malian government was prepared to offer the MNLA in return for not rebelling was more of the same targeted favors and payoffs that had characterized President Touré's policy since the 1990s. On January 7, 2012, the MNLA rejected the government's offer.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Baz Lecocq and Georg Klute, "Tuareg Separatism in Mali," *International Journal* 68, no. 3 (September 2013), 430.

¹¹¹ The Imghad are not precisely a clan. Instead, the Imghad are members of a class of Tuareg society, ostensibly of non-slave artisans and herders. Historically, the social position of the Imghad has been inferior to that of other Tuareg groups, most notably the Ifoghas, but above that of former slaves, or *bellahs*.

¹¹² Lecocq and Klute, 430.

¹¹³ "Mali: Avoiding Escalation," International Crisis Group, *Africa Report 189* (July 2012), 10.

By this point, however, the MNLA was not the only newly formed armed group in northern Mali. Iyad Ag Ghali responded to the rejection of his overtures by founding his own group, Ansar Dine (“Defenders of the Faith,” a name frequently adopted by jihadist organizations).¹¹⁴ Ansar Dine offered an explicitly Islamist vision of the state in opposition to the MNLA’s secularism, calling for the imposition of Islamic law in the north but not necessarily demanding political independence from the Malian government.¹¹⁵ Ansar Dine was dominated by members of the Kidal-based Ifoghas elite; one of Ag Ghali’s top lieutenants was Alghabass Ag Intallah, son of *aménokal* Intallah Ag Attaher. Ansar Dine was closer to elements of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb than was the MNLA, although the nature of its relationship with AQIM during this period remains unclear. In addition to Ansar Dine, other AQIM-linked groups were present in northern Mali. First and foremost of these was the Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), which formally announced its split from AQIM in mid-2011. Although MUJAO was initially founded as a vehicle for attracting black African recruits to the jihadist cause, within a few months, it came to be dominated by Arabs from northern Mali with strong links to drug trafficking. The Malian government proved utterly incapable of responding to this proliferation of armed groups across northern Mali, and the stage was set for the outbreak of war.

On January 17, 2012, MNLA combat units attacked Malian army outposts around the city of Ménaka in the eastern part of Gao region. War had arrived. Despite the Malian government’s attempt to strengthen its military presence in the north since December 2011, Malian soldiers quickly lost ground to the forces of both the MNLA and Ansar Dine. The relationship between

¹¹⁴ Iyad Ag Ghali’s Ansar Dine is not to be confused with the Maliki Sufi group of the same name led by Chérif Madani Ousmane Haidara, which operates in southern Mali and other countries in West Africa. Haidara’s group is generally represented by its French spelling, Ançar Dine.

¹¹⁵ Klute 63.

the MNLA and Ansar Dine in the first months of the war is not entirely clear. Both groups initially fought the Malian army and did not fight each other, but the degree of coordination between the two remains disputed. On January 18, the MNLA and Ansar Dine attacked the Malian army garrison at Aguelhok, hundreds of kilometers north of Kidal; AQIM fighters may also have been present. The troops of the Malian garrison surrendered after running out of ammunition as a result of several days of fighting. On or before January 24, in the aftermath of the surrender, dozens of Malian soldiers of southern origin were summarily executed by either being shot in the head or having their throats cut.¹¹⁶ Photos purporting to show the slaughtered soldiers circulated widely in Mali in subsequent days, galvanizing public opinion against both the rebels and the Malian government. The Malian government did not issue any official statements, however, until after February 13, when a French government official confirmed the killings. Even then, what had happened and who was responsible remained unclear. On February 18, the MNLA denied all responsibility for killing prisoners.¹¹⁷ Subsequent investigations by various human rights bodies have failed to definitively establish either a death toll or responsibility for the massacre. The most plausible reconstructions of events suggest that approximately 80 Malian soldiers in the custody of the MNLA and Ansar Dine were killed by elements of Ansar Dine and AQIM.

Regardless of what precisely happened at Aguelhok on January 24, rumors circulating in southern Mali took on a life of their own. By February 2, wives and widows of Malian soldiers stationed in the north staged protests in front of the presidential palace in Bamako, demanding better state support for the army. Security forces did nothing to break up the protests in what swiftly became a major indictment of the strength of President Amadou Toumani Touré's

¹¹⁶ "Mali: Avoiding Escalation," 14.

¹¹⁷ Tamboura 141.

regime.¹¹⁸ No good news came from the north to support President Touré's cause; the Malian military continued to suffer defeat after defeat at the hands of the MNLA and Ansar Dine. On March 10-11, the MNLA forced the Malian military to withdraw from the town of Tessalit in Kidal Region after a series of running battles stretching back to January. Tessalit boasted the best airstrip in Kidal Region, and its loss hamstrung the Malian military's ability to resupply its forces. By this point, the MNLA had already taken the towns of Aguelhok and Tin Zaouatene (Kidal Region), Léré (Timbuktu Region), and Ménaka (Gao Region).¹¹⁹

On the night of March 21, 2012, the situation for the Malian government went from bad to worse. A group of junior officers led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo stationed at the military garrison town of Kati, 15 kilometers from Bamako, launched a mutiny. Encountering little resistance, the mutiny morphed into a full-blown military coup against President Touré as the mutineers seized the presidential palace and the national broadcasting station. On the morning of March 22, the mutineers announced the creation of the National Committee for the Reestablishment of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (CNRDRE), which was essentially a junta.¹²⁰ However, President Touré's presidential guards had remained loyal, and he managed to escape the attack on the presidential palace. His whereabouts remained unknown.

The coup in Bamako led to a complete breakdown of the military chain of command, further crippling the Malian military's attempt to defend its lines against the MNLA and Ansar Dine in the north. On March 30, the MNLA and Ansar Dine took Kidal; Ansar Dine ended up in primary control of the city.¹²¹ Gao followed on March 31, and the MNLA entered Timbuktu on

¹¹⁸ Tamboura 163.

¹¹⁹ Harmon 177.

¹²⁰ "Mali: Avoiding Escalation," 18.

¹²¹ Tamboura 167.

April 1, 2012.¹²² No previous Tuareg rebellion had ever managed to take any of the regional capitals of northern Mali. The MNLA had now seized all three, in addition to every other important town in the north. During the same three-day period, one of the most colorful events of the war had played out. On March 30, Malian army Colonel Ag Gamou attempted to retreat with his men south from Kidal but was quickly pursued and surrounded by fighters of the MNLA and Ansar Dine. Ag Gamou feared Ansar Dine in particular: he and Iyad Ag Ghali had a long history together, having both fought in Qaddafi's Islamic Legion during the 1980s. During the 1990s, the two became sworn enemies as Ag Gamou's ARLA fought Ag Ghali's MPA during the Second Tuareg Rebellion. Their animosity towards each other had a more personal dimension as well: Ag Gamou's ex-wife later married Ag Ghali. If that were not enough, Ag Ghali's lieutenant Alghabass Ag Intallah also hated Ag Gamou due to the latter's brief abduction of Alghabass's father, Intallah Ag Attaher, in 1994.

The MNLA, for its part, sought Ag Gamou's defection to their side. So Ag Gamou cut a deal with MNLA Colonel Assalat Ag Habi: Ag Gamou announced to the French and Malian media that he was defecting to the MNLA. In return, Ag Gamou got freedom of movement, control over the men under his command, and protection from Iyad Ag Ghali.¹²³ Although Ag Gamou's public announcement of his defection caused dismay in Bamako, it was revealed to be an elaborate ruse: Ag Gamou and his men headed straight for the border with Niger and presented themselves at the Malian consulate in Niamey, declaring their loyalty to the Malian government and their readiness for redeployment.¹²⁴

¹²² Tamboura 144.

¹²³ Baba Ahmed, "Mali : comment Ag Gamou a échappé au MNLA et à Ansar Eddine," *Jeune Afrique*, April 11, 2012, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/176577/politique/mali-comment-ag-gamou-a-chapp-au-mnla-et-ansar-eddine/>.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

Ag Gamou's escape notwithstanding, the MNLA and Ansar Dine had driven the Malian military from the north entirely. In the first week of April, the MNLA declared an official end to combat operations, as it had secured the borders of its would-be state of Azawad. On April 6, 2012, the MNLA officially declared the independence of Azawad as a secular, democratic state.

Bamako, the capital of Mali, remained in chaos; only on April 6 did the junta agree to the return of constitutional order and elections, with Dioncounda Traoré, president of the National Assembly, being named Interim President.¹²⁵ Major street battles between army units loyal to the junta and units still loyal to former President Touré continued through the end of April in Bamako and Kati.¹²⁶ Incensed rioters targeted shops, businesses, and houses owned by Malians of Tuareg and Arab origin, forcing thousands to flee the city. By mid-April, Bamako had been effectively emptied of its Tuareg and Arab populations. Some fled north, while others fled into neighboring countries.¹²⁷ Nor did the Bamako rioters target only ethnic minorities. On May 21, Interim President Dioncounda Traoré was severely beaten by protesters as security forces stood by and did nothing, having earlier failed to prevent the crowd from breaching the presidential palace. President Traoré was flown to France for medical treatment, and his absence further complicated the tangled and tenuous web of power in Bamako.¹²⁸

Despite the Malian government's weakness, the MNLA's declaration of independence on April 6 proved to be the high water mark for the movement. Despite the MNLA's appeals for international support, Azawad was not officially recognized by any other country, with Western and regional powers instead formally committing themselves to Malian territorial integrity.

Worse still, before the April 6 declaration of independence, rumors circulated that Ansar Dine

¹²⁵ Tamboura 161.

¹²⁶ Harmon 189.

¹²⁷ Leela Jacinto, "Par peur de représailles, les Touareg de la capitale malienne prennent le large," France24, April 11, 2012, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20120411-mali-rebellion-independance-nord-peur-represailles-touaregs-bamako-fuite>.

¹²⁸ Harmon 189-190.

and AQIM had effectively pushed the MNLA out of Timbuktu and other major towns.¹²⁹ Although these rumors could not be verified, throughout April, the MNLA lost momentum and influence on the ground in favor of Ansar Dine and MUJAO. In May, with its position weakening and the international community increasingly voicing concerns about AQIM's presence in Azawad, the MNLA attempted to forge an alliance with Ansar Dine. On May 26, the two groups announced the formation of the Islamic Republic of Azawad. Under the terms of the alliance, the MNLA and Ansar Dine would join forces to expel the supposedly foreign elements of AQIM from Azawad. However, the agreement between the MNLA and Ansar Dine was promptly denounced by members of the MNLA's political bureau, especially those living abroad. Facing internal opposition, on June 1, the MNLA's political leadership formally rejected the agreement and reaffirmed their commitment to secularism.¹³⁰

Following the collapse of the alliance between the MNLA and Ansar Dine, relations between the two groups quickly soured. On June 12, unarmed protesters in Kidal demanded the departure of Ansar Dine from the city and the return of the MNLA; the protests were broken up by Ansar Dine's Islamic police.¹³¹ The final breach between the MNLA and Islamist groups came on June 27, when fighting broke out in Gao between the MNLA on one side and MUJAO and elements of AQIM on the other. The MNLA quickly came out the worst in the fighting. Secretary-General Bilal Ag Achérif was wounded and evacuated to Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, while four MNLA colonels were reportedly killed. The MNLA evacuated Gao entirely later that day.¹³² Over the next few days, the MNLA was forced to withdraw from Timbuktu and Kidal as

¹²⁹ Jeremy Keenan, *The Dying Sahara: US Imperialism and Terror in Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 266.

¹³⁰ Tamboura 149, 168.

¹³¹ Tamboura 168.

¹³² Abbès Zineb, "Nord-Mali: Le SG du MNLA Bilal Ag Acherif blessé à Gao, évacué à Ouagadougou," *Algérie 1*, June 27, 2012, <https://www.algerie1.com/actualite/nord-mali-le-sg-du-mnla-bilal-ag-acherif-blesse-a-gao-evacue-a-ouagadougou>.

well after brief fights with Ansar Dine supported by AQIM.¹³³ By mid-July, the MNLA was evicted from Ansongo in the eastern Gao Region,¹³⁴ and in November, MUJAO pushed the MNLA out of Ménaka in Gao Region and forced the MNLA to withdraw from Léré in Timbuktu Region.¹³⁵ Late 2012 marked the nadir of the MNLA's military control of Azawad. Its fighters were forced toward—and in some cases across—the borders with Mauritania, Algeria, and Niger, and it controlled no major population centers. Instead, Ansar Dine controlled Kidal and Timbuktu, while MUJAO held sway in Gao and Ménaka. The Islamist groups quickly moved to begin imposing their harsh interpretation of Islamic law, banning music, prohibiting any mixing of the genders, and mandating that men wear beards and that women only venture out of their homes fully covered. Rules were enforced by special police units tasked with monitoring compliance to Islamic law. Transgressors were beaten, had limbs amputated, and were sometimes killed.

The response of the Malian government and the international community to this course of events was scattered and ineffectual. In mid-October, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 2071, which endorsed the formation of a force of 3,000 men drawn from Mali's neighbors in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to support the Malian military in taking back control of the entirety of Mali's national territory.¹³⁶ However, the ECOWAS force was not expected to be sufficiently trained in desert warfare to mount such an operation until far in the future; this would cause a delay of months or even years. From the international community's perspective, the MNLA was largely an afterthought.

Resolution 2071 did not mention the MNLA at all and was instead entirely focused on AQIM

¹³³ Harmon 183.

¹³⁴ Thierry Perret, *Mali : Une crise au Sahel* (Paris, France: Editions Karthala, 2014), 229.

¹³⁵ Baz Lecocq and Georg Klute, "Tuareg Separatism in Mali," *International Journal* 68, no. 3 (September 2013), 431.

¹³⁶ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2071, October 12, 2012, accessed via <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10789.doc.htm>.

and affiliated groups—a sign of the MNLA’s military irrelevance at the time. In December 2012, through Algerian mediation, the MNLA and Ansar Dine agreed in principle to ally against the so-called foreign jihadists of MUJAO and AQIM in Azawad.¹³⁷ However, nothing concrete came of the agreement, and the status quo in the region continued.

On January 8, 2013, the status quo was irrevocably broken. A jihadist column broke through the tentative front lines in central Mali’s Mopti Region and attacked the city of Konna. The next day, facing another rout of the Malian military, Interim President Dioncounda Traoré formally requested French assistance.¹³⁸ On January 10, the jihadists took Konna and little appeared to stand in the way of their seizing the strategic military base and airfield at Sévaré (likely the real target of their attack) in Mopti Region or even Bamako itself. The next day, on January 11, France intervened militarily. The first wave of Operation Serval saw French airstrikes devastate jihadist columns in central Mali, effectively halting their advance south. Over the next few days, thousands of French infantry arrived in theater and began punching through jihadist lines in the Islamist-controlled north, backed up by massive firepower. The Malian army followed in their wake to mop up, and the French forces were also supported by ECOWAS and Chadian troops. Even before Operation Serval took any of the major cities in northern Mali/Azawad, as the Malian army moved north behind the French, the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) accused Malian soldiers of carrying out reprisals and summary executions targeting Arabs and Tuaregs.¹³⁹ This was a sign of things to come.

The French intervention prompted the northern elites of Azawad to attempt to distance themselves from jihadist groups. On January 24, before French forces reached the northern

¹³⁷ Michel Galy *et al.*, *La guerre au Mali : Comprendre la crise au Sahel et au Sahara. Enjeux et zones d’ombre* (Paris, France: Editions La Découverte, 2013), 191.

¹³⁸ Galy *et al.* 191.

¹³⁹ Galy *et al.* 192.

cities, Alghabass Ag Intallah, formerly Iyad Ag Ghali's second-in-command in Ansar Dine and son of the *aménokal* of the Ifoghas Intallah Ag Attaher, announced that he was breaking away from Ansar Dine to form a new group, the Islamic Movement of Azawad (MIA). The MIA claimed to be entirely composed of Malians and announced its desire to "move towards a peaceful solution."¹⁴⁰ The MIA effectively proved to be a vehicle for Ifoghas elites to get out of Ansar Dine before French bombs fell on them.

On January 26, 2013, Gao was retaken by French forces after the jihadists evacuated the town without a fight. Timbuktu fell in a similar fashion on January 28.¹⁴¹ By the end of January, Kidal, too, had been retaken. However, French authorities effectively barred the Malian military from entering Kidal for fear of reprisals sparking further violence. The MNLA claimed to have concurrently mounted a counter-offensive against Islamist forces, seizing back the towns of Léré (Timbuktu Region), Tessalit (Kidal Region), and Ménaka (Gao Region).¹⁴² However, reliable information on Azawad from this period is extremely hard to come by, as French and Malian authorities banned all journalists from entering the combat zone (effectively the entire north). In addition, the MNLA's tendency to exaggerate military victories means that its claims must be taken with a dose of salt. French officials were extremely coy during this period about any cooperation between their forces and the MNLA; doubtless the two were in contact with each other at some level, as the MNLA ended up in effectively military control of Kidal alongside the French military.¹⁴³ On February 5, the MNLA announced that its forces were prepared for

¹⁴⁰ "Mali : scission au sein d'Ansar Eddine," *Le Monde*, January 24, 2013, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/01/24/mali-scission-au-sein-d-ansar-eddine_1821602_3212.html.

¹⁴¹ "Mali: Security, Dialogue, and Meaningful Reform," International Crisis Group, *Africa Report 201*, April 2013, 8.

¹⁴² Harmon 212.

¹⁴³ "Mali: Security, Dialogue, and Meaningful Reform," 12.

“coordination” with French troops against the terrorists.¹⁴⁴ However, French authorities did not officially respond.

On February 8, the war entered a new phase as Mali experienced a suicide bombing for the first time in its history. This operation was carried out by MUJAO in Gao and was followed by waves of MUJAO gunmen, who penetrated the city center before being contained and repulsed.¹⁴⁵ More suicide bombings followed in Gao over the next few days, and on February 21, Kidal witnessed its first suicide bombing.¹⁴⁶ Although the jihadists no longer controlled territory, they continued to fight through asymmetrical means.

Meanwhile, the focus shifted to negotiations and achieving stability and a political solution. In late April 2013, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2100, declaring the forthcoming deployment of a full UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, MINUSMA, to consist of up to 11,200 military personnel. This was to be achieved mainly by redesignating ECOWAS and African Union forces already in Mali. MINUSMA’s formal start of operations was set for July 1.¹⁴⁷ On May 5, the MNLA declared its readiness to negotiate with the Malian government.¹⁴⁸ Later in May, the MIA, led by Alghabass Ag Intallah, merged with the High Council of Azawad (HCA), itself recently founded by Alghabass’s brother Mohamed Ag Intallah, to form the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA). The HCUA was expressly created for the purposes of negotiation with the Malian government.¹⁴⁹ In early June, negotiations between the Malian government, the MNLA, and the HCUA duly began in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, under the mediation of Burkinabé president Blaise Compaoré.

¹⁴⁴ Perret 230.

¹⁴⁵ Harmon 210.

¹⁴⁶ “Mali: Security, Dialogue, and Meaningful Reform” 12.

¹⁴⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 2100, April 25, 2013, 6, accessed via <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2100>.

¹⁴⁸ Fabien Offner, “Le Mali confronté au casse-tête de Kidal,” *Libération*, May 22, 2013, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2013/05/22/le-mali-confronte-au-casse-tete-de-kidal_904937.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Although the negotiations took place against a backdrop of skirmishes between the MNLA and the Malian army, the parties signed the Ouagadougou Accord on June 18. Under the terms of the agreement, the MNLA and the HCUA agreed to allow voting in Mali's presidential elections to be held in late July throughout Azawad, especially in Kidal Region, in order to return Mali fully to constitutional order. The MNLA and HCUA also agreed to an immediate ceasefire and the potential deployment of the Malian army throughout Azawad. The Malian government was forced to abandon its insistence on the immediate disarmament of the MNLA and HCUA and to accept the inclusion of the term "Azawad" in the text. Finally, all parties committed themselves to further talks intended to achieve a definite political resolution.¹⁵⁰ On July 28 and August 11, two-round presidential elections were duly held. Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, a former prime minister known universally as IBK, triumphed in the second-round runoff with a dominant 77.6% of the vote.

In October 2013, the MNLA announced that it would coordinate militarily with two other ostensibly pro-secession groups operating in northern Mali/Azawad: these were the HCUA and a faction of the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA), an armed group formed in mid-2012 that primarily existed to protect the interests of wealthy Arab businessmen in Timbuktu and Gao. (Another faction of the MAA opposed the independence of Azawad and was considered pro-government. However, this faction, too, was motivated primarily not by politics but by a desire to protect Arab business interests.) The MNLA's chief of staff, Libyan veteran Mohamed Ag Najim, was placed in overall command.¹⁵¹ Military coordination soon extended to political

¹⁵⁰ "Mali: les grandes lignes de l'accord signé à Ouagadougou," RFI, June 16, 2013, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130619-mali-grandes-mesures-accord-signé-ouagadougou/>.

¹⁵¹ "Mali: les mouvements de l'Azawad créent une coordination militaire," RFI, October 29, 2014, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20141029-mali-mouvements-azawad-creent-une-coordination-militaire>.

coordination, and the three groups formed the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) as a vehicle for representing them in the negotiations to follow the Ouagadougou Accord.

In early November, jihadist groups sent a powerful message of their continuing intentions and capabilities by kidnapping two French journalists for Radio France Internationale off the streets of Kidal and killing them a short time later.¹⁵² Elsewhere, a week later, at least three MNLA soldiers were killed following a skirmish with a Malian army patrol in Gao Region, with the Malian army suffering unspecified casualties as well. In what was to become a standard pattern, both the MNLA and the Malian army accused the other side of attacking first; the MNLA further alleged that the Malian army had recently summarily executed civilians in the area. Although MINUSMA forces were present in the area, UN officials insisted they could not confirm either side's account.¹⁵³ Similar skirmishes, allegations of atrocities, and a general atmosphere of uncertainty became standard fare in northern Mali/Azawad. However, crucially, the presence of MINUSMA and French forces as overall security guarantors placed an effective ceiling on the extent to which the MNLA and its allies could confront the Malian army militarily in northern Mali/Azawad. MINUSMA played a further vital role as a broker between the MNLA and the Malian government. In mid-November, the MNLA withdrew from the district of Kidal city containing government buildings in accordance with prior negotiated agreement. MINUSMA then secured the area for a brief transitional period; only after this did Malian state officials and security forces return. Incidentally, the MNLA expended (or at least appeared to expend) a degree of political capital in honoring its treaty commitments and withdrawing from

¹⁵² Thomas Hubert, "Two French Radio Journalists Killed in Northern Mali," France24, November 3, 2013, <https://www.france24.com/en/mali-kidal-mnla-rfi-journalist-kidnapped-french>.

¹⁵³ "Accrochage entre l'armée malienne et le MNLA dans la région de Gao," France 24, November 11, 2013, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20131109-mali-accrochage-armee-malienne-combattants-mnla-region-gao-menaka-touareg-azawad-minusma>.

Kidal: popular protests against the MNLA's withdrawal emerged and were dispersed by the MNLA's own security forces.¹⁵⁴

In January 2014, negotiations intended to end in a definitive solution to the status of Azawad vis-à-vis Mali were launched. Despite major misgivings on the part of the MNLA, Algeria once again assumed the role of official mediator, and talks were held in Algiers. Talks proceeded at a snail's pace through multiple stages. The reality of insecurity in northern Mali/Azawad continued: in early February, approximately 30 Tuareg civilians were killed by unidentified assailants; these were reported in the Malian media as ethnic Peuls (Fulani).¹⁵⁵ In an official press release, the MNLA blamed MUJAO for the attack and, two days later, claimed to have pursued and engaged the assailants, killing six and taking more as prisoners.¹⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the MNLA sought to bolster its position by seeking international support. In early March, Secretary-General Bilal Ag Achérif led MNLA delegations that were officially received in Niger and Mauritania; Ag Achérif met with the presidents of those countries.¹⁵⁷ A few weeks later, Ag Achérif led a delegation to Russia, where he met with Mikhail Bogdanov, the Russian vice-minister for foreign affairs in the Middle East and Africa. The MNLA sought to publicize the fact that it had been officially received by a permanent member of the UN Security Council.¹⁵⁸ In early May 2014, the MNLA held large-scale internal meetings, following which the group

¹⁵⁴ "Mali : le MNLA recule à Kidal," RFI, November 15, 2013, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20131115-mali-le-mnla-recule-kidal>.

¹⁵⁵ "Nord du Mali: au moins 30 Touareg tués dans des violences intercommunautaires," Malijet, February 7, 2014, http://malijet.com/actualite_dans_les_regions_du_mali/rebellion_au_nord_du_mali/92879-nord-du-mali-au-moins-30-touareg-tues-dans-des-violences-interco.html.

¹⁵⁶ "Combats et bilan des affrontements contre les Terroristes du MUJAO," Mouvement Nationale de Libération de l'Azawad, <http://mnlamov.net/actualites/332-combats-et-bilan-des-affrontements-contre-les-terroristes-du-mujao.html>.

¹⁵⁷ "Visite d'Etat d'une délégation du MNLA en Mauritanie et au Niger," Mouvement Nationale de Libération de l'Azawad, March 3, 2014, <http://mnlamov.net/actualites/333-visite-detat-dune-delegation-du-mnla-en-mauritanie-et-au-niger.html>.

¹⁵⁸ "Le MNLA reçu en audience par le ministère Russe des affaires Etrangères," Mouvement Nationale de Libération de l'Azawad, March 14, 2014, <http://mnlamov.net/actualites/337-le-mnla-recu-en-audience-par-le-ministere-russe-des-affaires-etrangeres.html>.

reaffirmed its commitment to negotiations with the Malian government under international auspices.¹⁵⁹ Although negotiations proceeded slowly, all signs pointed to a relatively smooth course toward a negotiated settlement; meanwhile, combat between the MNLA and the Malian state was limited to low-level and infrequent skirmishes.

Unfortunately for the status quo, however, the Malian Prime Minister insisted on visiting Kidal. Prime Minister Moussa Mara had been appointed the month before, in April. He was one of Mali's youngest prime ministers, and he sought to inject vigor into his government by aggressively asserting the Malian state's right to exercise sovereignty over the entirety of its territory. Although Malian state officials were present in Kidal, the MNLA and its ally the HCUA had a strong military presence in the town and its environs. The MNLA made its feelings about a potential Mara visit clear by organizing popular protests in Kidal against Prime Minister Mara and the Malian state. Nevertheless, on May 17, Prime Minister Mara arrived in Kidal. He was accompanied by a security detail of Malian army soldiers, including 160 predominantly Tuareg troops under the command of El Hadj Ag Gamou, who had been promoted to general following his return from Niger.¹⁶⁰ Ag Gamou's presence made obvious sense militarily, as he knew Kidal and its environs intimately, but, as a UN official later stated, in political terms, bringing him to MNLA-controlled Kidal was like inviting a friend to dinner and seating him opposite his worst enemy.¹⁶¹

Exactly what happened on May 17 will likely never be confirmed. Fighting broke out between Prime Minister Mara's security detail and MNLA and HCUA fighters in Kidal. Both sides subsequently accused the other of starting the shooting. Fighting spread, and Prime

¹⁵⁹ "Déclaration finale de la rencontre de concertation interne du MNLA; les 29; 30; 1^{er}, et 02 Mai 2014," Mouvement Nationale de Libération de l'Azawad, <http://mnlamov.net/actualites/340-declaration-finale-de-la-rencontre-de-concertation-interne-du-mnla-les-29-30-1er-et-02-mai-2014.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Rémi Carayol, "Mali : El Hadj Ag Gamou, le renard de Kidal," *Jeune Afrique*, June 10, 2014, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/50571/politique/mali-el-hadj-ag-gamou-le-renard-de-kidal/>.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Minister Mara was forced to take refuge at a UN camp outside the city. The governor of Kidal and a number of other government functionaries were killed in the crossfire. The Malian government claimed 36 people in total had died, including eight soldiers, while the MNLA claimed to have inflicted more casualties and taken prisoners. The next day, Prime Minister Mara evacuated to Gao and claimed, “The terrorists have declared war on Mali, and Mali is therefore at war with the terrorists.”¹⁶² A hasty ceasefire brokered by the local UN commander on the evening of May 18 saw approximately 30 government officials and soldiers taken prisoner by the MNLA the previous day released into the custody of the Red Cross.¹⁶³ Nevertheless, the Malian government ordered an estimated 1,500 soldiers to occupy positions outside Kidal and, on May 21 they launched a three-pronged assault on the city, supported by vehicles. After a battle that lasted for six hours, the Malian army was utterly routed by the MNLA and its allies. Malian troops fled south in disorder, suffering dozens of soldiers killed and taken prisoner and abandoning their vehicles.

On May 23, the constituent groups of the CMA (the MNLA, the HCUA, and the MAA) signed a ceasefire agreement with the Malian government after talks in Kidal mediated personally by the UN special representative in Mali and President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz of Mauritania. The groups also committed to a prisoner swap and to launch an investigation into the events that led to the outbreak of the fighting.¹⁶⁴

The ceasefire notwithstanding, the Malian military’s rout at Kidal sparked a general retreat among all Malian army forces in northern Mali/Azawad. By the end of May 2014, in

¹⁶² “Mali : 36 morts lors d’affrontements, des fonctionnaires en otages à Kidal,” *Le Parisien*, May 18, 2014, <http://www.leparisien.fr/international/mali-36-morts-lors-des-affrontements-a-kidal-18-05-2014-3851057.php>.

¹⁶³ “Mali: cessez-le-feu respecté et otages libérés à Kidal,” RFI, May 20, 2014, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20140520-mali-cessez-le-feu-respecte-otages-liberes-kidal-mnla>.

¹⁶⁴ Tiemoko Diallo, “Mali Tuareg Separatists Accept Ceasefire Agreement,” Reuters, May 23, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-fighting/mali-tuareg-separatists-accept-ceasefire-agreement-idUSBREA4M0ND20140523>.

addition to Kidal, the MNLA claimed control over the towns of Djébo, Léré, Goundam, Anéfif, Tessalit, Aguelhok, and Ménaka, among others in all three northern regions. While small numbers of Malian army soldiers remained in barracks in Ménaka and Tessalit, they did not control any territory beyond the edges of their camps.¹⁶⁵ The Malian minister of defense, Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga, resigned in disgrace.

Despite the drastic changes on the ground in northern Mali/Azawad, the process of negotiations continued and, on June 14, a new player entered the picture. This was the Platform of Movements of June 14 in Algiers (known universally thereafter simply as the Platform). The Platform was a coalition of anti-secessionist armed groups from northern Mali/Azawad, most notably a faction of the MAA and a faction of the Coordination of Movements-Patriotic Resistance Front (CM-FPR), which included the ethnic Songhai and Peul militias Ganda Koy and Ganda Izo. The Platform was created officially to represent in negotiations the peoples of northern Mali who opposed the CMA's secessionist plans. In practice, however, the Platform soon began to challenge the CMA militarily in northern Mali/Azawad. As early as July 7, the MNLA issued an official press release complaining of violations of the May 23 ceasefire by Platform militias.¹⁶⁶ A few weeks later, on July 18, fighting erupted around Tabankort on the road between Kidal and Gao between the CMA and fighters from the MAA-Platform. The MAA claimed that its attacks were in retaliation for the MNLA's seizure of Arab-owned goods and garages in the frontier town of In Khalil in 2013, which the MNLA claimed occurred in the

¹⁶⁵ Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, "A Process in Search of Peace: Lessons from the Inter-Malian Agreement." International Peace Institute, June 2017, 12.

¹⁶⁶ "Actes de provocation et violation de cessez le feu," Mouvement Nationale de Libération de l'Azawad, July 8, 2014, <http://mnlamov.net/actualites/361-actes-de-provocation-et-violation-de-cessez-le-feu.html>.

context of an operation targeting a MUJAO base.¹⁶⁷ The fighting eventually subsided without a decisive victory by either party.

The Malian government strenuously denied providing any support for or coordinating with the Platform; however, the fighting around Tabankort between the MAA and the CMA was the first instance of what was to become a pattern—waves of Platform attacks on CMA positions at critical moments in negotiations between the Malian government and the CMA. A week after the outbreak of fighting in Tabankort, on July 24, the CMA, the Malian government, and the Platform signed a formal roadmap for future negotiations in Algiers. At these talks, the CMA had refused to recognize the Platform as an independent entity (insisting that it was part of the Malian government’s delegation), with the result that two copies of the Roadmap were signed—one one between the CMA and the Malian government, and one between the Malian government and the Platform.¹⁶⁸ Lending credence to the idea that the MAA-Platform’s attacks in Tabankort helped pressure the CMA into signing the Roadmap is the fact that the text of the Roadmap was no longer in dispute by the time of the outbreak of fighting—the MNLA had published the full text of the Roadmap as it was eventually signed on its official website on July 16, two days before the start of fighting.¹⁶⁹

In mid-August, another new armed group formally entered the scene with the creation of the Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés (GATIA). GATIA was composed, as its name suggests, of Tuaregs from the Imghad social class, and its leaders claimed that it served to defend the communities of northern Mali who opposed the CMA and any form of secession or

¹⁶⁷ “Alger: pendant les négociations, les combats continuent au Mali,” RFI, July 24, 2014, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20140724-alger-pendant-negociations-combats-continuent-koenders-arabes-touaregs-mnla-hcua-ma>.

¹⁶⁸ Boutellis and Zahar 13.

¹⁶⁹ “Feuille de route des négociations coordination des mouvements (MNLA, HCUA, MAA),” Mouvement Nationale de Libération de l’Azawad, July 17, 2014, <http://mnlamov.net/actualites/365-feuille-de-route-des-negociations-coordination-des-mouvements-mnla-hcua-maa.html>.

autonomy for northern Mali in the wake of the Malian military's effective withdrawal from the area.¹⁷⁰ GATIA claimed to have approximately 1,000 fighters and expressed its hope of joining the Algeria-led official peace process.¹⁷¹ GATIA quickly joined the Platform (although it took some time for the CMA and international brokers to accept GATIA's inclusion in ongoing negotiations). GATIA immediately served to greatly increase the Platform coalition's ability to militarily confront the MNLA and its allies in the CMA in northern Mali/Azawad. At the same time, GATIA's formation made the Malian government's claim that it was not supporting Platform groups even more far-fetched: GATIA's military leader was none other than General El Hadj Ag Gamou, who retained his post and rank in the Malian military despite his leadership of a group ostensibly negotiating with the Malian government.

For the remainder of 2014, little changed on the ground in northern Mali/Azawad. Violence continued at a consistent but low level throughout the region, primarily perpetrated by members of jihadist groups who targeted civilians, the Malian military, and UN personnel. In October, MINUSMA suffered its biggest loss to date when jihadist gunmen ambushed a convoy of Nigerien peacekeepers in Gao Region, killing nine.¹⁷² In November, French forces, whose mandate had rolled over in August from Operation Serval to a more long-term mission called Operation Barkhane, tasked with hunting members of AQIM-affiliated jihadist groups, announced they had killed 24 armed jihadists in an operation in the mountains of Kidal

¹⁷⁰ "Nord du Mali: naissance d'un groupe armé opposé à l'autodétermination," RFI, August 15, 2014, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20140815-nord-mali-naissance-groupe-arme-oppose-autodetermination-maa-gatia-mnla-gamou-almahmoud/>.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Adama Diarra and David Lewis, "Nine U.N. Troops Killed in Worst Attack Yet on Mali Force," Reuters, October 3, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-un-peacekeepers/nine-u-n-troops-killed-in-worst-attack-yet-on-mali-force-idUSKCN0HS0ZH20141003>.

Region.¹⁷³ The peace process, too, continued inching towards a final document, and official phases of the process were inaugurated and concluded in October and November.¹⁷⁴

On January 17, 2015, a new round of skirmishes began between the CMA and the Platform around the town of Tabankort between Gao and Kidal, which had been the site of combat between the CMA and the MAA-Platform in July 2014.¹⁷⁵ MINUSMA forces were present in Tabankort, and UN officials immediately called for calm. Nevertheless, on January 20, MNLA forces launched a new assault on the town, and this time, the UN claimed that MNLA soldiers fired heavy weapons at UN forces. The UN responded: a Dutch attack helicopter destroyed an MNLA vehicle. An MNLA spokesman claimed the UN killed five MNLA soldiers, and the spokesman said the MNLA would suspend coordination with the UN as a result.¹⁷⁶

Popular protests in Kidal city erupted against MINUSMA; protesters, who were predominantly women and children, briefly took over Kidal airport.¹⁷⁷ Skirmishes around Tabankort continued, and the UN announced the creation of a special “temporary security zone” around Tabankort.¹⁷⁸

A few days later, three died in Gao during the course of violent anti-UN protests; in Gao, the protesters were pro-Platform and denounced the UN’s intervention in Tabankort as designed to weaken the Platform.¹⁷⁹ Despite the temporary security zone, fighting continued, and on the night of January 27, GATIA forces launched new attacks against MNLA positions. This time,

¹⁷³ “French Military Kills 24 Jihadists in North Mali,” RFI, November 11, 2014, <http://en.rfi.fr/france/20141109-french-military-kills-24-jihadists-north-mali>.

¹⁷⁴ Boutellis and Zahar 15.

¹⁷⁵ “Mali: combats pour le contrôle de la localité stratégique de Tabankort,” RFI, January 18, 2015, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20150118-mali-combats-controle-tabankort-point-routier-strategique-mnla-hcua-maa-azawad>.

¹⁷⁶ “Dutch Apaches Strike Mali Rebels,” DefenceWeb, January 21, 2015, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/aerospace/aerospace-aerospace/dutch-apaches-strike-mali-rebels/>.

¹⁷⁷ Lieuwe de Vries, “Dutch Gunships Battle Mali Rebels,” *War Is Boring*, January 23, 2015, <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/dutch-helicopter-gunships-battle-mali-rebels-517f21837211>.

¹⁷⁸ “Mali : trois morts dans une manifestation à Gao contre la Minusma,” *Libération*, June 27, 2015, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2015/01/27/mali-trois-tues-dans-une-manifestation-a-gao-contre-la-minusma_1189798.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

GATIA attacks were accompanied by suicide bombers; it was unclear whether the bombers were GATIA members or jihadists from another group who had infiltrated themselves into the attack.¹⁸⁰ Eventually, the UN managed to contain the fighting, and the Tabankort skirmishes ended without a decisive victory by any side.

Meanwhile, in Algiers, the negotiators of the CMA, the Platform, and the Malian government, under the watchful eye of the international community, began moving towards a final document. The CMA, however, was extremely reluctant to support a document that did not provide an official legal and juridical status for northern Mali as Azawad. No such designation was forthcoming. Nevertheless, in February 2015, it was announced that the parties had put together a final document, which would become the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. On March 1, 2015, the Malian government and the Platform initialed the document. The CMA, however, refused to sign and instead held internal consultations in mid-March to gauge the mood of its constituents. As a result of these consultations, the CMA announced its rejection of the Agreement in its current form but its openness to continuing negotiations.¹⁸¹

However, the Malian government considered the Agreement to be a done deal and proclaimed before the UN Security Council on April 9 that “negotiations are over.”¹⁸² A signing ceremony was scheduled for Bamako on May 15.¹⁸³ The impasse continued until late April, when GATIA moved to change the facts on the ground by launching a series of attacks against the city of Ménaka in Gao Region, seizing it from the CMA on April 27.¹⁸⁴ The CMA was unable to retake Ménaka. Two weeks later, on May 14, the CMA initialed the Agreement in Algiers. However, the CMA declined to show up at the planned signing ceremony in Bamako

¹⁸⁰ “Mali’s MNLA Tuareg Rebels Hit by Suicide Bombers,” BBC, January 28, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31021892>.

¹⁸¹ Boutellis and Zahar 17.

¹⁸² Boutellis and Zahar 20.

¹⁸³ Boutellis and Zahar 20.

¹⁸⁴ Tamboura 201.

the next day, leaving the Malian government and the Platform to sign the Agreement by themselves. With the Agreement's status unclear, the UN led further consultations, and on June 5, the CMA announced that it would sign the document. In the meantime, though, the Platform had not withdrawn from Ménaka, and fighting around the town continued. The town's fate occupied a major sticking point in the final talks. On June 19, an agreement was reached: MINUSMA took over responsibility for the security of Ménaka in exchange for an end to the CMA's attacks on the town; at the same time, the Malian government lifted arrest warrants against CMA leaders.¹⁸⁵ On June 20, 2015, the CMA finally signed the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation.

Although a full analysis of the Agreement's stipulations is outside the scope of this work, the Agreement is remarkably similar in most of its content to the 1992 National Pact. The Agreement called for former rebel combatants to be integrated into the Malian national army and for this reconstituted army to be deployed throughout the country. Government power and revenues were to be largely devolved to the regions, not just in the north but throughout the entire country; new representative bodies were to govern these regions. A comprehensive plan for economic development aimed at bringing socioeconomic conditions in the north into line with the rest of the country within a set period of time was promised. Various committees were formed and tasked with implementation of the Agreement, and everything was to be overseen by the international community and a neutral Independent Observer.¹⁸⁶ Azawad did not receive juridical recognition as a political entity. Instead, Azawad was dismissed in the preamble as "a socio-cultural, memorial, and symbolic reality shared by various populations of Northern

¹⁸⁵ Boutellis and Zahar 21.

¹⁸⁶ The author interned with the Independent Observer team at The Carter Center, the organization eventually designated as the Independent Observer, from January through July 2018.

Mali,”¹⁸⁷ followed by a passage underlining “respect of the Malian state’s unitary character and its territorial integrity.”¹⁸⁸ The MNLA’s dream of Azawadian independence was dead, at least on paper.

However, the signing of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation was not entirely a fateful moment for the MNLA or northern Mali/Azawad. On the ground, little changed in the short term. In mid-August 2015, more large-scale fighting erupted between the CMA and GATIA, this time around the town of Anéfif in Kidal. According to MINUSMA, GATIA was the clear aggressor; GATIA nevertheless seized control of Anéfif. The CMA responded by suspending participation in the main bodies tasked with implementing the Agreement,¹⁸⁹ while MINUSMA declared a special security zone around Kidal city to prevent the fighting from spreading.¹⁹⁰ Fighting around Anéfif continued on and off into September. In late September through early October, a series of meetings between the two sides, mediated by local tribal leaders, achieved a breakthrough. The resulting so-called Anéfif Agreement was comprised of simultaneous agreements addressing disputes between the CMA and the Platform, the Ifoghas and the Imghad and the Idaksahak and the Imghad within the Tuareg community, and the Machzouf and Lamhar Arab tribes.¹⁹¹ The Malian government and MINUSMA, in contrast to previous negotiations, played only a minor role.¹⁹² The Anéfif meetings also reportedly addressed disputes over lucrative contraband trafficking routes.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁷ In the original, “une réalité socio-culturelle, mémorielle et symbolique partagée par différentes populations du Nord du Mali.”

¹⁸⁸ In the original, “respect du caractère unitaire de l’Etat malien et de son intégrité territoriale.”

¹⁸⁹ “Mali : que se passe-t-il à Anéfif?” *Jeune Afrique*, August 28, 2015, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/260397/politique/se-passe-t-a-anefis/>.

¹⁹⁰ “Suite aux combats du nord du Mali, l’ONU tente de sécuriser Kidal,” RFI, August 17, 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20150817-mali-combats-kidal-nord-cma-gatia-victimes-azawad-cma>.

¹⁹¹ Baba Ahmed, “Nord du Mali : paix tribale à Anéfif,” *Jeune Afrique*, October 19, 2015, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/272752/politique/nord-du-mali-paix-tribale-a-anefis/>.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ “Mali : la paix venu d’en bas?” International Crisis Group, Briefing no. 115, December 14, 2015, 6.

The year 2015 ended on a bitter note for the MNLA thanks to two incidents. On December 17, a well-known pro-MNLA activist and blogger known as Sahara Rebelle was assassinated by unknown assailants in Timbuktu.¹⁹⁴ One week later, on December 24, after months of increasing tensions between the MNLA's specially designated anti-terror unit and the jihadist group Ansar Dine, Ansar Dine launched its biggest attack yet against the MNLA, ambushing an MNLA column. The resulting battle cost the lives of a reported 20 MNLA soldiers, along with 15 of Ansar Dine. Among the dead was Balla Ag Achérif, the brother of Secretary-General Bilal Ag Achérif.¹⁹⁵

At the beginning of 2012, the MNLA had controlled no territory and had won no recognition. At the close of 2015, the MNLA and its allies in the CMA were militarily dominant in the region of Kidal and maintained significant presences in Timbuktu and Gao Regions. MNLA representatives had been officially received in world capitals from Nouakchott to Moscow, and the MNLA was party to diplomatic agreements endorsed by the UN Security Council. In some ways, therefore, the MNLA had achieved great success between 2012 and 2015.

However, on the flip side, in January 2012, the MNLA was driven by a powerful ideal, and the recent independence of South Sudan seemed to indicate the MNLA could forge a path to Azawadian independence. By the end of 2015, however, the MNLA could no longer claim to be the main arbiter of the destiny of northern Mali/Azawad. Militarily, even if the MNLA could replicate the decisive victories it had won over the Malian military in early 2012 and May 2014, it faced further battles against the pro-government Platform militias. Even if these could also be

¹⁹⁴ “Le MNLA condamne l’assassinat crapuleux d’Abdel Malick Ag Mohamed Alher et ses deux compagnons à Tombouctou,” Mouvement Nationale de Libération de l’Azawad, December 17, 2015, <http://www.mnlamov.net/actualites/463-le-mnla-condamne-l-assassinat-crapuleux-d-abdel-malick-ag-mohamed-alher-et-de-ses-deux-compagnons-a-tombouctou.html>.

¹⁹⁵ Baba Ahmed, “Nord du Mali : la guerre est déclarée entre le MNLA et Iyad Ag Ghali,” *Jeune Afrique*, January 22, 2016, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/295976/politique/nord-mali-guerre-declaree-entre-mnla-iyad-ag-ghali/>.

defeated, the UN and France would serve as an insurmountable cap on the MNLA's military ambitions. Politically, by signing the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in June 2015, the MNLA had formally committed itself to work within the framework of the Malian state. Thus, by December 2015, if the MNLA's dreams of an independent Azawad were not entirely dead, they were further from reach than in January 2012. In this sense, the MNLA ultimately met with failure from 2012 through 2015.

Chapter 3: The MNLA on Facebook: Social Media Outreach by the Numbers

Methodology

The concept of sampling media content from certain sources over a certain period of time and categorizing it based on content has been frequently employed by scholars researching insurgent groups worldwide and similar groups on the African continent. This methodology has also been used many times in the study of the Islamic State. For example, Jytte Klausen (2015) analyzed 154,119 Tweets produced by 59 Twitter accounts linked to the Islamic State from January through March 2014 and placed the most recent 10 Tweets produced by each account into one of five categories based on content.¹⁹⁶ Similarly, Aaron Zelin (2015) recorded all of the Islamic State's official media releases on Twitter during a week in April 2015 and placed them into 11 different categories;¹⁹⁷ J.M. Berger (2015) categorized the Islamic State's official media releases during a one-month period in 2015 into three groups.¹⁹⁸ Beyond the Islamic State, Chiluiwa and Adegoke (2013) examined Tweets produced by the Nigerian insurgent group Boko Haram and comments added to news stories on Boko Haram by anonymous users, grouping a total of 291 Tweets and comments into seven content-based categories.¹⁹⁹ In this survey, I follow a similar methodology to quantify and analyze Facebook postings by pro-MNLA accounts. However, because Facebook as a platform allows for significantly longer and more

¹⁹⁶ Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the *Jihad*: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (2015), 11.

¹⁹⁷ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Pictures or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015), 89.

¹⁹⁸ J.M. Berger, "The Metronome of Apocalyptic Time: Social Media as Carrier Wave for Millenarian Contagion," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015), 67.

¹⁹⁹ Innocent Chiluiwa and Adetunji Adegoke, "Twittering the Boko Haram Uprising in Nigeria: Investigating Pragmatic Acts in the Social Media," *Africa Today* 59, no. 3 (Spring 2013), 89.

complicated posts than does Twitter, I depart from the methodology used by the above researchers in allowing a given post to simultaneously be placed in more than one sub-category.

Defining the Dataset: The Accounts

The dataset analyzed in this research consists of the content posted by nine Facebook accounts linked to the MNLA between January 1, 2012 and December 31, 2015. All accounts in the dataset are completely public and can be viewed by anyone with a Facebook account; the account used to collect data shared no mutual friends with any account in the dataset. Of these accounts, four can be verified as belonging to MNLA officials tasked with communicating on behalf of the group, while the remainder cannot be tied with certainty to specific individuals outside Facebook. Due to the inherently anonymous nature of social media, including Facebook, inclusion of non-MNLA official accounts was determined by three criteria. First, each non-official account had to be Facebook friends with at least three of the four official accounts. Second, each non-official account had to have posted content relating to the MNLA (see below) in each year from 2012 through 2015. Third, each non-official account had to remain loyal to the MNLA through the end of the sample period. Accounts that declared their support for any of the many splinter groups to emerge during the sample period (such as the Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA) founded in May 2013 and the Coalition du peuple pour l'Azawad (CPA) founded in March 2014) were disqualified from the sample.

The sample examined in this study therefore comprises only a small piece of a much larger international online community interested in the MNLA and events in northern Mali/Azawad. Thus, it is not necessarily representative of this online community as a whole. It is certainly not representative of all those who supported the MNLA inside and outside the borders of northern Mali/Azawad and on and off the internet.

The Official Accounts

Moussa Ag Acharatoumane was one of the founders of the MNLA and served as one of the first active spokesmen for the MNLA, as cited by Reuters as early as January 2012.²⁰⁰ Subsequently, multiple mainstream media sources confirmed Ag Acharatoumane's role over a long period of time, including Al Jazeera in June 2012,²⁰¹ *The Chicago Tribune* in May 2013,²⁰² France24 in September 2013,²⁰³ and Reuters in April 2015.²⁰⁴ A student in France prior to the uprising of January 2013, Ag Acharatoumane was named Chargé for Human Rights in the MNLA's Conseil transitoire de l'état de l'Azawad (CTEA), the MNLA's government for the territory under its control.²⁰⁵ However, in September 2016, Moussa Ag Acharatoumane broke off from the MNLA and formed a new group, the Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad (MSA). The MSA, a militia primarily made up of Idaksahak Tuareg, Ag Acharatoumane's native group, continues to have a major security and political presence in Ménaka Region and eastern Gao Region today. The MSA is still led by Ag Acharatoumane. Moussa Ag Acharatoumane began posting regularly on Facebook in April 2013.

Moussa Ag Attaher has been consistently cited as an MNLA media representative since January 2012.²⁰⁶ In February 2012, he was officially cited by Toumast Press, an MNLA-linked press

²⁰⁰ Tiemoko Diallo and Adama Diarra, "Mali Rebels Push South to Open Third Front," Reuters, January 26, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mali-fighting/mali-rebels-push-south-to-open-third-front-idUKTRE80P1WT20120126>.

²⁰¹ "'Dozens Killed' in Northern Mali Fighting" *Al Jazeera*, June 28, 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/06/201262891738152474.html>.

²⁰² David Lewis, "Armed Tuareg and Arab Groups Clash in Northern Mali," *The Chicago Tribune*, May 18, 2013, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2013-05-18-sns-rt-us-mali-fightingbre94h07f-20130518-story.html>.

²⁰³ "Clashes in Northern Mali Spark Fears of Mounting Violence," France24, September 30, 2013, <https://www.france24.com/en/20130930-mali-tuareg-rebels-kidal-mnla>.

²⁰⁴ Emma Farge, "Mali's Main Rebel Group Says It Will Initial Peace Deal Next Month," Reuters, April 26, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-talks-idUSKBN0NI02C20150427>.

²⁰⁵ "Décret N° 0003/2013/P-CTEA," Mouvement Nationale de Libération de l'Azawad, <http://www.mnlamov.net/?previewType=seccion&start=236>.

²⁰⁶ Yidir Plantade, "Dans le nord du Mali, les Touaregs du MNLA lancent un nouveau défi armé à l'Etat," *Le Monde*, January 25, 2012, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2012/01/25/dans-le-nord-du-mali-les-touareg-du-mnla-lancent-un-nouveau-defi-arme-a-l-etat_1634378_3212.html.

service, as the chargé of communication for the MNLA.²⁰⁷ Additionally, Ag Attaher was named the MNLA's Coordinator for Diplomatic Action in Europe. He was a postgraduate student in Belgium in January 2012, prior to the start of the rebellion.²⁰⁸ He has been active on Facebook since the beginning of the survey period, with the exception of a long, unexplained absence from June 2012 to October 2013. This absence from Facebook did not correspond to an absence in his official duties for the MNLA, however; in January 2013, Ag Attaher was named Chargé of Information and Communication of the CTEA. Ag Attaher remained a spokesman for the MNLA through at least 2018 and has been one of the MNLA's leading voices in Europe since 2012.

Mahamadou Djéri Maïga was the Vice President of the MNLA and of the CTEA. Maïga was ethnically Songhai, making him the highest-ranking non-Tuareg official in the MNLA. As Vice President, Maïga played a major role in attempting to win international support for the group and was the chief negotiator of the preliminary Ouagadougou Accords, signed in June 2013 between a group of pro-secessionist groups led by the MNLA and the Malian government.²⁰⁹ After the signing of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in June 2015, Maïga frequently represented the MNLA at meetings of the body tasked with implementing the Agreement. Maïga died of natural causes in October 2018. Maïga posted very infrequently on Facebook (averaging less than one total post per month over the four-year survey period). His account is included in this survey primarily to establish the network connections of non-official accounts.

²⁰⁷ Mossa Ag Attaher, "Déclaration du rassemblement en faveur de l'Azawad en Belgique, 26/2/12," Toumast Press, February 27, 2012, <http://toumastpress.com/actualites/dossier/manifestation/290-declaration-rassemblement-azawad-bruxelles-26-2-2012.html>.

²⁰⁸ Mossa Ag Attaher, "Le devoir d'engagement," Toumast Press, January 8, 2012, <http://toumastpress.com/autres/opinion/205-devoir-engagement.html>.

²⁰⁹ Benjamin Roger, "Mali : décès de Mahamadou Djéri Maïga, ancien vice-président du MNLA," *Jeune Afrique*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/651623/politique/mali-deces-de-mahamadou-djeri-maiga-ancien-vice-president-du-mnla/>.

Moussa Ag Assarid was one of the MNLA's primary spokesmen in Europe. Prior to the start of the rebellion, Ag Assarid moved to France (1999), published a book about his life (2006), and became a French citizen and dual national (2010).²¹⁰ In December 2011, Ag Assarid formally announced his adhesion to the MNLA,²¹¹ and by April 2012, he was acting as an official spokesman for the group and was cited as president of the MNLA's political bureau in Europe.²¹² In June 2012, Moussa Ag Assarid was named Chargé for Information and Communication of the CTEA.²¹³ Ag Assarid later served as a member of the MNLA's negotiating team in the talks that led to the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in 2015. Along with Mossa Ag Attaher, Ag Assarid was the most important MNLA official communicating the group's cause to European audiences. Like Mahamadou Djéri Maïga, however, Ag Assarid posted very seldom on Facebook (an average of less than one post every two months during the survey period), and his inclusion in the dataset primarily serves to aid in establishing the network connections of non-official accounts.

It is important to note that not all of the officials tasked with communicating on behalf of the MNLA are included in this dataset. For example, Hama Ag Sid'Ahmed was the first named official spokesman for the MNLA after the beginning of the armed rebellion.²¹⁴ In June 2012, he

²¹⁰ Agnieszka Gratzka, "How a Desert Nomad from Mali Found His Oasis in Northern France," *The Financial Times*, October 9, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/9e406ecc-6790-11e5-a57f-21b88f7d973f>.

²¹¹ Intahmadine Ag Atoubelle, "L'écrivain et consultant Moussa Ag Assarid rejoint le MNLA," Toumast Press, December 30, 2011, <http://toumastpress.com/actualite/199-moussa-ag-assarid-rejoint-mnla.html>.

²¹² "Mali. Moussa Ag Assarid: 'L'indépendance de l'Azawad est irrémédiable,'" *Courrier International*, April 18, 2012, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2012/04/18/moussa-ag-assarid-l-independance-de-l-azawad-est-irremediable>.

²¹³ "Membres du Conseil Transitoire de l'Etat de l'Azawad (CTEA)," Mouvement Nationale de Libération de l'Azawad, June 9, 2012, <http://mnlamov.net/38-constantes/constantes/182-mis-en-place-un-conseil-transitoire-de-letat-de-lazawadctea-.html>.

²¹⁴ Ikhrou Ag Azzezen, "Ménaka: 1ère ville sous le contrôle du MNLA," Toumast Press, January 16, 2012, <http://toumastpress.com/actualites/liberation-azawad/217-menaka-1ere-ville-sous-le-contrôle-du-mnla.html>.

was announced as official spokesman for the CTEA.²¹⁵ However, Hama Ag Sid'Ahmed had no public, verifiable Facebook presence during the survey period.

All four official accounts posted overwhelmingly in French.

The Non-Official Accounts

The five non-official accounts in this survey represent a diverse group of pro-MNLA supporters. All identified themselves as Azawadian, but beyond that, the group displayed a strong international and diasporic character. Although locations cannot be verified solely through Facebook, the owners of the non-official accounts indicated that at various points during the survey period they were living in and posting from countries including France, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Saudi Arabia. The strong international character of the non-official accounts indicates that the views expressed by them may not be the same as those who supported the MNLA on the ground in Azawad—the same events can look quite different from several hundred miles removed.

Some owners of non-official accounts identified themselves as being members of or in contact with the MNLA's political offices abroad. These affiliations could not be independently verified, and the structure and organization of the MNLA's political offices abroad, as well as their relationships to the MNLA's central leadership, have not been explored in the literature.

Although identity and gender cannot always be verified through Facebook, the owners of all five of the non-official accounts (in addition to the four official accounts) represented themselves as male. This gender imbalance reflects that of the online community interested in the MNLA as a whole. It is also reflected in the official appointments of MNLA officials in Azawad: of the 28 members of the CTEA announced by the MNLA in June 2012, only one (Nina Walet Intalou, Chargé for the Promotion of Women, Children, and Families) was a

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

woman. However, it is important to note that the lack of gender equality within the MNLA is not exceptional within the broader Malian context. For example, the first government under President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who was elected in July 2013 and announced his first government in September, included only four women among 34 cabinet ministers.²¹⁶

Furthermore, the lack of women in public pro-MNLA Facebook communities does not mean that women are unimportant to the MNLA. Women, and especially female officials of the MNLA including Nina Walet Intalou, were crucial subjects of the MNLA's Facebook discourse. The gender disparity observed in this survey likely results from a combination of several factors, including differential rates of literacy between men and women in northern Mali/Azawad and, due to the international character of the accounts in the survey, a greater presence of men than women in diaspora and immigrant Tuareg populations.²¹⁷ However, the role of gender in pro-MNLA discourse on and off the internet is undoubtedly an important area for further research.

Two of the non-official accounts posted primarily in French, two posted primarily in Arabic, and one posted approximately evenly in French and Arabic. Additionally, at least three of the five of the non-official accounts operated their Facebook accounts under pseudonyms. The use of pseudonyms has a long tradition within the communities of northern Mali/Azawad, even outside an armed context. For example, a well-known member of the band Tinariwen, Ibrahim Ag Alhabib, goes by the name of Abreybone; the secretary-general of a small militia, Hassane Ag Mehdy, is universally known as Jimmy le Rebelle, and the leader of the Kel Intessar Tuareg tribal fraction, Abdoul Majid Ag Mohamed, is invariably referred to as Nasser. Thus, the

²¹⁶ "1er gouvernement de l'ère IBK : Liste du Gouvernement," aBamako, September 9, 2013, <http://news.abamako.com/h/25242.html>.

²¹⁷ See, for example, Sarah Lunacek, "Tuareg Travelling to Europe: Particularities and Continuities," *Studia Ethnologica Croatica* 25 (2013), 159-182.

appearance of pseudonyms among the account owners in the dataset should not come as a surprise and, more importantly, is not necessarily motivated by the desire to remain anonymous.

Defining the Dataset: Posts

The dataset analyzed in this study includes all posts that appeared on the wall of the accounts within the date range, encompassing shared content, originally posted content, and content posted by others onto the accounts' walls. The account owner has sole control over the appearance of all of these types of posts at any given time. Each post was placed into one of three categories—political, non-political, and Tamasheq-language. Two types of posts appeared on the walls of the accounts in the sample but were not categorized and thus are not reflected in the dataset. The first type consists of duplicate posts: in the event that multiple identical posts (text and images or video) appear on the same calendar day or if an account owner posted something in one language and subsequently used an online translation tool to copy it into other languages (as was the common practice of one non-official account), only the original post was counted in the dataset. Second, birthday wishes posted to the walls of accounts were not included in the dataset. A total of 8,065 posts make up the dataset—1,353 non-political posts, 176 Tamasheq-language posts, and 6,536 political posts.

Because Facebook users retain complete control over their past posts, it is possible that posts were selectively deleted by account owners at some point after they were published and before the data were collected. Such deletions would be impossible to detect after the fact. However, there is no evidence of any kind to indicate that any past posts were deleted by any account in the dataset.

Non-Political Posts

Non-political posts were those that had no specific connection to the MNLA or to its struggle and cause. Although non-political posts were not placed into sub-categories or further analyzed in the survey, two main types of non-political posts predominated. The first were posts related to Islam as a whole. For example, in August 2015, one of the accounts in the sample shared a post that consisted of a photo of the Qur'an. The photo was captioned, in French, "The Qur'an: are you ashamed of sharing the Holy Qur'an on your wall? Share please. I love Islam. Proud to be Muslim." Other posts in a similar vein included mass-shared memes and stories with a general Islamic theme and well-wishes around the dates of Ramadan and other Islamic holidays. The second major type of non-political post was content, usually pictures, related to the daily lives of account owners (for example, pictures of barbecues with friends and selfies). In the event that the account owner posted links or videos that had been taken down between the date of posting and the time of the survey, the post was categorized as non-political because the content could no longer be accurately determined.

Tamasheq-Language Postings

Because of my own language limitations, posts in Tamasheq, which were occasionally published by accounts within the dataset, were not categorized or studied. Tamasheq-language posts accounted for only 2.1% of total posts during the relevant timeframe, and no single account within the dataset posted in Tamasheq more than 9.2% of the time. Anecdotally, although I obviously cannot be certain of the meaning of these posts, posts in Tamasheq appeared to accompany photos of MNLA fighters and military equipment at a rate substantially greater than posts in other languages. An analysis of the MNLA's Tamasheq-language social media activity thus constitutes an important avenue for future scholarly research.

Political Posts

Political posts are defined as those that are broadly related to the MNLA and its campaign for the independence of northern Mali/Azawad. The question of what relates to the MNLA and what does not is, again, subjective. For the purposes of this study, I define all posts as relevant whose content (be it text, photo, video, or some other medium) relates to Mali, the Tuaregs, or otherwise has a clear connection to the MNLA. Official and non-official accounts did not post markedly different proportions of political content: political posts accounted for 83.6% of all posts by official accounts and 80.3% of all posts by non-official accounts. A total of 6,536 political posts make up the dataset—1,446 from the four official accounts and 5,090 from the five non-official accounts.

Figures 1-3 (below) show the distribution of non-political, political, and Tamasheq-language posts across all accounts and for official and non-official accounts respectively.

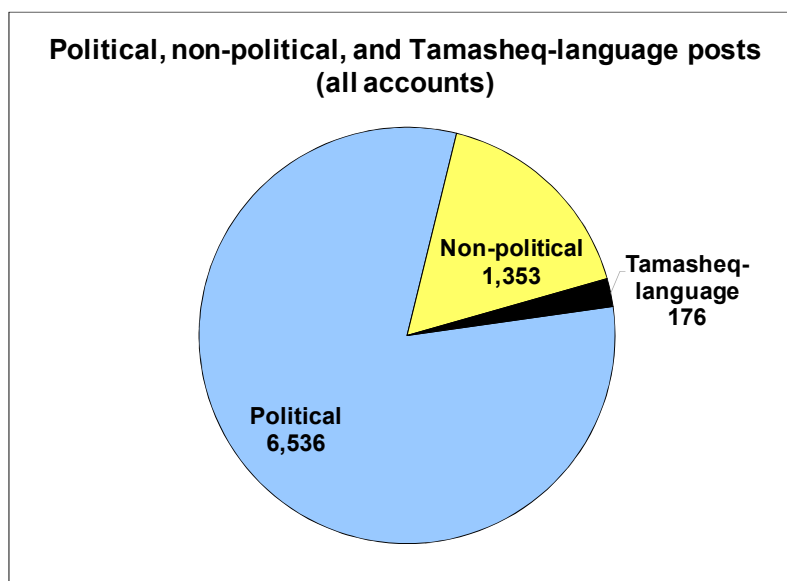


Figure 1

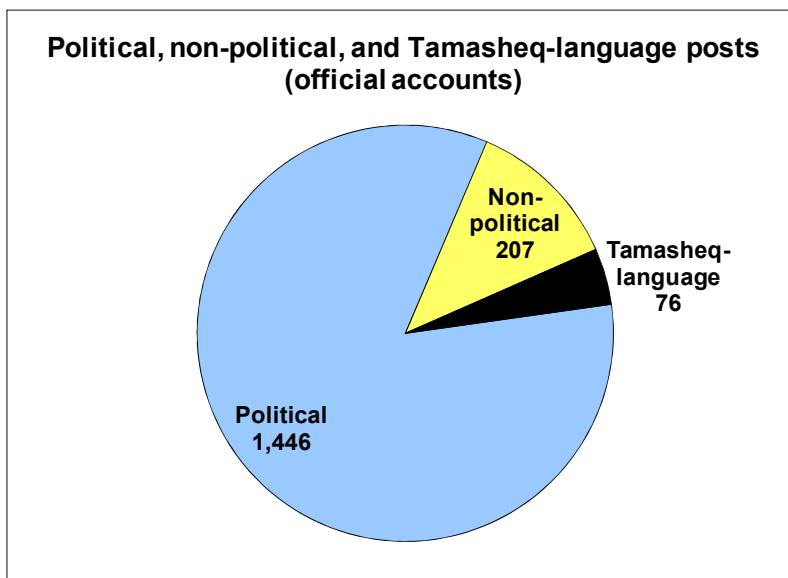


Figure 2

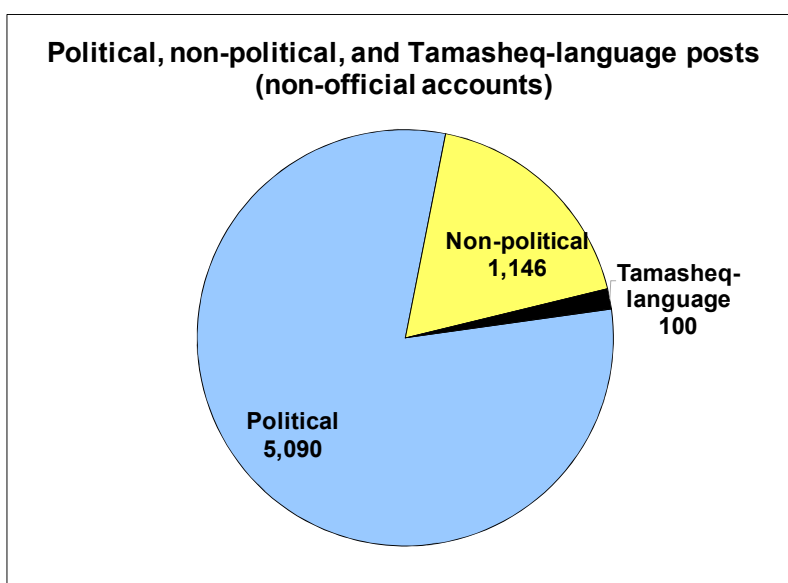


Figure 3

Political Posts: Sub-Categories

Political posts were further placed into one or more of the following seven sub-categories:

1. News and Current Events

Posts about news and current events are those designed to inform the reader about events of relevance to the MNLA and northern Mali/Azawad. This category typically included official

MNLA press releases and posts relevant to this category written by the account owner (for example, reporting on skirmishes in northern Mali/Azawad between the MNLA and pro-government militias). Most frequently, reported news consisted of shared news articles from outside media sources. Articles were shared from a diverse collection of sources, including mainstream news outlets in French, Arabic, and English (for example, France24, Al Jazeera, and Reuters), the MNLA-linked Toumast Press news agency, and other news outlets that focused on reporting Tuareg and Amazigh news. Not surprisingly, news shared from Toumast Press and Amazigh sites generally focused more on the MNLA and the people of northern Mali/Azawad.

2. General Comments and Exhortations

General comments included posts addressing and reacting to current events and the situation in northern Mali/Azawad and expressions of support for the MNLA and Azawad. Expressions of support frequently took the form of photos, often of the account owner holding an Azawadian flag, but also through more indirect means, such as when an account owner changed his profile picture to a photo of Mano Dayak, a leading Nigerien Tuareg leader of the 1990s.

3. Efforts by the MNLA to Win International Support and Recognition

The MNLA seeks recognized, *de jure* independence for northern Mali as Azawad. Thus, obtaining international acknowledgement and support is crucial to the MNLA's national project. The general failure of the MNLA to secure international recognition of Azawad in April 2012 following the declaration of Azawadian independence did not halt the MNLA's efforts in this regard. This category includes all postings emphasizing the MNLA's efforts abroad, including states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and foreign publics. Posts in this category also include news and photos from pro-MNLA/Azawad rallies in other countries, most notably European countries, and official trips abroad by MNLA officials. Only organized

efforts were included in this category, rather than attempts by individuals to draw attention to the MNLA and northern Mali (for example, by bringing an Azawadian flag to soccer matches in France or on the Hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia).

4. Popular Support for the MNLA Among the Azawadian Community

Because the MNLA was founded as an explicitly popular movement, it attempts to portray itself as the sole legitimate representative of the population of Azawad. This category consists of posts emphasizing the popular support enjoyed by the MNLA among the people of Azawad and members of the diaspora who identify themselves as Azawadian. It is important to note that this category includes only claims to and expressions of mass and widespread support; individual expressions of support were categorized as general comments. Many posts in this category were related to mass peaceful protests organized by the MNLA in Azawad and frequently featured women and children.

5. The MNLA's Military Strength and Armed Character

The MNLA was also founded as a movement dedicated to armed struggle. Posts emphasizing the MNLA's military strength and the armed character of the movement most frequently took the form of expressions of military defiance, photos and videos of MNLA fighters and their weapons, and photos and videos of the MNLA in battle. This category did not include news of the results of military actions unless it was accompanied by other content directly emphasizing the MNLA's military strength. No account, either official or non-official, posted calls for recruits (inside or outside northern Mali/Azawad) to take up arms in support of the MNLA. However, some accounts did exhort the Azawadian population to throw their support behind existing MNLA fighters in the field. This lack of recruitment constitutes a major

difference between the social media strategy employed by the MNLA and that employed by previously studied extremist groups, such as the Islamic State.

6. Inspirational Quotes, Poems, and Other Forms of Expression

Employed much more frequently by certain accounts within the dataset than others, posts of inspirational quotes feature the account owner reproducing or quoting another author's words. The immediate content of the posts themselves did not necessarily relate explicitly to northern Mali/Azawad, but the account authors invited such an interpretation in light of events relevant to northern Mali/Azawad. The accounts in this dataset quoted an extremely wide variety of inspirational figures, including but not limited to Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela, Mohandas Gandhi, Thomas Sankara, Victor Hugo, Martin Luther King, Jr., Paulo Coelho, and the actor Will Smith. Most, but by no means all, of those quoted were people of color perceived as fighters against oppression. An exploration of the ways in which race impacts the MNLA's vision of history, influences, and messaging is a possible avenue for future study. Some accounts within the dataset also posted poetry relating to the MNLA and northern Mali/Azawad, tapping into a long Tuareg tradition of verse. However, such poems were few in number.

7. Tuareg and Nomadic Identity

This category encompasses posts that referenced touchstones of Tuareg or nomadic identity without explicitly referencing current events, northern Mali/Azawad, or the MNLA. Examples of posts in this category include photos of Tuareg/Amazigh flags (but not the Azawadian flag), photos of everyday nomadic lifestyle, archival photos of Tuaregs from the past, and videos of and references to Tuareg cultural practices and celebrations. Tuareg music, especially the band Tinariwen, was frequently referenced as an authentic expression of Tuareg culture, and many accounts within the dataset shared Tinariwen's music and videos.

Figures 4-6 show the distribution of political posts across the seven sub-categories among all accounts, official accounts, and non-official accounts.

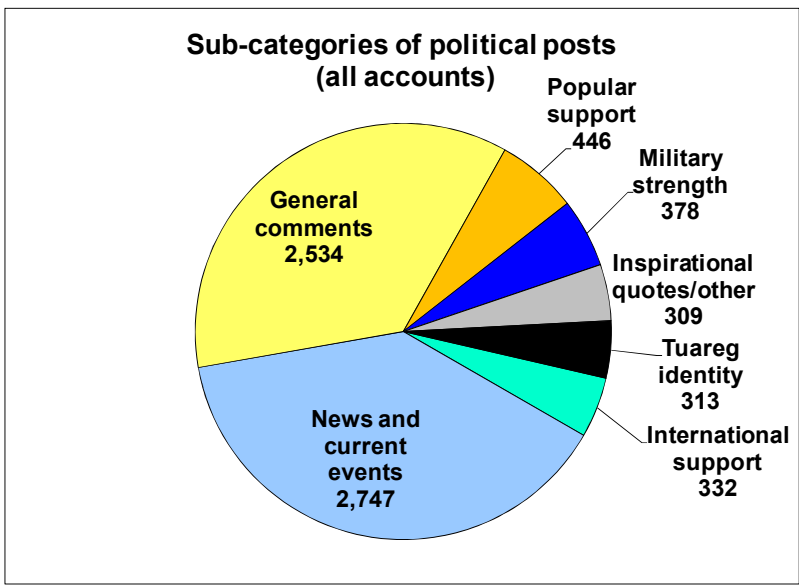


Figure 4

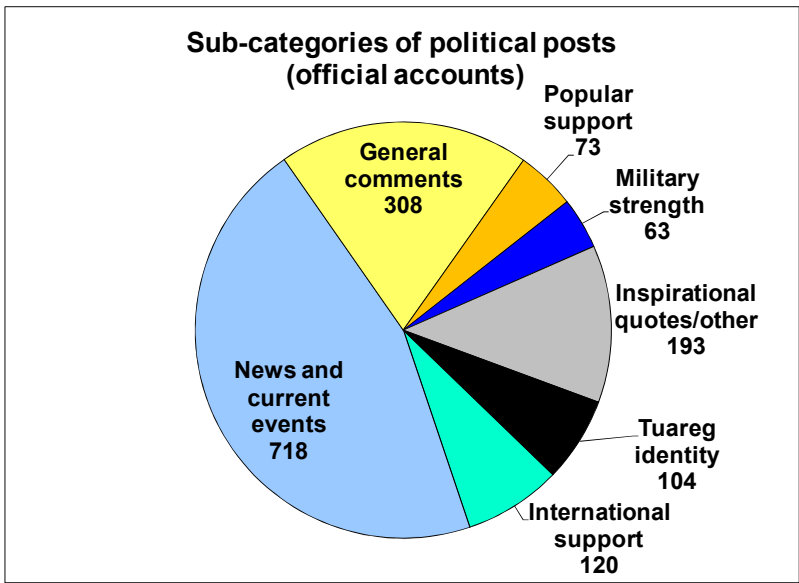


Figure 5

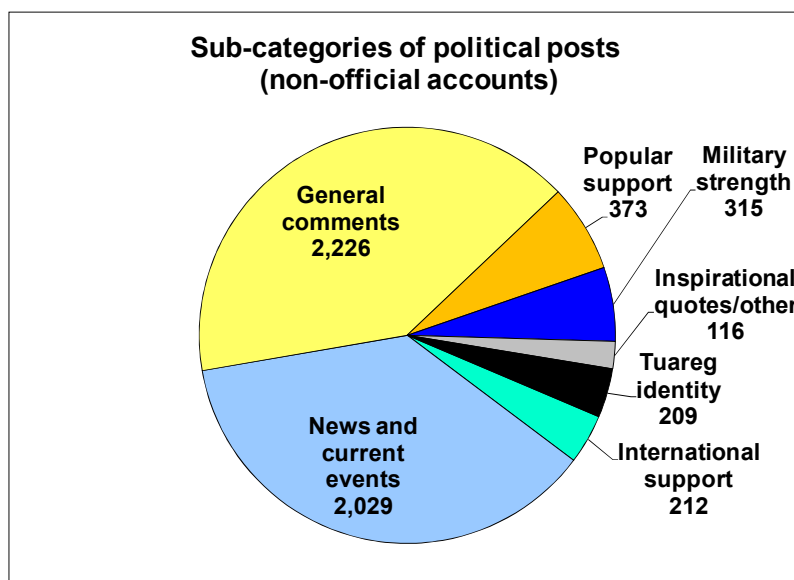


Figure 6

Discussion

Several noteworthy observations can be made from these data. First, content posted by both official and non-official accounts was dominated by posts informing readers about news and current events and comments on events. However, official accounts published a much greater proportion of news, while non-official accounts published a greater proportion of comments. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that official account owners, who were frequently tasked with speaking to the press on behalf of the MNLA, saw themselves first and foremost as press officers responsible for spreading information rather than sharing and pushing their own opinions.

Additionally, however, the social media campaign waged by official accounts was broader than that of non-official accounts. Although news and current events and general comments accounted for the majority of postings by both official and non-official accounts, fully 33% of postings by official accounts fell outside these two categories, compared with only 22% of non-official accounts. One possible explanation for this disparity lies in the fact that three of

the four official account owners (Mossa Ag Attaher, Moussa Ag Assarid, and Moussa Ag Acharatoumane) had strong European intellectual roots before the start of the uprising. When combined with their official roles as public relations officers, they may have seen themselves as more responsible for running a sophisticated social media campaign on behalf of the MNLA. However, the small number of accounts within the sample means that such a conclusion is preliminary at best.

Another striking feature of the postings in the surveyed accounts is the lack of attention given to the MNLA's military strength and popular support. Posts emphasizing MNLA military strength accounted for only 5.8% of the total, with similar proportions for official and non-official accounts (4.4% and 6.1%, respectively); this is a far lower proportion than in other armed groups that have been studied, most notably the Islamic State. The lack of celebration of MNLA military strength does not stem from military weakness on the part of the group. In fact, within the time period of the survey, from January through June 2012 and after May 2014, the MNLA and its allies had undisputed military control over large portions of northern Mali/Azawad and likely constituted the strongest indigenous force in northern Mali/Azawad. The MNLA was never decisively defeated militarily by the Malian government or its allies; even in early 2019, at the time of writing, it retains a strong armed presence in northern Mali/Azawad.

Similarly, although posts emphasizing the MNLA's mass political support among Azawadians accounted for only 6.8% of the total (5.0% among official accounts and 7.3% among non-official accounts), the MNLA continues to enjoy significant support on the ground in northern Mali/Azawad, although no reliable polls have been taken. One possible explanation for the apparent lack of emphasis on the MNLA's military strength and popular support is that most of the account owners studied in this survey, whether official or non-official, were not physically

present in Azawad for substantial portions of the survey period. Thus, they may have been out of touch with MNLA fighters and supporters in Azawad and had to increase their reliance on others closer to the theater of operations to provide them with content.

The Posts Over Time: Results and Discussion

Figures 7-9 (below) show political posts by sub-category month over month for the duration of the survey period from all accounts, official accounts, and non-official accounts.

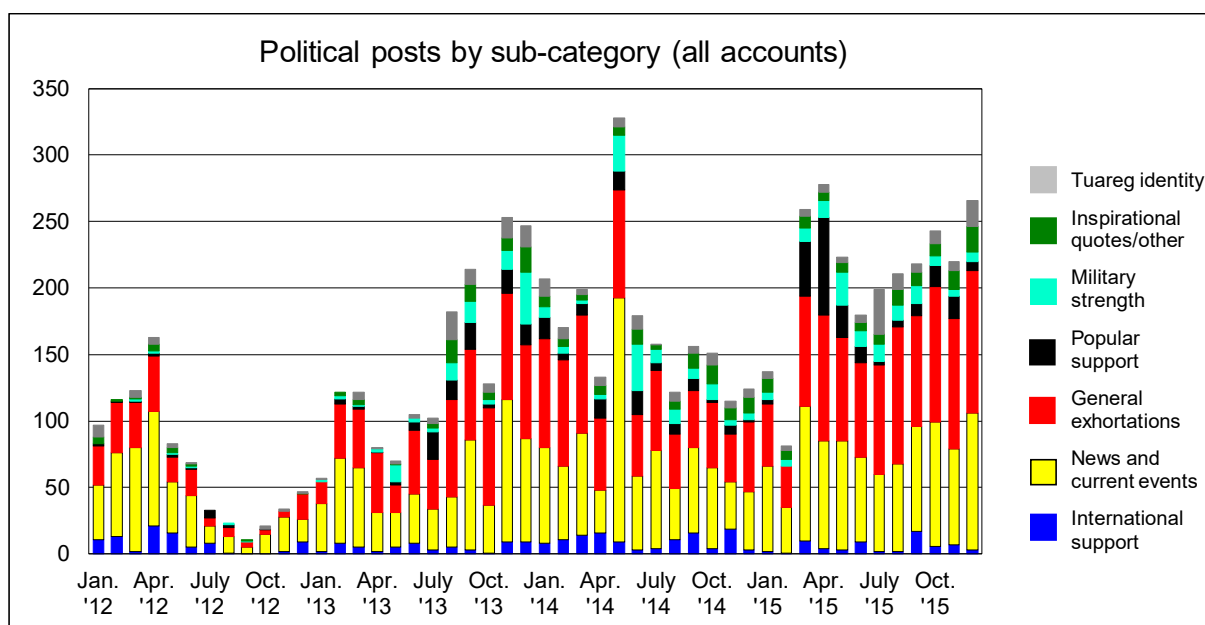


Figure 7

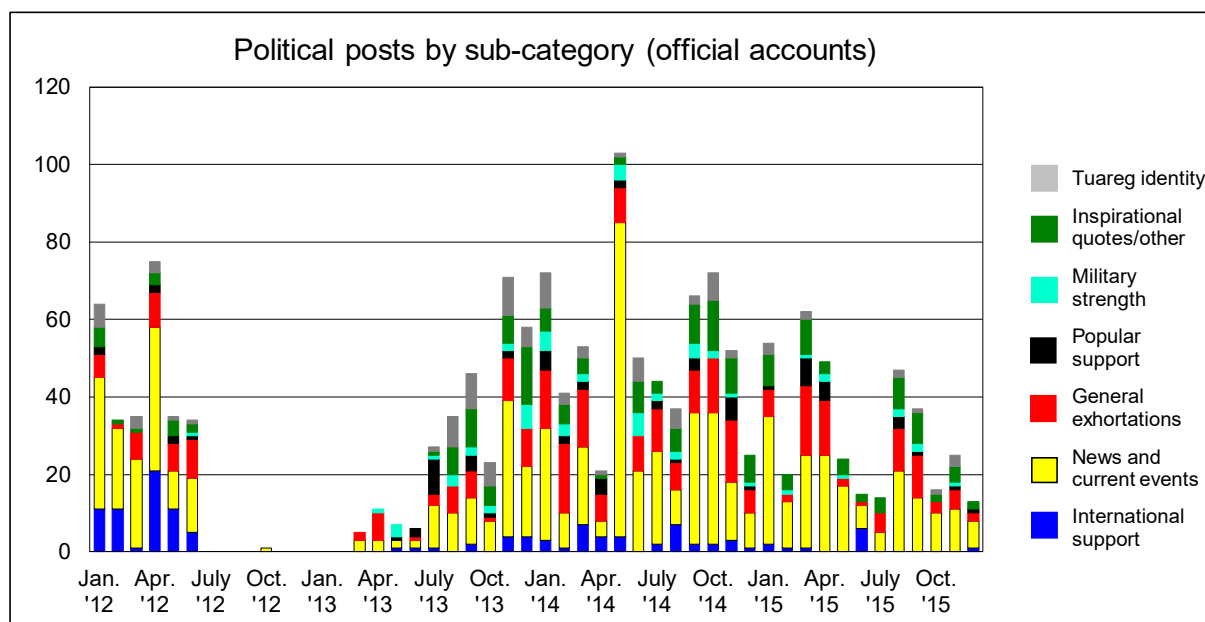


Figure 8

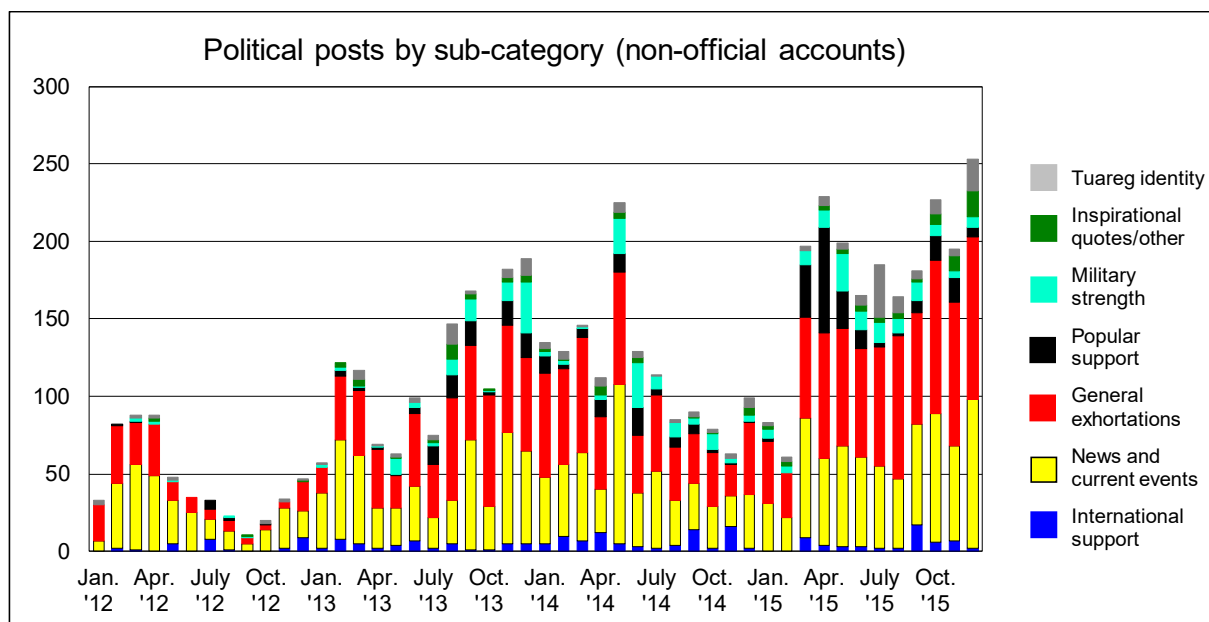


Figure 9

Figures 7-9 draw immediate attention to several posting trends: a sharp drop in post output from May 2012 through January 2013, a spike in output in May 2014, and a sustained increase in posting from March 2015 through the end of the survey, December 2015. Each trend merits discussion in turn.

Lull: July 2012-January 2013

Both official and non-official accounts established a baseline of Facebook posting during the first five months of 2012, with small spikes in March and April 2012, corresponding to the MNLA's military advance across northern Mali/Azawad and the MNLA's declaration of Azawadian independence on April 6, 2012. Posting dropped somewhat in May and June 2012 before falling precipitously for the remainder of the year (and, in the case of the official accounts, plummeting almost to zero).

This period also corresponded with the nadir of the MNLA's fortunes on the ground in northern Mali/Azawad. The MNLA defeated the Malian army in northern Mali/Azawad

between January 17, 2012, when the MNLA launched its first armed attack against the northeastern city of Ménaka, and early April, when the MNLA declared the end of combat operations in preparation for its declaration of independence on April 6. However, these gains were made alongside Islamic jihadist groups including Ansar Dine, elements of AQIM, and MUJAO (the exact nature of the relationship between the MNLA and these groups remains disputed). In May 2012, the MNLA and Ansar Dine briefly signed an agreement to establish an “Islamic Republic of Azawad,” a decision against which Mossa Ag Attaher and some other account owners strongly dissented. The agreement did not last long, however, and in late June 2012, fighting broke out between the MNLA and the jihadist groups. The MNLA got the worst of the combat and was driven from the major cities in Azawad, including Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal; some MNLA fighters and officials fled to neighboring countries. The jihadist groups remained in control on the ground in Azawad until January 2013, when France launched Operation Serval. The MNLA eventually mounted a counteroffensive in conjunction with Operation Serval and ended up in control of Kidal. Between July 2012 and January 2013, however, the MNLA’s fortunes were at their lowest ebb. Not only did limited control of territory mean limited access to news from Azawad, but the jihadist groups, not the MNLA, held the primary attention of the international media. Finally, it is likely that morale among MNLA supporters was low during this period.

Spike: May 2014

May 2014 saw the highest post totals of any month across all accounts (highest among official accounts and second only to December 2015 among non-official accounts). Posts categorized as news and current events largely accounted for the increase (see Figure 10).

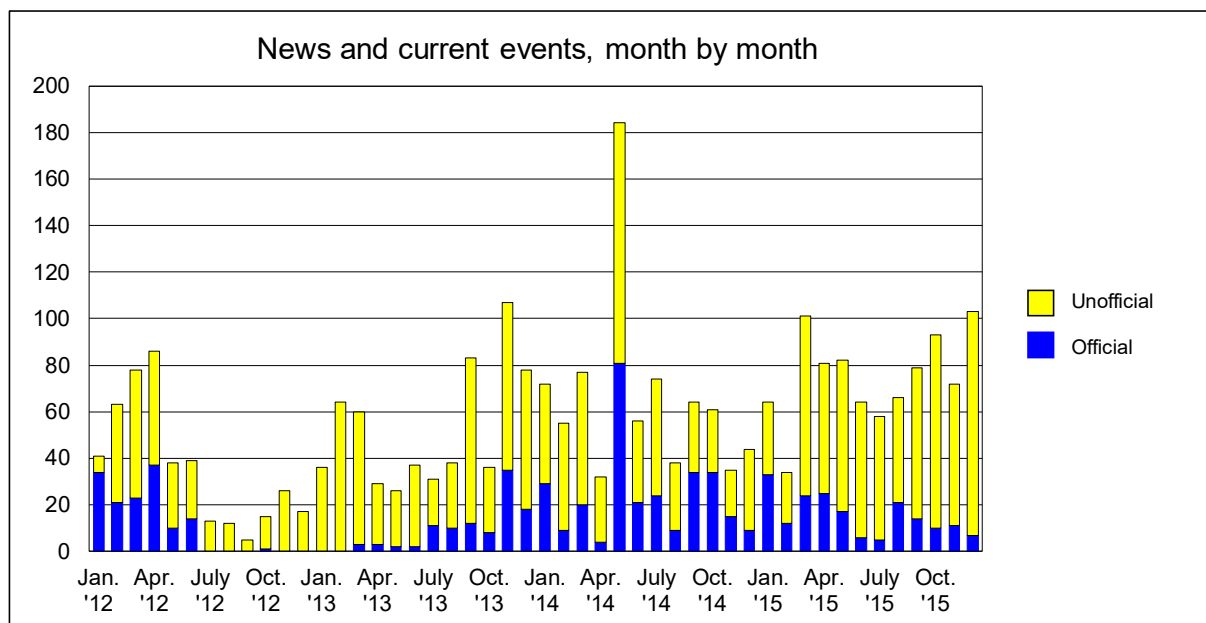


Figure 10

When placed in the context of events on the ground in northern Mali/Azawad, May 2014's prominence within the dataset does not come as a surprise. In that month, Malian prime minister Moussa Mara insisted on visiting Kidal, one of the three regional capitals in northern Mali/Azawad, over the strenuous objections of the MNLA. This city had been under the MNLA's military control since French forces evicted jihadists fighters in early 2013. In the days leading up to Prime Minister Mara's arrival, the MNLA organized popular protests in Kidal against the Malian government. After Prime Minister Mara arrived in Kidal on May 17, fighting broke out between the MNLA and members of the Prime Minister's security detail, who were affiliated with the Malian military—exactly what transpired remains hotly disputed. The next

day, the Malian military moved a reported 1,500 troops into the area, and on May 21, they launched an offensive aimed at seizing Kidal from the MNLA. After several hours of battle, the Malian military was utterly routed by the MNLA, suffering dozens of casualties and reportedly abandoning dozens of vehicles. Prime Minister Mara was forced to take refuge at a nearby camp under the control of MINUSMA, the UN mission in Mali. The disaster at Kidal prompted the general retreat of all Malian military forces in northern Mali/Azawad, and over the next several days, the MNLA seized military control of the entire north, achieving its greatest extent of territorial control since April 2012. The action was followed closely and reported heavily by both official and non-official accounts in the survey.

Spike and Plateau: March-December 2015

A minor drop in posting activity after the spike of May 2014 ended with a renewed surge in posting in March 2015. This surge continued until the end of the survey period. However, a closer examination of the data shows that while a clear spike occurred in March and April 2015, the sustained increase of posting for the remainder of the year may have been due to other factors.

March and April 2015 were the seventh and second most prolific months, respectively, across all accounts. This uptick in posting, including a huge spike in posts emphasizing the popular support enjoyed by the MNLA (see Figure 11), can be traced to events relevant to the MNLA in Azawad. On March 1, 2015, the Malian government and the Platform, a group of anti-secessionist northern groups, unveiled and initialed a draft copy of what was to become the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. Trilateral negotiations between the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA), an alliance of secessionist armed groups including the MNLA, the Platform, and the Malian government had been ongoing under Algerian mediation

since January 2014. Preliminary stages, such as the signing of a formal roadmap agreement in July 2014 by the three parties, failed to attract meaningful attention from either the official or non-official accounts in the dataset. The unveiling of the draft copy in March 2015, though, did have an effect: although the CMA refused to initial the agreement, account owners in the dataset erupted with anger against the proposed document, criticizing its similarity to failed past agreements and its lack of sufficient political and juridical recognition of Azawad. The MNLA organized popular protests in Kidal against the agreement, and in April these protests grew in scale. These events coincided with the three-year anniversary of the MNLA's declaration of the independence of Azawad. Posts about these protests accounted for the spike in posts

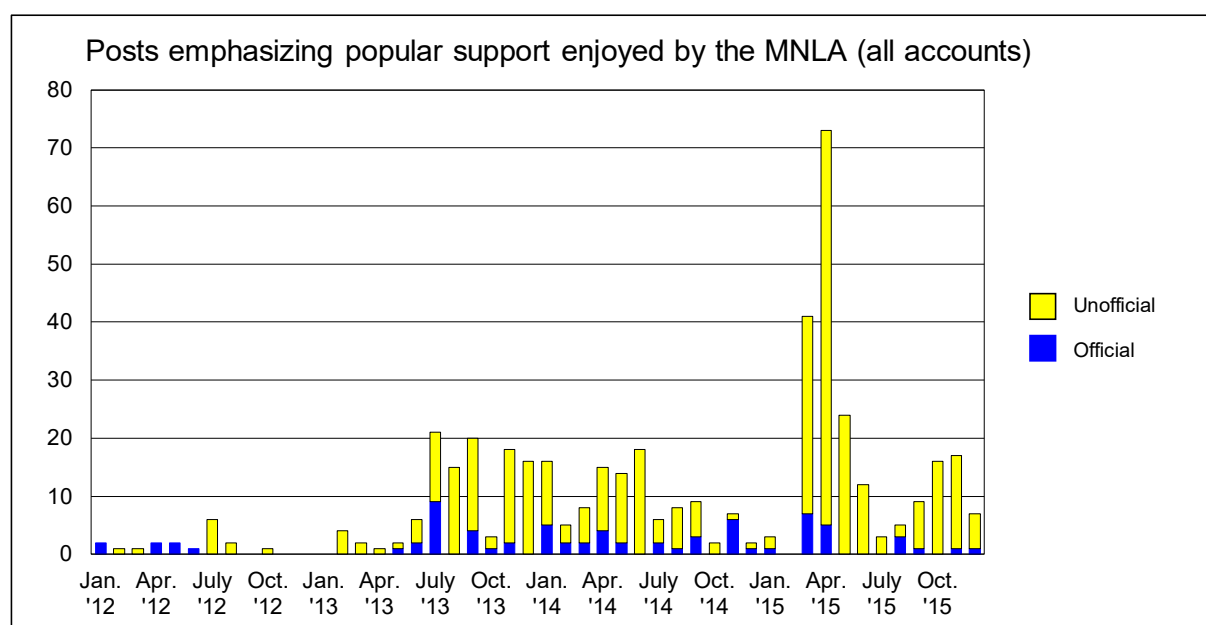


Figure 11

emphasizing the popular support enjoyed by the MNLA during this period (see Figure 11).

Although the MNLA ultimately agreed to initial (May 2015) and sign (June 2015) the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, the non-official accounts in the dataset remained critical of the Agreement.

The apparent continuation of a high level of postings from July 2015 through the end of the year is likely amplified by anomalies within the data—what statistician Nate Silver famously dubbed “noise.” As can be seen in Figure 12, the last months of 2015 also saw a corresponding spike in non-political posting on the part of non-official accounts. It is thus possible that factors not related to Azawad but to the personal situations of several non-official account owners, such as internet access, may have played a role in the high post levels characterizing the final months of the survey period. This trend within the data serves as a reminder that it is important to avoid drawing overly broad conclusions about the MNLA’s Facebook communities without further research.

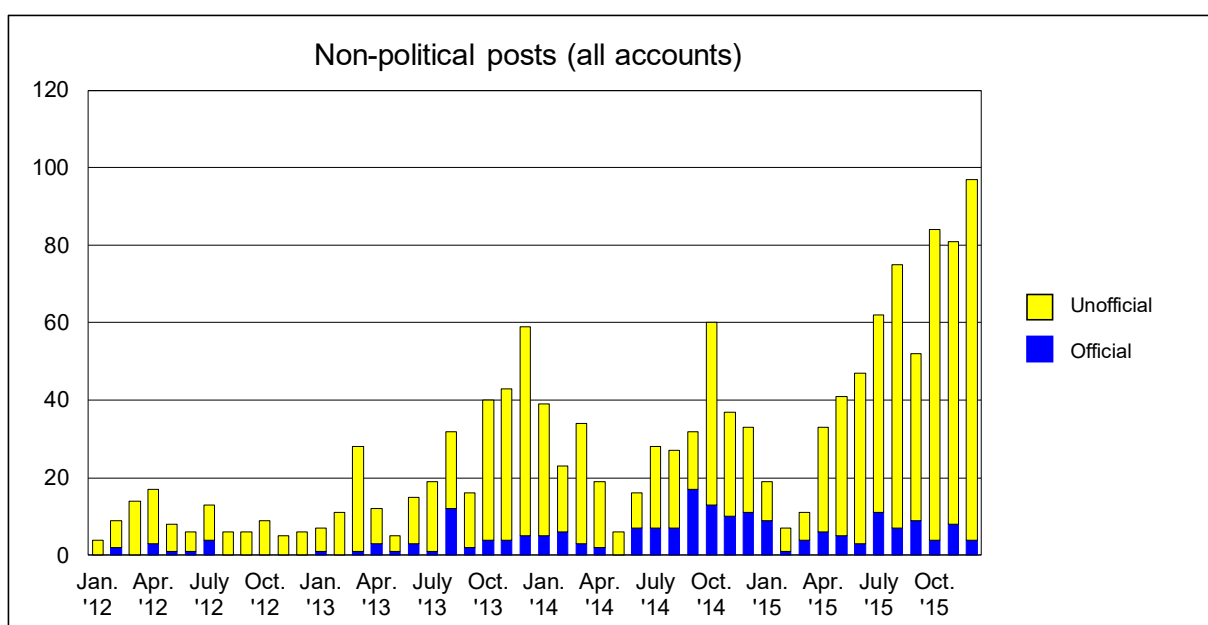


Figure 12

General Discussion and Conclusions

Overall, the evidence of this survey indicates that while individual members and supporters of the MNLA saw Facebook, and social media more generally, as a valuable tool in the MNLA’s broader media campaign for the independence of northern Mali/Azawad, the

MNLA did not organize and pursue a coherent and centralized social media strategy at the outset of its political campaign. The MNLA did attempt to organize a media campaign, based on the creation of an official website (www.mnlamov.net) and press service (Toumast Press) in 2011, before the outbreak of the armed rebellion in January 2012. However, social media did not initially play a major role in the MNLA's organized media campaign. Today the MNLA's website includes links to official MNLA Facebook and Twitter accounts. However, these were created only in September 2014 and almost exclusively post links to news from external sources (both mainstream media outlets and the MNLA's website). At time of writing, neither the MNLA's Facebook nor Twitter page have posted anything since February 2018, despite continuing activity on the MNLA's website.

Accounts within the dataset also confirm the lack of social media savvy of the MNLA. Mossa Ag Acharatoumane did not join Facebook until June 2012, did not post at all until January 2013, and did not begin consistently posting political content until April 2013. This is despite the fact that he was one of the founding members of the MNLA and had been speaking to traditional media on behalf of the MNLA since January 2012. For his part, Mossa Ag Attaher virtually disappeared from Facebook from July 2012 through September 2013, posting only once in that 15-month period. During that time, however, he did not interrupt his duties as an MNLA official and was in fact appointed as Chargé of Information and Communication for the CTEA, the body the MNLA intended to become the transitional government for the independent state of Azawad. Mahamadou Djéri Maïga and Moussa Ag Assarid also posted extremely infrequently over the survey period, and neither posted at all until mid-2013, despite their active work on behalf of the MNLA as far back as 2011. The fact that political posts constituted a large majority of the total posts published by the four official accounts during the survey period

eliminates the possible theory that the account owners did not see their personal Facebook pages as appropriate spaces for posts on behalf of the MNLA. Instead, they did not see Facebook posting as critical to their broader media duties.

A more detailed comparison of the postings by Moussa Ag Acharatoumane and Mossa Ag Attaher, by far the two most active official accounts in the survey, further demonstrates the absence of a coordinated MNLA social media strategy. It is inconceivable that Moussa Ag Acharatoumane and Mossa Ag Attaher did not know each other and were not in communication (for one thing, the two are friends on Facebook). Nevertheless, as can be seen in Figures 13 and 14, Ag Acharatoumane and Ag Attaher posted very different types of content during the survey period.

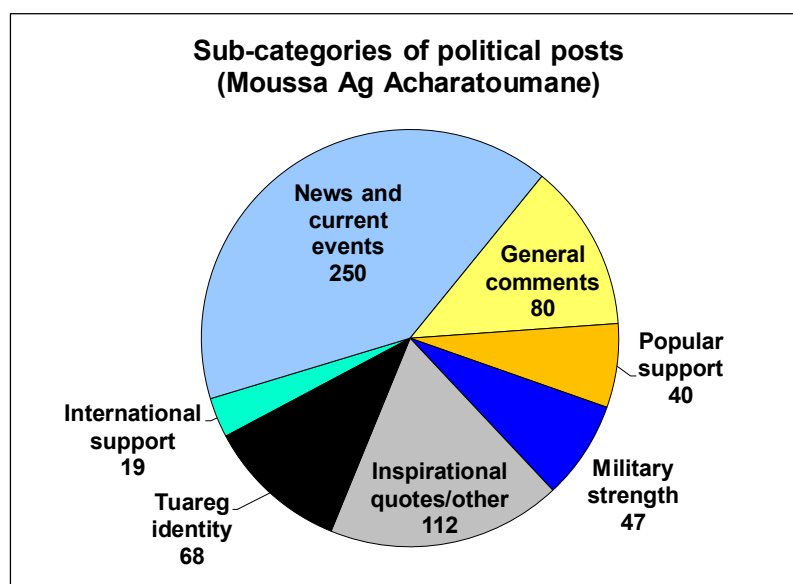


Figure 13

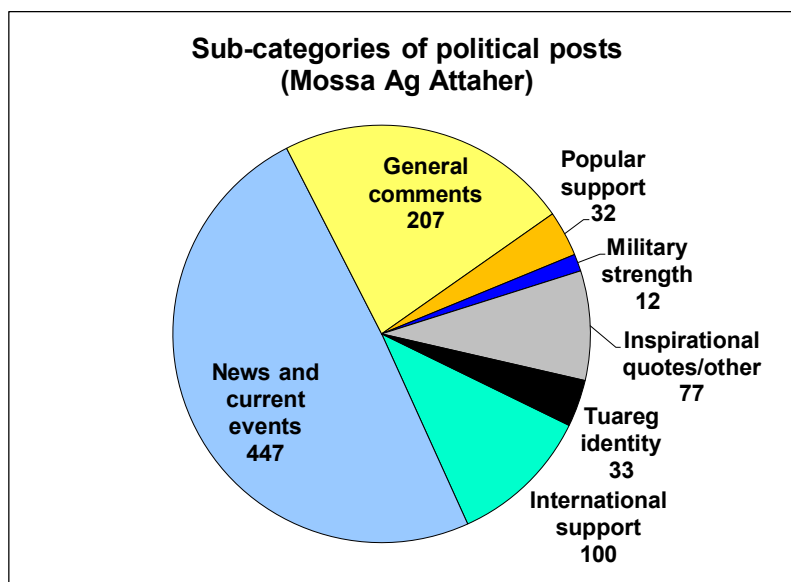


Figure 14

Among the non-official accounts, as one would expect, there is little evidence of collective coordination of a social media strategy. However, among these accounts, there seems to have been an understanding that Facebook could serve as an effective platform for the MNLA. Exhortations calling on supporters of Azawad around the world to join an online campaign in favor of the MNLA and Azawad appeared across multiple accounts. Several of the accounts eventually standardized the format of their posts. For example, one non-official account, posting primarily in Arabic, began in the survey period to start almost every post with the Basmala and end almost every post with “Long live free Azawad.”²¹⁸ Another non-official account, posting primarily in French, adopted a system in which almost every longer post began with “Hello everyone! Did you know? Do not ignore my truth!” and ended with “AZAWAD, Mali No !”²¹⁹

Additionally, the non-official account owners clearly sought to reach a wider audience. Calls for readers to share posts with their Facebook friends appeared across many accounts. One

²¹⁸ In the original, either “Vive Azawad libre,” even if the post was in Arabic, or “يعيش أزواد حر”.

²¹⁹ In the original, “Bonjour à tous ! Le Saviez-Vous ? N’ignorez surtout pas ma Vérité !” Closing statement verbatim.

non-official account owner took advantage of his language skills and frequently repeated the same content in both French and Arabic. Another non-official account owner went a step further, using online translation software to convert his original posts in French into a large number of other languages (including English, Arabic, German, Russian, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean), presumably in an attempt to reach more readers. However, based on the number of likes, comments, and shares, such multilingual posts did not appear to have engaged many more readers.

Avenues for Further Research

In many ways, this study poses far more questions about the MNLA's social media use than potential answers. A great deal of further research on the topic is needed, along many avenues. First, only the most rudimentary network analysis was employed in this study, especially with respect to the non-official accounts. A more robust network analysis of the MNLA Facebook community could shed valuable light on the contours of this community, including the identification of influential members and nodes of connection, geographic locations, languages employed, and gender, among other factors. Second, this study only examined the MNLA's Facebook use through the end of 2015. The MNLA continues to be a major player in northern Mali/Azawad, and an examination of MNLA social media use subsequent to 2015 could be of potential relevance to the ongoing peace process. Third, this study did not track post engagement levels over time. Therefore, it was impossible to draw conclusions about possible increases or decreases in the influence of MNLA-linked accounts and, more importantly, who the audiences for these accounts were. Fourth, this study examined only Facebook due to the relative lack of an MNLA presence on other platforms. However, the MNLA now has at least some presence on other social media sites. This presence remains, to the

best of my knowledge, completely unstudied. It is my hope that the present research will spur future scholarship along some or all of these avenues of investigation.

Chapter 4: Dominant Pro-MNLA Discourse Frames and Identity on Facebook

In this chapter, I apply elements of discourse analysis to the content of Facebook postings in my dataset. Robert Entman's conception of framing forms the main theoretical basis of this chapter and provides the main lens for my qualitative analysis of pro-MNLA Facebook postings. Several concepts articulated by Teun van Dijk and other scholars of discourse analysis also informed my analysis. Finally, I rely on Charles Tilly's work to draw broader conclusions about the place of the frames I discuss in forming the broader identity of the pro-MNLA Facebook community, its members, and the MNLA as a whole.

Micro Discourse Analysis of Groups in the Middle East and North Africa

Qualitative analysis of media content has, of course, a scholarly history far too substantial to list fully here. However, similar methods have been applied to the communications of political dissident groups operating in the Middle East and Africa; several examples are worthy of mention. Aaron Zelin's 2015 study of the Twitter output of the Islamic State (mentioned previously) includes a section in which Zelin discusses the "eleven key types of messages disseminated in the Islamic State's releases" and analyzes what Zelin identifies as the top six messages.²²⁰ Chiluya and Adegoke's 2013 article (also previously mentioned) discusses pragmatic acts implicit in the content of Tweets and online comments responding to Boko Haram in Nigeria, drawing on earlier theory by Searle (1969) and Mey (2001).²²¹ In a 2012 article, Innocent Chiluya applies critical discourse analysis to posts made by supporters of Biafran separatism on internet forums. Chiluya dissects the posts based on the propositions, presuppositions, and implications present in their text in an attempt to uncover ideologies and

²²⁰ Zelin 90.

²²¹ Chiluya and Adegoke

value judgments held by pro-Biafra internet activists, drawing primarily upon Teun van Dijk's definitions.²²²

In the specific context of Mali, Boukary Sangaré in 2014 published a paper in which he examines several Facebook groups dedicated to discussing events in Mali from varying perspectives. Sangaré specifically identifies the “essential messages” of content posted in each group.²²³ Finally, at least two studies have examined online media postings by the MNLA itself. First, in 2012, Sean Curtis published a master's thesis in which he analyzed 259 posts on the MNLA's official website in relation to events on the ground. He included a cursory exploration of the authors, content, targets, and intentions of the MNLA's postings on its official website.²²⁴ Second, Nanourougo Coulibaly (2017) examines from a linguistic standpoint the rhetorical registers present in the MNLA's discourse, including online statements.²²⁵ However, none of these studies directly examined the content of the MNLA's online postings within a robust theoretical framework, and none addressed social media activity relevant to the MNLA at all.

Frames and Framing

The terms “frames” and “framing” have been frequently used in a wide range of fields for decades, but the first author to give the concept of frames a rigorous and applicable definition was Robert Entman. In a 1993 article, Entman defined framing as “*select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or*

²²² Innocent Chilwa, “Social Media Networks and the Discourse of Resistance: A Sociolinguistic CDA of Biafra Online Discourses,” *Discourse and Society* 23, no. 3 (May 2012): 230-231.

²²³ Boukary Sangaré, “Réseaux sociaux et communication en temps de crises au mali : l'exemple des groupes de discussion sur Facebook,” European Conference on African Studies: African Dynamics in a Multipolar World (2014): 1929.

²²⁴ Sean Neil Curtis, “La Lutte Pour l'Azawad: MNLA Public Relations Responses to Conflict in Northern Mali, 2011-2014,” master's thesis, University of Texas El Paso Intelligence and National Security Studies Program, May 2015.

²²⁵ Nanourougo Coulibaly, “Les visées discursives dans les discours du MNLA du Mali,” *Exercices en rhétorique* 10 (December 2017).

treatment recommendation for the item described” (emphasis in original).²²⁶ According to Entman, frames serve four functions: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. A given text need not include all four aspects of a frame. Instead, frames can be manifested or referenced by a text “by the presence of or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgment.”²²⁷

Furthermore, frames operate in at least four locations within the communication process: the communicator and the receiver are both influenced by the frames “that organize their belief systems,” a given text contains frames, and culture is defined by Entman as “a stock of commonly invoked frames” and “the empirically demonstrable set of frames exhibited in the discourse and thinking of most people in a social grouping.”²²⁸ The more a frame is present in the culture of a social group and influences the individual members that comprise it, the more easily and concisely it can be activated by a given text.

Entman defines a dominant frame as “a particular framing of the situation that is most heavily supported by the text and is congruent with the most common audience schemata.”²²⁹ In a subsequent article, Entman and Usher (2018) discuss the relevance of social media, including Facebook, as platforms for the propagation of frames.²³⁰ I have identified three dominant frames within the texts posted by the accounts within my dataset: the Genocidal State frame, the Anti-Jihadist frame, and the Long Struggle frame. Within the corpus, each frame is constructed (*i.e.*

²²⁶ Robert Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 52.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

²²⁹ Entman 56.

²³⁰ Robert M. Entman and Nikki Usher, “Framing in a Fractured Democracy: Impacts of Digital Technology on Ideology, Power and Cascade Network Activation,” *Journal of Communication* 68 (2018): 301.

appears in its full form) in some posts and is activated (*i.e.* referenced) in many more posts.

Each frame merits analysis in turn.

The Genocidal State Frame: Construction

The Genocidal State frame was by some margin the most dominant frame within pro-MNLA Facebook discourse. The Genocidal State frame was identified in the postings of every single account in the dataset save that of Moussa Ag Assarid. (Ag Assarid published only 20 political posts during the survey period, by far the fewest of any account, almost all of which were simple photos without caption.) Of course, not all posts that served to construct the Genocidal State frame included either explicitly or implicitly all four of Entman's functions of a frame, namely to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Many, however, did, and by examining these, the construction of the Genocidal State frame becomes apparent.

On February 4, 2012, slightly more than two weeks after the outbreak of fighting between the MNLA and the Malian government, official account Mossa Ag Attaher published a lengthy post purporting to be the text of a speech he gave at a pro-Azawad rally in Paris. The post is a detailed justification of the grievances behind the MNLA's struggle for Azawadian independence, and the Genocidal State frame is central to the post. Ag Attaher writes,

Since the independence of Mali, tyranny and absolute arrogance have constituted the only daily reality of the peoples of Azawad. The creation of postcolonial states such as Mali represents for us only a succession of great misfortunes stemming from a general indifference unworthy of the human race. ... Why does the entire world ignore the genocides to which [the people of Azawad] have been exposed for many years? Azawad has since the creation of the State of Mali been submitted to a succession of genocides, revolts, pseudo-treaties that have never been respected, false appeasements, displacements of population, forced assimilation, and humiliations.... Our fight is just and legitimate; Azawad will regain its liberty. Nothing and nobody will deter us from our objective. The MNLA is more than ever determined to continue military operations until the

official recognition by Mali of the right to self-determination of the people of Azawad.²³¹

All four of Entman's components of a frame are clearly present in Ag Attaher's post. The text identifies the problem as the "genocides" committed against the people of Azawad; the diagnosed cause is "the creation of postcolonial states" and Mali more specifically. Moral judgments abound: the Malian state is associated with "tyranny and absolute arrogance" and behavior "unworthy of the human race." Finally, the suggested remedy is explicit, as Ag Attaher calls for the support of formal legal separation from Mali to be obtained by the MNLA's military force.

The same frame is constructed by other official accounts in the dataset. In December 2013, Moussa Ag Acharatoumane posted,

We have lived for 53 years, in our souls, our preaching, and all our being, and it is only today that you begin to recognize that they kill, torture, and massacre Tuaregs and Arabs because they are different. Is it necessary that we take up arms so that you realize we suffer, that we sacrifice our lives so that you realize we exist, that we annihilate a state so that you realize that we are different and that we want change? If the world does not help a people, they will wake by themselves, for liberty has no price and injustice has no place among the oppressed.

Like Ag Attaher, Ag Acharatoumane addresses his post primarily at the international community, and his post contains identical themes as Ag Attaher's. The problem identified is the abuse of Azawadian populations, the diagnosed cause is, again, the Malian state, and moral judgments are prevalent. In this post, Ag Acharatoumane does not call explicitly for the secession of Azawad, but by intentionally confining his post to the 53 years of the Malian state's existence, his suggested remedy of separation from Mali is implicit.

²³¹ A note on translations: all translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated. The original texts contain many non-standard spellings and grammatical constructions. Because I am primarily concerned here with the content, not the style, of posts, I have generally translated them into standard English. See Appendix 1 for the full texts of all posts quoted in this chapter in their original language.

The Genocidal State frame was constructed by non-official accounts as well. For instance, in March 2013, Non-Official Account 3 published a post reading in part,

The people of Azawad have not forgotten the racist and barbaric collective assassinations, the abduction and rape of women, the destruction of livestock, the poisoning of wells, that they have been victims of during all the uprisings ... because of the color of their skin. The eventual actions of the International Criminal Court must cover all these atrocities and other eruptions committed against Azawadians by a bloody and pathologically racist state. ... Let all Azawadians with evidence of abuses committed against the people of Azawad put it at the disposal of the MNLA to aid it in bringing forth the law to benefit our people. May God help the people of Azawad in their noble struggle, undertaken by the MNLA. Amen!

This post identifies the problem as, once again, crimes committed against Azawadians by the Malian state, which is condemned morally as a “bloody and pathologically racist state.” The post cites as the only solution support for the MNLA, this time through the eventual use of the International Criminal Court as a vehicle for obtaining justice for crimes committed by the Malian state.

Based on posts in which the Genocidal State frame was constructed, it is possible to define the frame. The problem identified is abuses committed against the people of Azawad, while the party blamed is the Malian state. The actions of the Malian state are universally presented as morally abhorrent, and the suggested remedy is support for the MNLA and the MNLA’s goal of an independent Azawadian state. The fundamental notion of the Genocidal State frame is one of historiography, and the frame is time-bound: per the frame, it is not simply that the people of Azawad *are being* oppressed by the Malian state, it is that they *always have been* oppressed by the Malian state. If the idea that the peoples of northern Mali have never been seen by the Malian government as anything other than a problem to be solved through violence is accepted, the remaining aspects of the frame (namely, that the Malian state is at fault, that the oppression of Azawad is morally wrong, and that Azawad deserves official political self-

determination) follow logically. Thus, based on the Genocidal State frame, in the discourse of the pro-MNLA Facebook community, to support the MNLA meant supporting the MNLA's version of northern Malian history.

The Genocidal State Frame: Activation

The Genocidal State frame was frequently activated, or referenced without being presented in its full form, in a wide variety of contexts by both official and non-official accounts within the dataset. Several examples illustrate the circumstances in which the Genocidal State frame was frequently activated by both official and non-official accounts.

One common use of the Genocidal State frame was to slant news and reporting on current events in favor of the MNLA. For example, in late January 2013, in the wake of Operation Serval, Non-Official Account 5 published a post purportedly replicating an official press release written by Mossa Ag Attaher. The news relayed by the post was relatively straightforward: the MNLA claimed to have taken a number of towns throughout Azawad, and the MNLA accused the Malian army and allied militias of committing atrocities against northern populations. By activating the Genocidal State frame, the author amalgamated these two pieces of news,

Since the beginning of French military operations for the conquest of the Azawad for the benefit of "Malian authorities," more than 100 people have already paid the price of ethnic reprisals: a manhunt targeting Tuaregs, Peuls, Songhai, and Arabs was organized by the Malian army and its militias in Azawad. The MNLA cannot under any circumstances accept that the people of Azawad are to be so delivered into Malian vengeance. As such, the MNLA commits to its full responsibility to secure its towns and protect its people against an army specializing in crime against the civilian populations of Azawad.

Here, the Genocidal State frame is activated through the description of the Malian army as "specializing in crime against the civilian populations of Azawad." By activating the Genocidal State frame, the author makes the MNLA's claim that the Malian army committed atrocities against civilians immediately on their return to the north more credible. Furthermore, the

Genocidal State frame also served to reduce controversy around another potentially tendentious action: the MNLA's seizure of towns across Azawad. In late January 2013, when this post was published, the MNLA's geopolitical position was extremely tenuous, as the trajectory of its relationship with France, now the overwhelmingly dominant military power in Azawad, was far from clear. Furthermore, the MNLA is not believed to have engaged in significant combat with jihadist groups during this period, instead taking control of towns from which jihadist groups had already withdrawn. Pushing the Genocidal State frame provided a built-in justification for what could have been interpreted as an act of military aggression on the part of the MNLA.

In other cases, the Genocidal State frame was activated to strengthen general declarations of the MNLA's steadfastness in resisting the Malian state. In April 2012, several days after the MNLA declared Azawad's independence, Non-Official Account 1 published a post in which the author referenced anti-Azawad demonstrations in southern Mali calling for the military reconquest of Azawad. The author closed the post by activating the Genocidal State frame and warning Mali against attempting to seize Azawad,

Maliens, we gave you rule over our state for a period of fifty years and you destroyed us and drove us away and expelled us and we became without identity in the world, and we were ignorant because of homelessness to the point we no longer knew where our fathers and mothers and brothers were. But now we have returned to our country, we will not surrender even a hand-breadth of it, and we do not fear death. I advise you that the smallest effort to attack our people and our country will cost you a price that you will not forget. If you are not convinced by these words, the battlefield will decide, and the world will bear witness. Long live Azawad.

In this post, the Genocidal State frame, activated by the strident language of the first sentence, serves to lend credence to the author's declaration of resolve and, in the temporal context of the post, to the historic magnitude of the MNLA's declaration of Azawadian independence. If the reader accepts the frame and concedes that the last 50 years of history have represented an

unbroken series of atrocities committed against the people of Azawad by the Malian state, the reader is then both likely to accept at face value the MNLA's claims of readiness to fight to achieve its goals and to see the independence of Azawad as the realization of a long-held and legitimate dream.

Elsewhere, accounts in the dataset used the Genocidal State frame to refocus discourse onto preferred subjects. For example, in March 2015, Non-Official Account 3 published a post reacting to the recent prosecution by the International Criminal Court of an ethnic Tuareg alleged to have been a member of a jihadist group and responsible for destroying cultural heritage in Timbuktu. However, the author spent most of the post connecting the ICC's action with the Genocidal State frame. A part of the post reads,

We remind the ICC that from 1963 to today the people of Azawad, notably those with white skin, have known only massacres and humiliations without hesitation by the Malian army, including women and children. ... If the international community wants to be credible and heeded, it should have indicted Captain Konaté, the infamous executioner of Tuaregs and Arabs in the wake of Operation Serval, Captain Beredougou Koné, the author of the historic massacres of Léré [in 1991], Captain Dibi Silla Diarra, or the butcher of the Adrar [during the 1963 rebellion]... All these cowards and criminals who were never investigated for having committed genocide and crimes against humanity; on the contrary, they were all promoted and congratulated for their barbarism.

In this post, the Genocidal State frame allows the author to link in the same breath atrocities purportedly committed around time of the post's publication against the people of Azawad by the Malian state with those that occurred decades ago. Moreover, in this example, activating the Genocidal State frame also allows the author to change the topic from the association of Tuaregs with terrorism, an uncomfortable topic for the MNLA (see the following section), to refocus discourse on the Malian state's mistreatment of northern populations, a discussion in which the MNLA feels itself to be on much steadier ground.

Particularly among the official accounts, the Genocidal State frame was also deployed to explain the MNLA's positions in negotiations between it and the Malian state. For example, in October 2014, months after the signing of the Ouagadougou Agreement but before meaningful progress on negotiations that would lead to the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, Mossa Ag Attaher began an almost poetically formatted post by writing,

We want peace, but not a peace:
 That ignores the weak;
 That pushes the orphan to the side;
 That denies the cyclically dramatic genocide that targeted our people;
 That camouflages the murderous stench of Bamako's schemes;
 That stigmatizes our people to the point of reducing them to the status of bandits,
 That refuses to admit that justice is the base of all peace;
 We want a peace that guarantees the legitimate and inalienable rights of the people of Azawad;
 We want a peace that will bring relief to the hearts of the parents of victims by means of a transitional justice that will shine light on the acts of violence, all acts of violence committed by the murderous Malian power and its genocidal army against our people from 1963 until today. We say no to sham peace but yes to real and realistic peace.

In this instance, the Genocidal State frame, activated through the use of the words "genocide" and "murderous Malian power," among others, aims to remind the reader of just how much is at stake in ongoing negotiations between the MNLA and the Malian government. In doing so, the frame lends credibility to the MNLA's negotiating positions at a time when negotiations were proceeding at a snail's pace.

The examples discussed here represent only a few of the cases in which the Genocidal State frame was activated by members of the pro-MNLA Facebook community within the dataset under study. Unfortunately, an exhaustive analysis of the place of the Genocidal State frame within the discourse of the pro-MNLA Facebook community, much less within the discourse of the MNLA on other platforms, is beyond the scope of this piece. Attention is next

turned to the second of the three dominant frames identified from the dataset: the Anti-Jihadist frame.

The Anti-Jihadist Frame: Construction

In addition to the anti-Malian Genocidal State frame, another frame condemned a rival to the MNLA in Azawad: Islamist/jihadist groups with ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The Anti-Jihadist Frame was not as ubiquitous as the Genocidal State frame, and it was fully constructed only rarely, although it was frequently activated. However, although varying accounts within the dataset had highly divergent views towards Islam and religiosity in general, almost all accounts, both official and non-official, shared in the construction and activation of the Anti-Jihadist frame.

An excellent example of the full Anti-Jihadist frame can be found in a post by official spokesman Mossa Ag Attaher on April 3, 2012, after the MNLA and Islamist groups had evicted the Malian army from Azawad but before the MNLA formally declared Azawad's independence. The main section of Ag Attaher's post reads,

There are currently in Timbuktu difficulties related to activities of Islamist groups that are seeking to steal the victory of the people from them. The MNLA will not allow any person, any group, or any bad intention to steal from the people their hope, their dignity, their victory, and their hope! ... People of Azawad, you have no need for anyone to teach you to pray or to which God you should address your prayers! Azawad; respond to all these monsters, respond to the enemies of your people. Say this to them: "The fight of my people cannot have religious foundations because I have fought extremism and radicalism for millennia! The fight of my people is a fight for survival, for life, for the restoration of social justice, for stolen dignity...for HOPE." Youth of Azawad, even if we must all march to Timbuktu, we will do it. Youth of Azawad, forward! All against the thieves of hope, of the people's victory!

The elements of the Anti-Jihadist frame are apparent in this post. Ag Attaher identifies a two-pronged problem. The first prong is the potential theft of the people of Azawad's political and military victory over the Malian state, while the second prong is the threat to what he implies are

traditional Tuareg values. Ag Attaher points the finger towards Islamist groups as the causes of both problems, and the post is replete with moral judgments (for example, using the word “monsters” to describe members of Islamist groups). The suggested remedy is explicit: the peoples of Azawad, especially youth, must unite behind the MNLA against the Islamist groups to defend their hard-fought victories.

Other examples of the Anti-Jihadist frame go further, claiming that members of jihadist groups close to Al Qaeda are not Muslims at all. For example, Non-Official Account 1 published a post in late June 2012, days before the outbreak of fighting between the MNLA and Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and AQIM. Although in previous posts Non-Official Account 1 had been sympathetic towards the idea of an alliance between the MNLA and Ansar Dine, expressing support for the short-lived merger between the two in May 2012, in this post, he took direct aim at Ansar Dine. He wrote,

Ansar Dine ... wants to apply Islam in the state of Azawad, despite that Azawad deals with Islam and teaches the precepts of Islam and the actions of Ansar Dine of beatings, intimidation, and terrorizing the populace are not Islamic. [Ansar Dine] causes antagonism towards Islam and they are the cause of Islam being described as terrorist, and that is incompatible with the religion of Islam. And its leaders are not learned and ignorant and break promises and violate treaties, and these morals are not found in Islam. ... Long live free Azawad.

The author identifies the problem as the immoral actions Ansar Dine has undertaken in the name of Islam, namely crimes against the civilian populace of Azawad. As in Ag Attaher’s post, Ansar Dine is blamed, and the author makes moral judgments against Ansar Dine based on its actions and the purported ignorance of its leaders. Finally, the author implies that the remedy must be to follow real Islam, which, combined with his clear avowal of support for the MNLA, means the type of Islam practiced by the MNLA (and, incidentally, the majority of the population of Azawad).

The Anti-Jihadist frame was thus constructed to blame jihadist groups for abuses inflicted on Azawadian populations, while also claiming that the beliefs and methods of these groups were foreign to Azawad and real Azawadian religious practice. In doing so, the Anti-Jihadist frame combined immediate local issues of contested political and military control with appeals to the notion that the underlying identity of the peoples of Azawad is incompatible with the version of Islam espoused by the jihadist groups operating in the area.

The Anti-Jihadist Frame: Activation

The Anti-Jihadist frame was frequently activated in order to distance the MNLA from the actions of AQIM-affiliated groups in Mali, especially after the French intervention in January 2013. For example, in November 2013, Moussa Ag Acharatoumane posted a quote from an Amnesty International report,

Contrary to a deeply rooted belief in southern Mali, it is not the Tuareg and Arab minorities who form, along with foreign elements, especially Mauritians, the bulk of Islamist recruits. Of the 200 suspected jihadists taken prisoner by French soldiers in Operation Serval in northern Mali between January and March, 80% were Malians, the majority Songhai and Peuls. Among the captured foreigners were counted two French, who were extradited, but also Nigerians, Nigeriens, Gambians, Burkinabé, a Mauritanian, a Somalian, a Tunisian, and a Moroccan who claimed to be Sahrawi.

Ag Acharatoumane does not mention either the MNLA or Azawad. However, by citing evidence that jihadism is foreign to the Tuareg and Arab communities that provided the bulk of the MNLA's popular support in Azawad, Ag Acharatoumane activates the Anti-Jihadist frame. By activating the frame, Ag Acharatoumane obliquely creates space between the MNLA and jihadist groups.

Another frequent means of activating the Anti-Jihadist frame was through condemning terrorist attacks committed around the world by groups unrelated to Azawad. For example, in December 2014, Non-Official Account 5 published a post in response to an attack by the Taliban

in Pakistan, writing, “Killed, 132 children and nine teachers, in a Taliban attack on a school in Pakistan. Oh God, what is this Islam? What is this jihad? How is it possible to kill Muslim children in the name of Islam?” Again, the MNLA and Azawad are not mentioned, but by dismissing terrorism as anathema to Islam, the author nevertheless activates the Anti-Jihadist frame. The next month, no fewer than four of the accounts in the dataset published posts condemning the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris. Moussa Ag Acharatoumane quoted an official MNLA press release, posted on the MNLA’s website, expressing condolences to the victims and activating the Anti-Jihadist frame, claiming that the MNLA had always opposed terrorism and stood ready to cooperate with others in “the struggle against this scourge.” In these cases, too, activation of the Anti-Jihadist frame served to distance the MNLA from terrorist groups and terrorism.

The Anti-Jihadist frame was also often activated in conjunction with the Genocidal State frame as pro-MNLA posters sought to link terrorist groups with the Malian state and blame the Malian government for the presence of terrorist groups in Azawad. For example, in April 2013, MNLA vice president Mahamadou Djéri Maïga published a post in reply to another interlocutor that began, “But help me to understand who brought the Islamists into Azawad? ... You said correctly that today the Islamists have established themselves and Malian authorities continue to know it and, in the view of all, collaborate with them provided they do not touch the south of the country.” Several years later, in May 2015, Non-Official Account 4 shared a post that began, “What is the difference between Daech and the [pro-government] Malian militias?” These posts sought to undermine the Malian government’s position by equating their actions with terrorism.

Based on the position of the Anti-Jihadist frame within the discourse of the pro-MNLA Facebook community, it seems likely that much of the construction and activation of the frame

was deliberately aimed at foreign audiences rather than audiences already sympathetic to the MNLA's cause. Whereas the Genocidal State frame was omnipresent in the discourse, the Anti-Jihadist frame was activated most strongly in relation to terrorist attacks involving foreign interests; the Charlie Hebdo attacks merited significantly more activation of the Anti-Jihadist frame than did even major jihadist attacks against the MNLA itself, such as those that killed Sahara Rebelle and Balla Ag Achérif in December 2015. The leadership of the MNLA, as well as many members of the Tuareg community, was keenly aware of the amalgamation of Tuaregs and terrorists in the minds of Western governments. Although more study is needed, the Anti-Jihadist frame appears to have been constructed in an explicit desire to fight that Western perception.

The Long Struggle Frame: Construction

The final dominant frame examined in this piece, the Long Struggle frame, is fundamentally different from the two frames discussed previously. Unlike the Genocidal State and the Anti-Jihadist frames, the Long Struggle frame is positive, not negative, in nature. As such, it is harder to fit perfectly into Entman's conception of framing, as the problem it defines is vague and blame is not specifically assigned. Moreover, like the Anti-Jihadist frame, the Long Struggle frame was not often constructed in its entirety, although it was frequently activated. Nevertheless, the Long Struggle frame was a critical element of the discourse of the pro-MNLA Facebook community. Several examples serve to illuminate the frame's construction.

In February 2013, Non-Official Account 2 published a post entitled "Appeal for Unity of the People of Azawad." The first section of the post consisted of a general appeal for unity to overcome "the occupation of our native land." Later in the post, the author laid out the Long Struggle frame,

The launching pad for the unity for which we call today was given by our ancestors at the beginning of the 20th century when well organized armies crossed swords with French colonialists in Azawad. Who does not remember Fihroun Ag Al Ensat, Kaocen Ag Kedda,²³² Sonni Ali Ber, Askia Mohamed, Askia Daoud,²³³ Zayd Ag Attaher,²³⁴ Alla Ag Albachir,²³⁵ Mossa Ag Amistane,²³⁶ Arrigoullane, Illadi Ag Alla,²³⁷ Mohamed Ali Ag Attaher,²³⁸ Chaboune?²³⁹ Or even the most recent ones: Mano Ag Dayak²⁴⁰ and Ibrahim Ag Bahanga. It is a duty of conscience for us to complete the work they began. To do this, all Azawadian functionaries and other intellectuals on the payroll of the Malian government, those of the diaspora, and all those who are still reticent must pledge allegiance to the MNLA ... Long live democracy, long live the unity of the people of Azawad, and long live the MNLA.

Applying Entman's elements of a frame, the author defines the problem specifically as a lack of unity among Azawadians, but this is just one facet of the broader problem of Azawad's lack of freedom. The people of Azawad are chided, if not fully blamed, for their lack of unity.

However, the moral judgments made in this post are not negative but positive, as the author lists a long line of northern Malian leaders stretching back to even before the colonial era. The suggested remedy is the most defining part of the frame: the audience should support the MNLA because it is the only organization dedicated to completing the work of these past heroes.

The Long Struggle frame was also frequently constructed in commemoration of anniversaries important to the MNLA. In January 2014, just prior to the anniversary of the outbreak of fighting between the MNLA and the Malian government, Non-Official Account 2 published an even clearer construction of the Long Struggle frame. His post, which also combined elements of the Genocidal State frame, read in part,

²³² Fihroun Ag Al Ensat and Kaocen Ag Kedda were leaders of Tuareg rebellions in the early colonial era.

²³³ Sonni Ali Ber, Askia Mohamed, and Askia Daoud were rulers of the Songhai Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries.

²³⁴ A leader of *Alfellaga* in 1963.

²³⁵ A local leader who resisted both France and leading Tuareg clans during the colonial period.

²³⁶ A Tuareg leader in modern-day Algeria in the early 20th century.

²³⁷ A rebel leader during *Alfellaga* (and, in fact, the individual who started the armed rebellion)

²³⁸ A rebel leader during *Alfellaga*

²³⁹ A colonial-era tribal leader

²⁴⁰ A leading Nigerien Tuareg rebel-turned-statesmen who died in a plane crash in 1995. Like Ibrahim Ag Bahanga's, Mano Dayak's death has spawned numerous conspiracy theories that he was killed by various intelligence agencies.

From 1960 to today, the central powers in Bamako and Niamey have always detested nomads. And this, because we are free men who have always and often at the price of savage repressions and pogroms protected our identity and preserved our historic and cultural autonomy!

In 1963, we were already in the nest of the revolution;

In 1990, it was the outbreak of our struggle;

In 2006 and 2009, [our struggle] reached the troubles and crises of its adolescences;

And January 17, [2012], it reached its maturity, in the sense that it carries the hope of an entire people, the people of AZAWAD! This is the real meaning of our upheaval! Long live the MNLA, and may God bless Azawad!

In this post, the problem defined and cause identified is effectively lifted from the Genocidal State frame. However, the moral judgments are again positive and focus on past Tuareg resistance to the Malian state. As before, the remedy suggested is support for the MNLA, and the MNLA is explicitly held up as the successor to all Tuareg resistance that came before.

Similarly, in April 2014, in a post commemorating the two-year anniversary of the MNLA's declaration of Azawadian independence, Non-Official Account 3 wrote,

To the youth we demand to be still more active; the history of Azawad will record from each of us his acts, but let us set positive actions like those set by Mohamed Aly Alansary, Alladi, Zeid²⁴¹ ...and before them Cheiboun Ag Fondogoumo, Fihroun, Alla²⁴² ... After them the saving and dignified acts of the Tuareg heroes of the 21st century, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, which deserve to be recorded and taught in schools. Today [the gauntlet has fallen] to the generation of Bilal Ag Achérif, who has been propelled to the front of the people of Azawad, with high hopes of success.

Like other posts constructing the Long Struggle frame, the problem implicit in this post is Azawad's general lack of freedom, and blame is not a significant factor in the post. Again, most important is the placement of the MNLA and the MNLA's leaders alongside Tuareg rebels of yore, whose stories Azawadians would have grown up hearing. This is the essence of the Long Struggle frame.

²⁴¹ All leaders of *Alfellaga*

²⁴² All leaders of anti-colonial Tuareg resistance

As is evident from these examples, the Long Struggle frame, like the Genocidal State frame (alongside which the Long Struggle frame frequently appears), is concerned with historiography and the MNLA's interpretation of the history of northern Mali/Azawad. This historiographic interpretation is not new to the MNLA; scholars writing prior to the MNLA's founding have noted that Malian Tuareg historiography and memory "[emphasize] a continuum of resistance against foreign domination" stretching from the start of the colonial period to the 21st century.²⁴³ Nevertheless, the fact that the pro-MNLA Facebook community chose to cast the MNLA as a successor to previous Tuareg rebellions through the Long Struggle frame is striking for two reasons. First, from its founding, the MNLA went to considerable pains to announce that it fought on behalf of not just Tuaregs but of all northern Malian populations; adopting a Tuareg-centric historiography appears to diminish that claim. Second, from a Tuareg perspective, all previous Tuareg rebellions, whether before or after Malian independence, largely or completely failed. In comparison, the MNLA's uprising achieved far more successes. The MNLA could have chosen to dismiss these past failures and define itself in opposition to them. There is even precedent for such a dismissal within modern Tuareg historiography: the *ishumar* leaders of the 1990 rebellion explicitly sought to build their movement to avoid the pitfalls of factionalism that bedeviled and ultimately doomed *Alfellaga*. Instead, the MNLA chose to hold up the leaders of failed rebellions as martyrs and illustrious predecessors.

The Long Struggle Frame: Activation

The Long Struggle frame was activated in a diverse set of contexts by both official and non-official accounts in the dataset. One common use came in the form of inspirational quotes and exhortations. For example, in August 2013, Moussa Ag Acharatoumane posted a picture of Ibrahim Ag Bahanga captioned with a quote by Burkinabé revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara

²⁴³ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 182.

reading, “One can kill a man, but not his ideas.” The next month, Ag Acharatoumane posted a picture of several armed MNLA fighters captioned, “They are in the process of writing an important page in the revolutionary history of Azawad in the 21st century.” Several months later, he posted a photo of Ibrahim Ag Bahanga accompanied by of Ag Bahanga’s quotes, “There are those who understand the language of arms and those who understand the language of negotiations. In Mali, they only understand the former.” These simple posts serve to reinforce and emphasize connections between the MNLA and prior rebels and revolutionaries by activating the Long Struggle frame.

Elsewhere, the Long Struggle frame was activated in conversation with current events. In early May 2012, as relations between the MNLA and Ansar Dine began to worsen, Mossa Ag Attaher, who was invariably extremely critical of Ansar Dine (to the point of dissenting with official MNLA policy at times), posted a video of news reporting on Ibrahim Ag Bahanga’s dissidence against the Malian government in 2006 and 2007. Ag Attaher wrote, “Ibrahim Ag Bahanga in his life already foresaw what would happen. He said, ‘We have nothing to do with the Salafists, it is a false campaign to destroy us...’” Here, Ag Attaher’s activation of the Long Struggle frame by invoking Ag Bahanga on the surface serves to signal his distaste for Ansar Dine and its religious ideology but, more profoundly, chides MNLA leadership for seemingly abandoning the principles of previous Tuareg rebellions in choosing to work with Ansar Dine.

Frames and Identity

How can the dominant frames employed in the discourse of the pro-MNLA Facebook community inform us about the MNLA’s place in the identities of those in this community? Per Charles Tilly’s definition of the term, the pro-MNLA Facebook community is a social category,

or a set of actors distinguished by a single criterion (in this case, support for the MNLA).²⁴⁴ Tilly further defines identity as “an actor's experience of a [social interaction], coupled with a public representation of that experience; the public representation often takes the form of a shared story, a narrative.”²⁴⁵ The frames analyzed in this chapter are dominant within the discourse of the pro-MNLA Facebook community social category and therefore constitute the core part of this group’s shared narrative. Thus, the Genocidal State, Anti-Jihadist, and Long Struggle frames at the very least inform a significant part of the group’s identity. To the extent that the individual members of the social category define their personal identities through the social criterion that defines their membership in the pro-MNLA Facebook community, *i.e.* support for the MNLA and its goal of Azawadian independence, these three frames inform their individual identity as well. The fact that postings related to the MNLA and Azawad accounted for such a high percentage of all Facebook activity among the accounts in the dataset would seem to indicate that the public representation of support for the MNLA was indeed crucial to the identities of these individuals.

Further research is needed to fully flesh out how these dominant frames interface with other elements of identity both for the members of the pro-MNLA Facebook community and for the MNLA as an organization. Direct interviews could perhaps shed light on the former. As for the latter, the few existing studies of the MNLA’s online media discourse seem to suggest that the frames analyzed in this piece are indeed present in the MNLA’s more formal online media activity. However, the MNLA’s online activities are largely French-language, and the basic realities of internet access in Azawad itself means that many of those living under the MNLA,

²⁴⁴ Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 48.

²⁴⁵ Charles Tilly, “Social Movements and (All Sorts of) Other Political Interactions – Local, National, and International – Including Identities,” *Theory and Society* 27, vol. 4 (1998), 456.

and presumably many supporters of the MNLA, are without access to the MNLA's online media discourse. It is possible that an entirely different set of frames dominate the MNLA's discourse on offline platforms and directed towards non-Francophone, non-literate audiences. Existing research simply does not allow us to answer these questions.

Chapter 5: Pro-MNLA Facebook Discourse and the Peace Process in Mali

At time of writing, the peace process in Mali centers around implementation of the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, signed between the Malian government, the CMA, an umbrella organization of secessionist groups including the MNLA, and the Platform, an umbrella organization of anti-secessionist groups. In the nearly four years since the Agreement was signed, few of its provisions have been implemented beyond the preliminary stage. More specifically, according to the Independent Observer tasked with monitoring implementation of the Agreement under its Article 63, while progress has been made, the signatories to the Agreement have not “accomplish[ed] a signature achievement demonstrating a real commitment to see the agreement through, despite significant support from the international community.”²⁴⁶ Furthermore, the Independent Observer noted a “low level of public ownership of the agreement” on all sides.²⁴⁷ It is clear that the signatories, including the CMA, are ambivalent, at best, towards implementing the Agreement.

While a full analysis of the factors motivating the attitudes of each of the signatories towards the Agreement and its implementation is far beyond the scope of this work, several elements observed in the discourse of the pro-MNLA Facebook community may shed light on aspects of the MNLA’s attitudes towards the Agreement and the broader peace process. These preliminary conclusions merit at least cursory treatment in this closing section. Three will be discussed here: first, massive opposition to the Agreement within the pro-MNLA community before the Agreement was signed; second, the perception that the Malian army not only commits

²⁴⁶ “Report of the Independent Observer on the Implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, Emanating from the Algiers Process: Evaluation of Implementation in 2018,” The Carter Center, February 18, 2019, accessed via https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/conflict_resolution/mali-3e-rapport-eng.pdf, 3.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

atrocities against Azawadian populations but also is ineffective as a security provider; and third, deep suspicions towards the major international players involved in the peace process.

Internal MNLA Opposition to the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation

As was discussed previously, the MNLA formally committed itself to seeking a political solution through negotiations with the Malian government with the signing of the Ouagadougou Agreement in June 2013. However, the peace process did not meaningfully register in the discourse of the pro-MNLA Facebook community (aside from a small number of general posts denouncing the Malian government and any prospect of an agreement between the MNLA and the Malian government) until early 2015, when the text of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation began to circulate and was formally initialed by the Malian government and the Platform. The text itself provoked a storm of criticism from the pro-MNLA Facebook community: four of the five non-official accounts within the dataset each published multiple posts denouncing the Agreement and its contents. Of particular concern to the account owners was the fact that the Agreement does not provide for recognition of Azawad as, in the words of a post published by Non-Official Account 2 in mid-April 2015 (before the CMA initialed or signed the Agreement), “a geographic, political, and juridical entity.” Certain accounts also raised the (admittedly valid) point that many provisions of the 2015 Agreement are incredibly similar in content to those of the 1992 National Pact. The authors then expressed that given the failure of the National Pact to address the underlying factors of rebellion, they did not see how signing the 2015 Agreement could be beneficial to the Azawadian cause.

Nor were such sentiments confined to individuals. Instead, long, formal dissents against the Agreement attributed to MNLA-affiliated groups and signed by many people were posted. For example, in February 2015, one of the non-official accounts published what purported to be

a formal statement on behalf of the MNLA's political office in Europe; the same text was also posted by another non-official account in April. The statement announced the European office's rejection of "any form of agreement contrary to the aspirations of the people of Azawad," although the post was careful to note that the authors continued to support the MNLA's representatives negotiating in Algiers. The statement was purportedly signed by 10 people, including Moussa Ag Assarid. Although the authors of that text expressed support for MNLA leadership despite their opposition to the Agreement, other posts went further. In early June 2015, after the CMA had initialed the Agreement and shortly before the CMA signed it, Non-Official Account 2 published a post that began by denouncing the Malian government and international mediators. However, the post continued, "Is it not time to change once and for all a team atrophied by tempting and petty interests to the point of abiding in silence the blood of our martyrs and other summarily executed innocents, the cries of our widows, and the tears of our orphans for some banknotes!" Other posts published by other accounts also expressed support for the idea of forcing a leadership change within the MNLA to avoid signing the Agreement.

However, none of the official MNLA accounts overtly condemned the Agreement on Facebook. Nevertheless, the level of dissent directed towards the Agreement by the non-official accounts was completely unprecedented in the dataset. Up to that point, the accounts had been consistently supportive of decisions made by the MNLA's leadership, with the exception of a small flare of dissidence against the MNLA's short-lived alliance with Ansar Dine in May 2012 (which was expressed most strongly within the dataset by Mossa Ag Attaher). Accusations that the MNLA's leadership had sold out the Azawadian cause were utterly unheard of.

Public opposition to the Agreement within the dataset did abate somewhat after the CMA formally signed the Agreement in June 2015. It is impossible to determine whether this

abatement resulted from a genuine acceptance of the Agreement on the part of account owners in the dataset or simple resignation to the fact that the MNLA had ultimately signed the Agreement. Either way, there is little evidence from the dataset or from any other source indicating that ordinary supporters of the MNLA have radically changed their views on the Agreement in the four years since it was signed. Needless to say, if the MNLA's base of support opposes the Agreement in the first place, the MNLA's leadership is not likely to feel pressure from below to move quickly to implement the provisions of the Agreement. This rank-and-file reticence is doubtless a factor behind the ongoing lack of public ownership of the Agreement noted by the Independent Observer.

Perceptions of the Malian Army

The ubiquitous perception on the part of the accounts in the dataset that the Malian army specializes in committing violence against Azawadian civilians is an integral part of the Genocidal State frame and already has been discussed at length. However, nuances to this perception have special relevance to the peace process and to the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. A central plank of the Agreement is that fighters from the two non-government signatory movements, the CMA and the Platform, are to be integrated into the Malian military, and that this "reconstituted" military is to be deployed throughout the entirety of Mali, to the eventual exclusion of all other armed groups. This process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) has been a priority of implementation for the last four years. However, at time of writing, very few fighters have actually been processed through the DDR system, and the mixed patrols composed of members of the Malian military and fighters from the CMA and Platform stipulated in the Agreement have yet to actually begin. In this area, too, evidence points to a lack of political will on the part of the signatories to aggressively move towards

implementation of the Agreement. The dataset can offer some hypotheses as to why. Multiple accounts shared the perception that not only does the Malian army commit atrocities against civilians, it is also an ineffective fighting force. Thus, relying on the Malian army to provide security is tantamount to not having security at all.

The accounts in the dataset were fully aware that the Malian army has not inflicted a decisive military defeat on northern rebels since the 1960s. In 1990, the rebels inflicted a series of major defeats on the Malian military, culminating at the Battle of Toximine; the rebellion sputtered out militarily as a result of infighting amongst the rebels and the rise of the Ganda Koy Songhai militia. The quasi-uprisings of the 2000s were largely bought off, and, more importantly, President Amadou Toumani Touré largely outsourced government military operations to units drawn from northern populations. These units were often technically under the command of Malian army officers, most notably then-Colonel El Hadj Ag Gamou and Colonel Abderahman Ould Meydou, but the troops were drawn from their commanders' social groups and functioned effectively as personal militias. The regular Malian military played only a limited role. In the 2012 war, the MNLA only engaged with the Malian military on two meaningful occasions: January through April 2012 and May 2014. On both occasions, the MNLA utterly routed the Malian military. The MNLA was militarily defeated by jihadist groups in mid-to-late 2012 and has subsequently been pressured militarily by pro-government Platform groups. Interestingly, while Platform groups were accused of committing atrocities, they were not accused of military incompetence in the same way the Malian army was. Finally, the accounts in the dataset blamed the Malian government, and especially the Malian military's weakness, for allowing jihadist groups to enter northern Mali and establish themselves in the area.

This perception on the part of the pro-MNLA Facebook community that the Malian military is both abusive and useless dovetails with the MNLA's longtime insistence that it, and it alone, is responsible for and capable of providing security to Azawadian populations. However, the entire peace process is built around the idea of the Malian military, albeit one containing former CMA fighters, regaining (or, arguably, gaining for the first time) a true monopoly of force throughout Malian territory. Furthermore, in follow-on talks on implementation, rebuilding and redeploying the Malian military has consistently been prioritized over other provisions of the Agreement, such as those relating to economic development and legal issues. Based on the accounts in the dataset, MNLA leadership faces pressure from below not to take steps towards implementation that would put the Malian military in sole charge of providing security to the populations of Azawad. There is no evidence that any adequate effort has been made on the part of either the signatories to the Agreement or international actors involved in the peace process to fight the perception among supporters of the MNLA that the Malian military is not only abusive but also incompetent.

Reservations About International Brokers

The international community has played a crucial aspect of the peace process between the MNLA and its allies and the Malian government, and international brokers have mediated every step of the peace process since before the Ouagadougou Accords of June 2013. The Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation contains an entire sub-section of clauses dictating the obligations and roles of the international community. A full analysis of the MNLA's relations with international actors is beyond the scope of this work. However, analysis of the pro-MNLA Facebook community did reveal some preliminary conclusions about attitudes held by MNLA supporters towards international actors with ramifications for the peace process. In particular,

the pro-MNLA Facebook community demonstrated attitudes ranging from wariness at best to outright criticism at worst towards the three international actors most intimately involved with the peace process: Algeria, France, and the United Nations.

Algeria has always viewed itself as the dominant regional power in the Sahara, and Algeria has always played a major role in northern Mali. This role actually predates the independence of both countries—the National Liberation Front recruited heavily in northern Mali, and current Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika was a frequent visitor to northern Mali, even adopting the *nom de guerre* Abdelkader El Mali.²⁴⁸ During *Alfellaga*, Algeria's granting to Mali the right to pursue rebels across the border effectively spelled the doom of the rebellion. Algeria directly mediated the 1991 Tamanrasset Accords, as well as a number of agreements in the 2000s. In 2014, Algeria once again stepped in to mediate the negotiations that resulted in the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. In recent decades, in Algeria, Malian affairs have largely been considered the purview of Algeria's intelligence services rather than the Foreign Ministry or other branches of government.

However, the MNLA has long distrusted Algeria. This distrust is partly born of the fact that many early members of the MNLA, as well as its ideological forefather, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, were among those who rejected the various Algeria-mediated agreements of the 2000s. The segment of the MNLA with ties outside northern Mali, including Secretary-General Bilal Ag Achérif and Chief of Staff Mohamed Ag Najim, had predominantly migrated to Libya, not Algeria. Finally, the MNLA judges Algeria to have been historically hostile to the idea of an independent Tuareg-dominated state for its own domestic reasons. These underlying factors behind the MNLA's frosty attitude towards Algeria are generally known and need not be further discussed here. However, the accounts in the dataset examined in this survey, especially the

²⁴⁸ Perret 39.

non-official accounts, also presented as fact the notion that Algeria is not only responsible for the spread of terrorist groups into Azawad but also continued to control terrorist groups for its own ends, even manipulating the peace process. More importantly, this perception appeared early and often within the dataset, well before Algeria had any official role in the peace process. For example, in July 2012, shortly after the MNLA was militarily defeated in Azawad by various jihadist groups, Non-Official Account 1 claimed in a post that “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb was founded by Algeria and Algerian intelligence.” Later, once Algerian-sponsored negotiations were underway, other accounts revealed their belief that Algeria was controlling terrorist groups to influence the MNLA’s position in negotiations. In March 2015, Non-Official Account 5 published a post in which he reported that an MNLA patrol had been ambushed by terrorists near Kidal, suffering three dead and one wounded. The author said of the ambush, “The Algerian intimidations have begun.” In the eyes of this author, Algeria was punishing the MNLA for its supposed recalcitrance in negotiations by unleashing Algeria’s terrorist proxies. These and other posts demonstrate a perception on the part of the pro-MNLA Facebook community that the MNLA was coerced into Algerian-mediated negotiations and that Algeria was not an honest broker. Today, Algeria chairs the main body tasked with implementing the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation. There is no evidence to suggest that Algeria has taken adequate steps to improve its reputation as a broker in the eyes of the MNLA and its allies in the CMA since the Agreement was negotiated and signed.

France and, later, the United Nations were also strongly criticized by the pro-MNLA Facebook community. However, the nature of the discourse targeting France and the UN differed significantly from those directed at Algeria. While Algeria was criticized for its direct actions, much of the rhetorical attack on France and the UN on the part of the pro-MNLA

Facebook community focused on France's and the UN's roles as security guarantors in northern Mali/Azawad. Frequently, France and the UN were tied to the Genocidal State frame: they were seen as permitting the Malian army to commit atrocities in Azawad. For example, in January 2013, just weeks after the start of Operation Serval, Non-Official Account 2 accused France of giving the Malian army its "benediction" to perpetrate genocide against northern populations. The previously discussed awareness on the part of the accounts in the dataset that the Mali never decisively defeated the MNLA militarily also came into play. Instead, the Malian military entered Azawad only in the wake of French units, and the UN also managed the Malian military's occasionally negotiated takeover of certain areas. Crucially, first the French and then the UN constantly sought to keep a lid on hostilities between the MNLA and the Malian army by negotiating ceasefires before local hostilities expanded. It is important to recall that in the one instance of truly large-scale combat between the MNLA and the Malian army after the entry of French and UN forces into Malian, the May 2014 battles around Kidal after Prime Minister Mara's visit, the Malian government, not the MNLA and its allies, rejected a UN-negotiated ceasefire and launched a new offensive against the rebels. Later still, as Platform militias battled the MNLA, accounts within the dataset blamed the UN for not allowing the MNLA and its allies to recoup territory purportedly temporarily lost to the Platform, especially in the Tabankort/Anéfif areas and around the city of Ménaka. Although the pro-MNLA Facebook community's concerns about France and the UN facilitating military advances on the part of the Malian army and Platform militias are no longer immediately relevant, owing to the lack of significant fighting between the CMA and the Malian army since 2014 and between the CMA and the Platform since late 2017, perceptions of past bias, and even complicity in the Malian state's genocidal designs, likely endure.

Finally, Algeria, France, and the UN were all blamed for colluding to force the CMA to accept the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the first place. A March 2015 post published by Non-Official Account 2 powerfully sums up this perception. The author described the Agreement as the fruit of “three years of gestation of an international plot orchestrated by the United Nations via a mandate given to MINUSMA as intervention force and to Algeria as chief of mediation in order to suffocate our aspirations and kill the project of Azawad in its embryo!” Although France was not mentioned in this specific post, France was very much included among the purported plotters by this and other pro-MNLA accounts. More research is undoubtedly needed, but mistrust towards Algeria, France, and the UN likely contributes to the CMA’s reluctance to engage in a peace process conducted under their auspices.

The Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation is central to the peace process in northern Mali/Azawad, and the eventual full redeployment of a reconstituted Malian military and the role of international brokers are in turn so central to the Agreement that it could not stand without these pillars. Furthermore, if the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation is to lead to a durable peace, the signatories, including the CMA, must clearly invest more in the document’s implementation than they have for the last four years. If the CMA, in particular, is to truly advocate for the Agreement, the concerns of its supporters about the Agreement, the Malian army, and the international brokers must be addressed one way or another. Previous events, mostly notably end of the MNLA’s short-lived alliance with Ansar Dine in May 2012, have demonstrated that the MNLA’s supporters, including supporters outside the physical borders of Azawad, can greatly impact decisions made by the MNLA’s political leadership. Until now, too few studies, scholarly or otherwise, have focused on the MNLA’s supporters as a group. Study of pro-MNLA communities in cyberspace is just the beginning.

Final Conclusions and Avenues for Further Research

This thesis has examined the postings, over a four-year period, of a slice of the pro-MNLA Facebook community, including MNLA officials and other MNLA supporters. Although it has shed light on important aspects of the MNLA's social media discourse, countless questions remain to be answered. Some of these possible further avenues for research have already been discussed. In addition to those, a number of more general areas for future scholarship are worthy of mention.

Most immediately, this survey examined the discourse of the pro-MNLA Facebook community, and other studies have explored facets of the MNLA's official online discourse on other platforms. However, to my knowledge, no study has ever attempted to place the two side by side and rigorously compare the frames or even general themes present in the discourse of each. Additionally, no study has focused solely on rank and file members and supporters of the MNLA off social media. Only through such studies can a better understanding of the MNLA's internal dynamics be attained.

Additionally, this study only barely began to map out the contours of the pro-MNLA Facebook community. Studies that incorporated more robust network analysis would shed light on exactly who is involved in various pro-MNLA communities both online and offline and on how various individuals in these communities interact with each other and the wider world.

Beyond the MNLA, further network analysis could open up entirely new avenues of research into the Malian military and political landscape, with potential ramifications for conflicts worldwide. For example, I observed in passing that all four of the official accounts examined in this study were friends on Facebook with Fahad Ag Almahmoud, the chief political leader of GATIA, a constituent group of the Platform. GATIA has been, of course, likely the

MNLA's most persistent and most ferocious armed opponent since its founding in 2014; GATIA and the MNLA and its allies fought regularly throughout much of northern Mali/Azawad until late 2017, when the two sides hammered out a ceasefire that has held until time of writing. Fahad Ag Almahmoud and other GATIA leaders could certainly not be confused for MNLA supporters. However, it is clear that despite the animosity between the MNLA and GATIA, interactions between the two sides continued online. Fahad Ag Almahmoud even frequently interacted with the posts of at least one non-official account in the dataset as well; Ag Almahmoud and the non-official account owner engaged in arguments in the comments section below the non-official account owner's posts. These observed interactions between Ag Almahmoud and pro-MNLA accounts open up a range of fascinating questions about the potential role of social media in maintaining personal lines of communication in conflict zones even between implacable ideological and military adversaries. Studies involving network analysis could begin to answer these questions.

More broadly still, the importance of social media as a platform for media is almost certain to grow as social media usership continues to climb. As a component of that trend, social media will almost certainly become ever more important for the communications of dissident groups, both violent and non-violent, especially given the fact that social media platforms have the most room to grow in those parts of the world that experience higher rates of organized violence. As armed groups use social media more and more, social media at the same time becomes a more effective means of studying these groups, their ideologies, their identities, and their supporters. All too little scholarship has focused thus far on these questions. The remainder of the 21st century is certain to bring armed conflict rising from disputes old and new. To understand these conflicts and their participants, scholars must use all tools available to them.

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Appendix 1: Full Texts of Referenced Social Media Posts Referenced in Chapter 4

This appendix contains the full texts of social media posts quoted in previous chapters. They are presented in chronological order and in the language in which they were posted. They have not been reformatted or edited for clarity. Posts made by official accounts are attributed, and an exact date is provided; posts made by non-official accounts are not attributed, only the month is given, and the names of the account owner have been removed. Photos, videos, and links that were also shared in the posts are not included.

Mossa Ag Attaher, February 4, 2012

Voici notre declaration lors du rassemblement qui vient juste de se terminer devant l'Assemblee francaise....

Déclaration pour le rassemblement en faveur de l'Azawad
Paris, 04 février 2012

Chers frères, chères sœurs, chers amis,
Merci d'être venus apporter votre soutien à l'Azawad qui se bat avec courage et détermination pour accéder enfin à sa liberté et à sa dignité.
Le combat que mène actuellement le MNLA dans l'Azawad est un combat noble et légitime. Il est noble parce qu'il aspire à mettre en place une société emprunte de liberté, de justice et d'égalité entre les différentes composantes de l'Azawad. Il est légitime parce qu'il est l'émanation de l'ensemble des peuples qui vivent sur ce territoire façonné par des siècles de cultures et de civilisations autochtones ayant vécu auparavant en parfaite harmonie.

Aujourd'hui, l'Azawad, dans toutes ses composantes, lutte pour se libérer de la politique criminelle de l'État malien qui nie nos existences, ruine notre territoire et affame nos peuples. Il est vrai que nous traversons actuellement une période très difficile mais c'est aussi une période cruciale pour notre avenir, parce qu'il n'y a pas de droit plus légitime que celui de vivre dignement et librement sur sa propre terre et qu'il n'y a pas pire que d'être l'étranger de son propre pays.

Les peuples et les communautés humaines aspirent naturellement, et depuis toujours, à la justice, à la liberté et à la dignité. Ce sont des aspirations universelles, partagées par l'ensemble des peuples de la terre. Les principes fondamentaux que sont la liberté, la justice et la dignité doivent s'appliquer à tous les peuples, en tout lieu et en tout temps, sans distinction de race, de religion de langue ou de culture. Ce sont des valeurs sacrées applicables à tous les êtres humains. Il n'y a pas de raison que les peuples de l'Azawad en soient privées

Le mouvement de l'Azawad est d'abord et avant tout un ensemble de valeurs humaines universelles que nous portons en nous depuis des millénaires. Nous estimons que la violation des droits humains est une grave violation que nous ne pouvons pas accepter.

Notre mouvement œuvre dans le sens de la confirmation du droit des êtres humains à disposer librement d'eux-mêmes, à vivre dans la dignité et à jouir de tous leurs droits naturels.

Le droit à l'autodétermination est le droit le plus important qui soit issu des luttes des peuples au cours de l'histoire de l'humanité. C'est au nom de la charte universelle des droits de l'homme, du principe de la criminalisation du colonialisme et de l'occupation illégale des territoires d'autrui ; au nom de tous les pactes similaires tels que le droit des peuples à choisir le système de gouvernance qui leur convient, le droit des peuples à disposer de leurs terres et de leurs richesses, c'est au nom de tous ces droits consacrés par le droit international, que le mouvement de l'Azawad, dans ses diverses composantes, résiste à ceux qui tentent de le jeter hors de la roue de l'histoire par tous les moyens possibles.

C'est pour cela qu'aujourd'hui, nous appelons les organismes internationaux, les démocrates du monde entier ainsi que les états de la région à assumer leurs responsabilités pour qu'il soit mis fin au massacre perpétré par le régime malien contre les peuples de l'azawad et pour soutenir les revendications légitimes des azawadiens.

Depuis l'indépendance du Mali, la tyrannie et l'arrogance absolue constituent le seul quotidien des peuples de l'Azawad. La création des Etats postcoloniaux tel que le Mali ne représente pour nous qu'une succession de grands malheurs vécus dans une indifférence générale indigne de la race humaine.

Bien que le mouvement de libération de l'Azawad soit l'un des plus anciens mouvements de lutte des peuples pour l'acquisition de leurs droits légitimes, il continue de souffrir de l'abandon et de l'indifférence de la Communauté internationale au point où les peuples de l'Azawad se demandent s'ils sont concernés par les droits de l'homme au même titre que les autres peuples ? Pourquoi le monde entier ignore les génocides auxquels ils sont exposés depuis tant d'années ? L'Azawad subit depuis la création de l'Etat du Mali une succession de génocides, de révoltes, de pseudos accords jamais respectés, de pseudos apaisements, de déplacement de populations, d'assimilation forcées et d'humiliations sans que personne ne réagisse. Pourtant nous sommes aussi constitués d'hommes et de femmes, tout comme les autres peuples qui ont subi des situations similaires telles que l'Erythrée, le Kosovo, le Timor oriental et le Sud Soudan au Darfour.

La détresse du peuple de l'Azawad depuis l'avènement de l'Etat-nation

Les Peuples de l'Azawad furent, avant d'entrer dans le colonialisme français en Afrique, une communauté vivant sous un système de fédérations fondés sur l'étendue de leurs terres. Ils contrôlaient l'ensemble du territoire selon une conduite démocratique rare en Afrique et caractérisée par la séparation entre ces autorités, conformément aux principes reconnus aujourd'hui dans tous les systèmes moderne.

Il y avait trois sultanats sur la terre d'Azawad, maintenant connu sous le nom du nord du Mali. Ces sultanats étaient coordonnés dans la gestion de tous le pays dans un système politique et social commun dans le respect de la diversité des peuples le composant. Le secteur scientifique y

était également développé notamment dans la ville de Tinbouctou. Celle-ci était connue par sa prospérité de son industrie traditionnelle ainsi son autosuffisance économique.

Les peuples de l'Azawad avaient vécu de façon générale, en paix avec leurs voisins. Ils étaient liés entre eux par leurs relations de bon voisinage, le commerce et les échanges culturels. Une fois la colonisation française arrivée, les Azawadiens avaient continuellement menés, de 1894 à 1954, des batailles de résistance contre l'occupation française pour défendre leurs terres et leur héritage social, culturel, et politique, construit sur des milliers d'années.

Puis le retrait français de l'Afrique commença et les peuples de l'Azawad ont pris conscience de l'importance et de la gravité de toute décision dans ces moments historiques. Alors, les peuples de l'Azawad ont présenté une lettre signée par près de quatre cents figures emblématiques représentant l'ensemble des composantes de l'Azawad. La lettre adressée au gouvernement français demandait la restitution de l'indépendance du territoire de l'Azawad sans le réaffecter à un autre territoire. Les peuples de l'Azawad avaient obtenu la promesse de leur indépendance. Mais, la promesse ne fut pas tenue en raison de certaines interventions régionales et internationales et l'Azawad a fini par être lié à un corps étranger qui ne lui garantissait en rien un quelconque développement économique, social, culturel ou technologique, ni même le minimum de respect dû à la dignité humaine.

La réalité du Mali commença alors à se manifester, c'était un Etat venu pour prendre et non pour donner ou partager tout au moins. Les premiers projets dans l'Azawad étaient d'imposer le communisme et la pensée socialiste avec le gouvernement du dictateur Modibo Keita. Cette politique était fondée sur la dépossession des azawadiens de leurs terres et de leurs animaux pour devenir des biens de l'état. Cette politique était également fondée sur la politique des mariages forcés visant à éliminer la diversité ethnique au sein des peuples de l'Azawad. Clairement, ce qui était exigé de l'Azawad était sa disparition en tant qu'entité ayant ses propres particularités. Ce n'était pas l'unité des peuples et la création d'un Etat démocratique dans lequel tous participent et bénéficient de la diversité culturelle et ethnique

Le premier des soulèvements Azawadiens contre la dictature et le racisme était en 1963. Mais le Mali avait utilisé des méthodes odieuses pour éradiquer le combat des azawadiens pour la liberté en passant par l'assassinat des personnes âgées, les gardiens de la mémoire, la mise à feu des camps, l'extermination des animaux et l'empoisonnement des puits. Ces pratiques reflétaient bien la politique réelle de l'Etat du Mali dont l'objectif réel n'était pas d'éliminer les éléments de la révolte seulement, mais il s'agissait bien d'un nettoyage ethnique visant à éradiquer l'ensemble de la communauté, accompagnée en cela de la famine et de la politique de la terre brûlée. La résistance fut alors avortée avec une brutalité inouïe, grâce à l'aide de Ben Bella en Algérie et du roi Hassan II du Maroc, qui ont remis les dirigeants politiques de la révolution azawadienne au gouvernement malien, provoquant auprès des peuples de l'Azawad un choc énorme. C'est ainsi que se termina le soulèvement de 1964.

La situation continua ainsi avec son lot d'assassinats et de déplacements, de famine, et d'humiliation. Les tentatives d'éliminer les cultures autochtones et d'éradiquer le sentiment national azawadien s'est poursuivi jusqu'à ce que les peuples de l'Azawad en arrivent à décider d'entamer sa deuxième Révolution en 1990. cette seconde révolution s'est caractérisée par des massacres encore pires que ceux de Modibo keita. Les événements de la seconde révolution vont

aboutir au 1er Accord en Algérie qui prévoyait un statut particulier pour les zones de l'Azawad. Mais le Mali a vite trouvé un moyen facile de ne pas respecter les dispositions du traité en organisant un coup d'Etat contre le système de Moussa Traoré. Le rôle d'Amadou Toumani Touré, en tant qu'homme politique du Mali, a commencé par la formation, en 1993-1994, d'une milice dirigée contre l'Azawad et qui visait à remettre en question leur droit d'exister en Afrique en général et à accélérer le mouvement de la migration des populations. Ces milices avaient déjà commis des massacres contre des civils, tuant plus de 700 civils chez les femmes et les enfants et les personnes âgées. Tout cela s'est passé sous les yeux de la communauté régionale et internationale.

La situation dramatique des peuples de l'Azawad persista jusqu'au soulèvement de 2006 qui s'est terminée avec le 3eme Accord entre le peuple d'Azawad et le gouvernement malien, toujours sous les auspices de l'Algérie, et comme ses prédécesseurs, il était sensé garantir les conditions de respecter la vie privée des autres aires culturelles et politiques de l'Azawad, d'accélérer les projets de développement, de réduire le nombre de troupes militaire dans des zones peuplées et d'arriver à la formation d'unités militaires constitués essentiellement d'habitants de l'Azawad afin de prendre en charge la sécurité de la région. Mais, encore une fois, c'était exactement le contraire qui s'est réalisé depuis la signature de l'Accord. Le Mali se précipita à commettre d'autres crimes avec le meurtre d'un membre du précédent soulèvement Barka Cheikh et de son compagnon, Mohamed AG Mossa. Les peuples de l'Azawad n'ont vu aucun suspect traduit en justice. Bien au contraire, le Président a signé la décision de l'exercice parlementaire de 1996 en gracieant tous les responsables des événements liés à l'Azawad. Les peuples de l'Azawad ont été alors considérés comme étant tous des criminels méritant ce qui leur était arrivé. Mais tout cela était une question de stratégie de la domination des minorités ethniques orientée et délibérée, exploitant la définition de l'Etat comme étant le seul à avoir le droit légitime de monopoliser l'usage de la force.

Les résultats de l'annexion de l'Azawad au Mali

1/ L'entretien du désespoir dans la communauté de l'Azawad en tentant de court-circuiter tout espoir d'avoir un rôle dans la gestion de sa vie politique, sociale, culturelle et économique ; opérant à travers le blocage de toutes les tentatives révolutionnaires dans le but de réaliser quelque chose de leurs aspirations, en éliminant le sentiment de la nécessité de préserver les spécificités culturelles et sociales de l'Azawad. Quand à la protection du reste de l'humanité de l'Azawad, elle à été contré carré en se servant des méthodes de la malice et de la ruse, comme le fait de créer le chaos dans la société en montant une partie de sa population contre l'autre pour couper la route à toute action collective utile. Tout cela était bien entendu accompagné du refus systématique du gouvernement malien d'appliquer les Accords signés.

2 / Les pressions régionales sur les peuples de l'Azawad au cours de chaque soulèvement contre son amère réalité et les contraindre à des accords qui ne contiennent guère que des aspirations minimales de sa Nation. De surcroît, le gouvernement malien n'hésite pas, devant les médiateurs et la communauté internationale, à trahir les termes de ces accords. Des promesses sont lancées aux peuples de l'Azawad ; mais, au Mali, les expériences des accords de 1991, 1992, 1996, 2006 et 2008 ont démontré que le gouvernement n'a jamais eu aucune intention d'appliquer quoi que soit.

3 / La transformation de la région de l'Azawad de façon volontaire, en une région livrée à toutes les activités interdites dans le monde en l'occurrence, la soi-disant cellule d'Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique. Cette raison providentielle a permis à l'Etat malien de poursuivre ses activités telles que les enlèvements, les massacres et la politique de marginalisation. Le gouvernement malien prétexte ainsi la présence du terrorisme pour justifier ses crimes contre l'humanité commis contre les peuples de l'Azawad. L'existence de cette organisation terroriste donne une couverture suffisante à l'Etat malien pour continuer son blocus sur les zones densément peuplées de nos populations en vue de poursuivre les politiques de mise à mort lente mais certaine et , dirigée au plus haut niveau du gouvernement malien.

Pour toutes ses raisons, notre mouvement a décidé de combattre cet état criminel et pervers dans ses modes d'actions. Et effectivement, jugez-en par vous-même, suite aux combats qui ont opposés nos armées, ils ont attaqué nos familles, brûlé nos maisons, saccagé nos biens et terrorisé nos femmes et nos enfants. Pour se venger de la déroute de l'armée malienne dans notre territoire, le Mali n'a rien trouvé de mieux à faire que de se venger sur les familles Tamasheq vivant à Kati et Bamako. Des centaines de familles de Tamasheq quittent précipitamment leurs maisons et se dirigent actuellement vers les frontières du Sénégal, de la Mauritanie, du Burkina Faso, et du Niger pour échapper aux exactions commises contre des eux. Nous rappelons à l'opinion internationale que, contrairement à l'armée malienne, nos troupes ne s'attaquent qu'aux institutions militaires et jamais à des civils.

L'armée malienne doit savoir qu'elle ne pourra jamais nous déposséder de notre détermination à mener jusqu'au bout notre combat pour la liberté. A travers leurs actes irresponsables, ils ne font qu'aiguiser davantage notre croyance aux idéaux qui nous animent. L'exil de nos sœurs, de nos aînés, de nos mères à travers les pays doit prendre fin! Nous avons un territoire et il nous appartient depuis la nuit des temps.

Toutefois, nous tenons à rappeler à l'opinion régionale et internationale que cette situation de guerre nous a été imposée par le Mali qui n'a respecté aucun de ses engagements et qui persiste à refuser tout dialogue sur le principe du respect du droit à l'autodétermination du peuple de l'Azawad. Nous restons ouverts à tout dialogue mais uniquement dans le cadre du respect du principe du droit à l'autodétermination. Le MNLA met en garde, toute partie qui se dressera contre la volonté du peuple de l'Azawad pour son droit à l'auto-détermination. A cet effet, nous rejetons les tractations actuelles et nous nous désolidarisons des accords actuellement en cours à Alger.

Notre combat est juste et légitime, l'Azawad retrouvera sa liberté. Rien ni personne ne nous détournera de notre objectif. Le MNLA est plus que jamais déterminé à continuer les opérations militaires jusqu'à la reconnaissance officielle par le Mali du droit à l'auto-détermination du peuple de l'Azawad.

Nous demandons simplement aux divers organismes internationaux, au Comité international de la Croix Rouge, à la Fédération internationale des croix rouges et croissants rouges, au Haut-Commissariat des Nations Unies aux réfugiés, à toutes les organisations humanitaires gouvernementales ou non gouvernementales, de répondre à l'appel des populations de l'azawad qui souffrent de cette situation de guerre imposée par le Mali dans le but de nous faire renoncer à nous-mêmes pour nous faire fondre dans une système qui méprise et martyrise notre existence Tanemmirt-nwen

Je vous remercie pour votre solidarité et votre soutien

Mossa Ag Attaher
Chargé de communication du MNLA

Mossa Ag Attaher, April 3, 2012

Bonjour à tous;

Camarades de luttes;

Amis de la lutte de l'Azawad;

Frères et soeurs azawadiens;

Il y a effectivement à Tombouctou actuellement des difficultés liée aux agissements des groupes islamistes qui cherchent à voler au peuple sa victoire.

Le MNLA ne laissera ni personne, ni aucun groupe, ni aucune mauvaise intention voler au peuple son espoir, sa dignité, sa victoire et son espérance!

En ces moments de confusion entretenues surtout par ceux qui ne souhaitent que l'installation du chaos et du désordre pour en profiter et instaurer du coup leur seul et unique projet:

L'ANARCHIE!

Peuple de l'azawad, tu n'as besoin de personne pour t'apprendre comment faire tes prières ou à quel Dieu devrais-tu les adresser!

Azawad ; réponds à tous ces monstres, réponds aux ennemis de ton peuple

Dis leur ceci:" le combat de mon peuple ne peut avoir des fondements religieux car j'ai combattu l'extrémisme, le radicalisme depuis des millénaires! Le combat de mon peuple est un combat de survie, de vie, de restauration de la justice sociale, de la dignité usurpée...de l'ESPOIR"

Jeunesse de l'Azawad même s'il faut qu'on marche tous jusqu'à Tombouctou, nous le ferons

Jeunesse de l'Azawad, en avant tous! tous contre les voleurs de l'espoir, de la victoire du peuple!

Non-Official Account 1, April 2012

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

الجمهورية الأزواذية . اخبركم بأن الشعب المالي يتظاهر في باماكو من أجل محاربة شعب أزواد وإستعادة الشمال من

انذر الشعب المالي وجيشه من اي تحرك نحو حدود جمهورية ازواد .

احتراماً . اخبركم بأنه تم ايقاف اطلاق النار داخل حدودنا بعد طلب الأمم المتحدة والولايات المتحدة الأميركية وفرنسا وذلك

للنظام الدولي

ملاحظة :

أيها المالين اعطينكم حكم دولتنا لمدة خمسين عام دمرتونا ونفرتونا وطرقتونا واصبحنا بلا هوية في العالم ولا تعلمنا حتى اننا

عدنا لوطننا ولن نتنازل عن شبر منه ولانخاف من الموت . اصبحنا لا نعلم اين أبائنا وامهاتنا واخواننا من التشرذ اما الآن فقد

بهذا الكلام فالميدان سيحكم والعالم . انصحكم اقل محاولة اعتداء على شعبنا ووطننا ستكلفك الثمن الذي لن تنسونه واذا لم تقتنعوا

يشهد بذلك

vive azawad

Mossa Ag Attaher, May 3, 2012

Ibrahim ag Bahanga de son vivant prévoyait déjà ce qui devait arriver... Il dira: "Nous n'avons rien avec les salafistes, c'est une campagne mensongère pour nous détruire..."

Non-Official Account 1, June 2012

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

تحية عطرة ومباركة

أود أن أعلمكم بما أفهمه من تصرفات أنصار الدين :

أنصار الدين لا يملكون رأي ثابت كأنهم مقيدون من جهات أخرى لماذا لا يؤيدون تحرير أزواد ويعارضونها ولا يؤيدوا أي اتجاه للحركة وكل لهم رأي جديد ويزعمون أنهم يريدون تطبيق الإسلام في دولة أزواد رغم أن أزواد يتعاملون بالإسلام ويعلمون تعاليم الدين الحنيف ومعاملة أنصار الدين غير معاملة إسلامية من ضرب وترهيب وتخويف للشعب ويسببون عداوة للإسلام وهم سبب لوصف الإسلام بالإرهاب وذلك يتنافى مع الدين الإسلامي وزعيمهم غير متعلم جاهل ويخالفون المواعيد علامات المنافق ثلاث إذا حدث كذب وإذا وعد أخلف وإذا (وينقضون العهود فهذه الأخلاق ليست موجودة بالإسلام قال ﷺ وهذه الصفات كلها رايناها فيهم وبأستمرار فلذلك أقول لكم أن (إن الفتنة أشد من القتل) وقال الله عز وجل (أؤتمن خان صفات التي تبحث عنها تنظيم القاعدة لا توجد عندنا إذن أقول لكم ليس هناك أي سبب لوجود تنظيم القاعدة في دولة أزواد إلا إذا تنظيم القاعدة تساعد المظلوم والمشرود شعبه هنا يجب على أي كان أن يساعدنا بل العالم أجمع أما إذا كان ذلك لشوشرة وعرقلة برنامجنا التحريري لدولتنا أناشدهم بأن يخرج معززين مكرمين وإذا كانت أهداف أخرى لمصالح شخصية أو دوليه ندعوهم للخروج لأننا لانخاف من أي تنظيم في العالم والله ولي التوفيق.

vive azawad liber

Non-Official Account 5, January 2013

Récupérations des villes

Communiqué de presse

Le MNLA informe l'opinion publique nationale et internationale que les villes de Kidal, Tessalit, Léré, In Khalil, Anefis, Tinzawatène, Tessit et Talatayt sont sous le contrôle du Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad qui a décidé de reprendre en toute urgence ces localités afin d'assurer la sécurité des biens et plus particulièrement des personnes en raison des graves dangers qui pèsent sur leurs vies avec le retour dans l'Azawad de l'armée malienne qui marchent sur les pas de l'armée française.

Nous avons engagé notre responsabilité pour la protection des civils contre les exactions criminelles de l'armée malienne qui s'est toujours distinguée par des massacres sur les populations azawadiennes sans défenses, comme elle vient de le prouver encore une fois à la suite de l'opération « Serval » menée sous le commandement de l'armée française.

Depuis le déclenchement des opérations militaires françaises pour la conquête de l'Azawad au profit des « autorités maliennes », plus de cent personnes ont déjà fait les frais de représailles ethniques : Une chasse à l'homme visant les Touaregs, les Peuhls, Sonrai et les Arabes est organisée par l'armée malienne et ses milices dans l'Azawad.

Le MNLA ne peut en aucun cas accepter que le peuple de l'Azawad soit ainsi livré à la vengeance malienne. A ce titre, le MNLA engage sa responsabilité pleine et entière pour sécuriser ses villes et protéger ses populations contre une armée spécialisée dans le crime contre les populations civiles de l'Azawad.

D'autre part, afin de clarifier très nettement ses objectifs, le MNLA rappelle qu'il ne souhaite aucune confrontation avec les forces de la CEDEAO ni avec celles de l'armée française, malgré le fait qu'elle dirige les opérations d'occupation de l'Azawad. Cependant, si le MNLA ne réagit

pas aux exactions maliennes, il aura alors faillit à son devoir premier qui est de garantir la protection des populations civiles de l'Azawad, depuis trop longtemps victimes expiatoires de l'armée malienne.

Très clairement, le MNLA exprime à nouveau sa totale disponibilité à travailler avec la France pour l'éradication des groupes terroristes mais il faut bien comprendre que le MNLA refuse catégoriquement la réinstallation de l'armée malienne qui excelle dans le crime contre nos civils. Aussi, afin de lever toute équivoque sur ses intentions, le MNLA informe la France et la CEDEAO qu'il n'engage pas ses forces dans des opérations militaires contre les forces internationales mais uniquement dans la protection des civils livrés à la vengeance de l'armée malienne et les groupes terroristes.

Le MNLA prend à témoin la communauté internationale sur ses engagements formels à combattre le terrorisme et réitère une nouvelle fois son entière disposition à participer avec l'armée française et la CEDEAO dans la lutte contre le terrorisme. Cependant, face à l'incapacité des forces françaises à protéger les populations civiles contre les exactions maliennes, et en attendant de trouver une solution politique et un statut juridique à l'Azawad, le MNLA a engagé ses forces dans la protection des villes citées plus haut afin de garantir l'intégrité physique de nos populations gravement menacée par l'armée malienne et ses milices ethniques.

Le MNLA rappelle à la France toute sa responsabilité quant à la sécurité et à la protections des populations azawadiennes vivants dans les villes déjà sous contrôle malien face aux exactions et à la vengeance de l'armée maliennes.

Ougadougou le 28 Janvier 2013

Mossa Ag Attaher

Chargé de communication du CTEA

Porte parole du MNLA

Non-Official Account 2, February 2013

APPEL A L'UNITE DU PEUPLE DE L'AZAWAD!

Le Mouvement National de l'AZAWAD appelle à l'unisson l'ensemble des tribus Azawadiennes.

Cette unité est la condition sine qua none pour atteindre le but ultime vers lequel nous tendons. La conscientisation de toutes les filles et de tous les fils de l'Azawad est la chose dont nous avons le plus besoin aujourd'hui que jamais, car nous entamons une lutte longue et éprouvante : éprouvante parce que l'occupant de notre territoire et ses acolytes ont dressé devant nous beaucoup d'obstacles qu'il nous faut franchir ; longue parce que l'opresseur et ses compères nous ont tendu des nombreux pièges qui prendront du temps à déjouer.

Chers frères et sœurs, cher Peuple de l'AZAWAD, à chaque fois que vous émettiez un doute au sujet des idéaux que nous défendons, figurez-vous que la lutte que mène le M.N.L.A est juste et nécessaire. Cette justesse se justifie par l'occupation de notre terre natale, l'oppression de notre Peuple et l'exaspération de nos sœurs et de nos vieillards.

A un contemporain de dire <>

Chers frères et sœurs, souvenez-vous que le Peuple de AZAWAD était jadis uni comme un seul homme c'est pourquoi il opposa une résistance farouche aux colons français malgré le déséquilibre des forces en présence dans les années 1900.

Pour nous affaiblir et détruire notre Unité, le colon scinda notre Peuple en Tribus sans demander notre avis c'était la politique de : diviser pour mieux régner.

- Avant-hier encore pour déstabiliser l'Unité du Peuple de AZAWAD et affaiblir nos forces, l'occupant malien dressa des frères qu'il organisa en milice armée contre des frères. Une tentative des plus malicieuses pour déchirer le tissu social azawadien. C'est dire combien le Mali nous redoutait et nous redoute toujours.

- Hier, il s'était servi de nos frères comme bouclier humain pendant les conflits armés de : 1990 ; 2006 et 2009.

- Aujourd'hui lorsque nous avons compris son stratagème et changer de fusil d'épaule pour sortir du joug et de l'oppression dans lesquels il nous a maintenu depuis plus de 50 ans, celui-ci change de stratégie.

Le Mali est en train d'organiser au moment où nous écrivons ces lignes des frères en milices politico judiciaires sous la couverture d'associations et autres O.N.G locales. Cette abominable idée vise la constitution d'un contre-pouvoir politico judiciaire qui ne dit pas son nom aux fins de nous dresser socialement, culturellement et politiquement les uns contre les autres. Parce que la lutte que nous menons aujourd'hui est politiquement et juridiquement légitime à tous égards. Et que l'option d'une quelconque répression est écartée à tout point de vue.

Le Mali use de tous les moyens à sa disposition pour nous discréditer et ternir l'image de notre Peuple.

Aujourd'hui, il nous taxe de tous les mots : esclavagistes, racistes, bandits armés, narco-trafiquants, terroristes...mais tout ça n'est que pur mensonge !

C'est parce que nous avons malgré l'occupation et l'oppression enregistré des progrès notoires depuis 1960 à nos jours sur tous les plans.

Socialement et culturellement, notre Histoire et notre Identité se sont affirmées aux yeux du monde entier ; économiquement nous constituons un poids de taille dans la balance économique sous- régionale et politiquement nous nous sommes imposés en affirmant à qui de droit notre engagement à reconquérir notre terre : l'AZAWAD.

O Peuple azawadi ! N'est-il pas temps de t'en rendre compte des agissements combatifs du Mali et de ses autorités politiques et te réconcilier avec toi-même ?

L'envol de l'unité à laquelle nous appelons aujourd'hui fut donné par nos ancêtres au début du 20e siècle lorsque des armées bien structurées et organisées croisèrent le fer aux colons français dans l'AZAWAD.

Qui ne se souvient de Fihroun AG AL Ensat, de Kaocen AG Kedda, Soni Ali Ber, Askia Mohamed, Askia Daoud, de Zeyd AG Attaher, de Alla AG Albacher, de Mossa AG Amistane, de Arrigoullane, Illadi Ag Alla, Mohamed Ali Ag Attaher, de Chaboune... ?

ou encore les tous récents : Mano Ag Dayak et Ibrahim Ag Bahanga.

Il est un devoir de conscience pour nous de parachever l'œuvre qu'ils entreprirent.

Pour ce faire, tous les cadres et autres intellectuels azawadis à la solde du gouvernement malien, ceux de la Diaspora, et tous ceux qui sont encore retissants doivent faire allégeance au M.N.L.A pour consoler nos sœurs et nos vieillards de leur exaspération et faire échec aux manœuvres politiciennes des détracteurs visant à faire de nous des éternels assujettis.

Souvenez-vous avec un artiste de chez nous que <> . Bannissons les querelles intestines et les conflits inter et intra communautaires fratricides qui ont jalonné l'histoire récente de l'AZAWAD et ont meurtri son vaillant peuple pour opposer à toute entreprise désobligeante l'union des cœurs et des esprits dans cette lutte politico judiciaire acharnée où que nous soyons ! O Peuple de l'AZAWAD ! << éloigner vos tentes et rapprocher vos cœurs >> !

C'est à ce prix là seulement qu'on peut faire de l'AZAWAD une terre d'accueil, d'hospitalité légendaire, de Paix, un Pays verdoyant où nos sœurs chanteront le Paradis aux rythmes de la guitare, du tendé et des parades des dromadaires !

Vive la démocratie, vive l'Unité du Peuple de l'Azawad et vive le M.N.L.A

Mahamadou Djeri Maïga, April 6, 2013

Merci Zoumana

Mais aide moi à comprendre Qui a amené les islamistes dans l'Azawad ? N'est ce pas le MNLA a bien vu de déclencher cette lutte, si non tu es d'accord avec moi que c'est des Afgans, Tunisiens et autres qui ont profité dans la drogue et le trafic humain en complicité avec les hautes autorités qui allaient nous enduire à leur merci. Tu as dit vrai aujourd'hui les islamistes se sont bien implantés et les autorités maliens continuent au su et au vu de tous à collaborer avec eux pourvu qu'on ne touche au sud du pays. Le MNLA est contraints car hier seulement certains se permettent tout au Mali pendant que d'autres croupissent sous le fardeau de l'impôt. Si le Mali traitait tout le monde de la même façon ces différentes guerres n'auraient aucune chance d'avoir lieu mais les leaders sont médiocres. J'ai beaucoup de respect au Maliens mais ATT doit répondre et tous ceux qui l'ont applaudi, doivent également répondre. Voilà aujourd'hui à quoi ressemble le Mali : la honte. je ne suis pas fier de ces leaders. Toi également je te comprends et je sais que tu n'es pas fier d'eux, même si tu cherches la solution en ta manière. Pendant que les Français, les tchadiens, les soldats de la CEDEAO meurent pour le Mali, les soldats maliens eux s'entretuent et refusent d'aller défendre la cause. Ils n'ont de force qu'en tuant les civils Azawadiens. Du début l'opération serval à nos jours combien de Sonray, d'Arabes, de Peuls et de tamacheqs ont été tués et continuent à être tués par l'armée malienne sous prétexte qu'ils soutiennent le MNLA. Alors que c'est des centaines des soldats Maliens qui ont été dignement traités et libérés par le MNLA sans condition. Les soldats maliens sont témoins ça. Des centaines des soldats maliens ont demandé au MNLA de leur laisser la voix pour rentrer soit au Niger soit en Algerie, chose faite. Alors pourquoi tant de haine. C'est la rupture entre l'Azawad et le Mali. Ils ne mourront plus pour nous et ça était toujours comme ça. Nous voulons désormais nous sécuriser nous même parce il n'y a personne pour le faire. Le Mali ne sera jamais le mali d'hier, car les azawadiens ont compris que l'Azawad doit se prendre en charge, si non à dieu la sécurité, le développement, le bien être la dignité.

Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, August 7, 2013

On peut tuer un homme, mais pas ses idées.

Thomas Sankara

Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, September 3, 2013

Ils sont entrain d'ecrire une page importante de l'histoire revolutionnaire de l'Azawad du 21 siecle.

Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, November 11, 2013

"Contrairement à une idée reçue solidement enracinée au sud du Mali, ce ne sont pas les minorités arabes et touarègues qui forment, avec des éléments étrangers, Mauritaniens notamment, l'essentiel des recrues des islamistes. Sur les 200 présumés djihadistes faits prisonniers par les soldats français de Serval dans le nord du Mali entre janvier et mars, 80 % sont des Maliens, la plupart songhaï et peuls. Parmi les étrangers capturés, on compte deux Français, qui ont été extradés, mais aussi des Nigériens, Gambiens et Burkinabè, un Mauritanien, un Somalien, un Tunisien ainsi qu'un Marocain se revendiquant Sahraoui."

Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, December 1, 2013

Nous l'avons vécu pendant 53 ans, dans nos âmes, nos chaires et tout notre être, c'est seulement aujourd'hui que vous commencer à reconnaître qu'on a tué, torturé et massacré des Touareg et des Arabes par ce qu'ils sont différents... Il faut qu'on prend des armes pour que vous sachez qu'on souffre, qu'on sacrifie des vies pour que vous sachiez qu'on existe, qu'on anéantisse un Etat pour que vous sachiez qu'on est différent et qu'on veut du changement? si le monde n'assiste pas les peuples, ils se réveilleront d'eux mêmes, car la liberté n'a pas de prix et l'injustice n'a pas de place chez les opprimés.

Non-Official Account 2, January 2014

Bonjour à tous !

Chers frères et soeurs,

Cher Peuple de l'AZAWAD,

Voici notre façon à nous au MNLA de vous souhaiter un joyeux anniversaire pour la deuxième année consécutive de notre soulèvement contre l'annexion et le néocolonialisme de l'Etat génocidaire du Mal-i !

Sachez bien que tout Peuple marginalisé, à moins qu'il ne soit constitué des communautés aussi bien lâches que traîtres est contraint au soulèvement !

Depuis 1960 à nos jours, les pouvoirs centraux de Bamako et de Niamey ont toujours détesté les nomades.

Et ce, parce que nous sommes des hommes libres qui avons de tout temps et souvent au prix de répressions sauvages et des pogroms protégé notre Identité et conservé notre autonomie, aussi bien historique que culturelle !

En 1963, nous étions déjà dans le nid de la révolution;

En 1990, c'était l'éclosion de notre lutte;

En 2006 et 2009, elle a franchi les troubles et les crises de son adolescence;

Et le 17 Janvier 2011, elle a atteint sa maturité, en ce sens qu'elle porte l'Espoir de tout un Peuple, le Peuple de l'AZAWAD !

C'est ça le vrai sens de notre Soulèvement !

Vive le MNLA, et que Dieu bénisse l'AZAWAD !

NB: ce modeste mot de bonne anniversaire, est spécialement dédié à l'ensemble de nos mères et sœurs dont les prières nous accompagnent toutes les minutes, toutes les heures et tous les jours !

Puisse ALLAH exhausser ces prières !

Amine !

Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, February 15, 2014

Il y a ceux qui comprennent le langage des armes et ceux qui comprennent le langage des débats. Au Mali on ne comprend que le premier. Ibrahim Ag Bahanga

Non-Official Account 3, April 2014

6 Avril 2012 – 6 Avril 2014, deux ans jour pour jour, l'État de l'Azawad accédait à sa souveraineté nationale et internationale, suite à la déclaration solennelle d'un certain Mossa Ag Attaher sur les ondes des télévisions du monde.

En effet, après d'âpres combats des enturbannés, à travers la branche politique dirigée par son Excellence Bilal Ag Acherif et la branche armée sous les ordres de mon général Mohamed Ag Najim, les drapeaux aux couleurs de l'Azawad ont flotté sur les quatre coins de notre territoire, sous les applaudissements et les acclamations d'un peuple très enthousiasmé et très euphorique de recouvrer la dignité et l'honneur longtemps mis en mal par l'État mercenaire du Mali.

Seulement devenu indépendant, l'État de l'Azawad s'est vu opposée une résistance farouche de la part de la communauté internationale, qui s'est laissé guider par des intérêts Étatiques égoïstes, en foulant au sol les souffrances multiformes des femmes, des hommes, des enfants, qui ne demandent qu'un mieux être chez eux, en devenant maîtres de leur destin sur le territoire de leurs ancêtres.

Ainsi, l'Azawad devient tant bien que mal le sixième État indépendant du monde, en attente de la reconnaissance officielle de L'ONU.

Deux ans de lutte, deux ans des pièges, deux ans des peines, deux ans d'expériences... la situation nous autorise à esquisser un bilan sommaire du parcours, avec des forces, des faiblesses et des Perspectives...

Les forces :

Elles résident principalement dans les avancées politiques et diplomatiques exponentielles réalisées grâce au génie créateur de son Excellence Bilal Ag Acherif et de son équipe, qui a su se tirer d'affaire, face à un gouvernement Malien en état d'agonie avancée.

Pour la première fois un mouvement Azawadien est reçu par un État membre permanent du conseil de sécurité de l'ONU, pas n'importe lequel, la GÉANTE RUSSIE de Poutine.

Pour la première fois le dossier de l'Azawad sort du giron de l'Algérie pour être confié à L'ONU.

Pour la première fois encore, les Azawadiens dans leur majorité n'attendent plus une quelconque intégration dans l'armée ou quémander un poste de responsabilité, mais exigent leur participation dans les affaires du Mali, en tant qu'entité à part entière, avec leur vision, leur spécificité et leur gestion conformément aux aspirations profondes du peuple dont ils sont les représentants.

Le mérite de Bilal est d'avoir écouté et entendu le peuple de l'Azawad dans ses aspirations, dans ses orientations, dans ses conseils... ceci explique la radiation, sans management et sans hésitation des mauvaises graines au sein de l'équipe.

La reconnaissance du caractère incontournable dans la paix au Mali du mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad(MNLA) par l'ONU, la France et son adhésion à l'organisation Américaine pour l'autodétermination des peuples Africains, sont entre autres des grands acquis, qu'il convient de mettre à l'actif des leaders politiques du mouvement.

Au plan de la cohésion sociale, la création des conditions de rapprochement avec les autres mouvements Azawadiens, œuvrant pour les mêmes objectifs que le MNLA, à savoir le MAA et

le HCUA, ainsi que la déviation des pièges de l'Etat à conférer au conflit un caractère racial et communautaire, sont très salutaires et témoignent du degré d'intelligence et de dépassement de soi au profit de l'intérêt exclusif du peuple multiethnique de l'Azawad.

Nous rappelons que le problème de l'Azawad est un problème POLITIQUE, vieux des années de l'indépendance, soit 54 ans et sa résolution, à défaut d'indépendance sous la forme de sécession, pourrait être UNE LARGE AUTONOMIE au profit de la région de l'Azawad.

Sur le plan militaire, l'organisation des troupes, leur équipement, la formation des contingents, la promotion des hommes qui se sont distingués par leurs actes de bravoure... permettent de regarder l'avenir de l'Azawad avec fierté et confiance dans la réussite de la lutte.

Au plan social, des mesures sont actuellement en cours pour l'ouverture et l'animation des écoles. des consignes de sécurité sont données aux réfugiés pour ne pas retourner avant une paix sérieuse et définitive...

Ceci est une esquisse sommaire du bilan par l'observateur que nous sommes, mais nous nous permettons aussi d'attirer l'attention de nos leaders sur certains faits saillants.

Le Mali veut tout faire pour confiner le problème et les enjeux du conflit à Kidal, vous voici tombés dans le piège si vous vous laissez faire, car il considère par là que les Touarègues et les Arabes sont issus seulement de Kidal, déjà une division se dessine.

La preuve, c'est son acharnement à travers les médias à ne parler que de problème de Kidal et non de l'Azawad entier ou du Nord, si vous voulez.

Et nous savons et prévenons dès maintenant que l'Etat fera tout son possible pour concrétiser ce projet, si nous ne nous réveillons pas vite.

Aux mouvements, MNLA, MAA, HCUA, de Tombouctou et de Gao, vous êtes avertis, restez toujours sur vos positions défensives, les ambitions du Mali à empêcher tout mouvement de se constituer et prétendre avoir des droits dans ces deux régions sautent à l'œil nu.

L'Azawad, c'est Tombouctou, Gao et Kidal, avec des Kel Tamasheq, des Arabes, des Sonrhais, des Peuls.

Nous profitons de l'heureuse opportunité qui nous est offerte en ce jour inoubliable du 6 Avril pour témoigner de notre soutien indéfectible et inconditionnel aux idéaux du MNLA, tout en lui réitérant notre confiance dans sa démarche et son projet de société pour l'Azawad.

Nous nous inclinons devant la mémoire de nos illustres disparus, morts sur le champ de l'honneur, l'Azawad ne vous oubliera jamais.

Aux blessés de la dignité nous souhaitons prompt rétablissement.

Une motion de reconnaissance et de profond respect est adressée aux braves femmes de l'Azawad, qui se sont battu au péril de leur vie, souvent en tombant sous les balles lâches et honteuses des amateurs soldats Maliens, avec une caution ignoble de la communauté dite internationale.

Permettez nous d'en citer des grandes figures, telles que Nina Walet Intalou, Aminata Walet Bibi, Assi Walet Hitta... et j'en passe au risque d'en oublier d'autres très engagées.

A la jeunesse nous demandons d'être encore plus active et plus réactive, l'histoire de l'Azawad retiendra de chacun de nous ses actes, mais posons des actes positifs à l'instar des ceux posés par Mohamed Aly Alansary, Alladi, Zeid... et avant eux Cheiboun Ag Fondogoumo, Fihroun, Alla... Après eux les actes salvateurs et dignes de ce héros Touarègues du 21 siècle, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga qui méritent d'être inscrits et enseignés à l'école.

Aujourd'hui l'ascenseur revient à la génération de Bilal Ag Acherif propulsée au devant du peuple de l'Azawad, avec des grandes attentes de réussite.

Cependant, l'arbre ne doit point cacher la forêt, en dépit d'énormes percées politiques et

diplomatiques enregistrées sous la houlette de son Excellence Bilal et son équipe courant 2014, certaines insuffisances s'affichent.

Au titre des faiblesses, nous pouvons noter :

un laisser aller et une complaisance au sein de l'équipe dirigeante, qui s'explique peut être par la volonté de ne frustrer aucun Azawadien qui désire participer à la lutte de l'émancipation ;

Une confusion, un moment donné concernant le poste de porte parole du MNLA ;

L'inactivité relative du site du MNLA, qui peut faire souvent un mois sans imprégner le peuple de l'évolution de la lutte ;

L'absence de politique/et ou des moyens permettant la récupération des combattants flottants et qui seraient tentés de rejoindre le camp adverse ;

L'absence des réactions adaptées aux massacres opérés sur notre population par l'armée malienne et sa cohorte des assassins.....

Perspectives

La lutte pour l'émancipation du peuple de l'Azawad est une lutte noble, légitime, héroïque, elle s'inscrit dans le long terme.

Des hommes et des femmes ont consenti des sacrifices ultimes, certains sont morts sous les balles, d'autres sont morts de soif, de faim, d'autres étouffés par la politique des États.

Il y en a qui se sont vendus aux plus offrants, d'autres ont changé de camp par pure opportuniste, d'autres, (les plus pessimistes) ont abandonné en pleine lutte pour tendre la main aux maigres pécules Maliens...

La lutte est longue et parsemée d'embûches, des trahisons, des déceptions, des improvisations. Après deux ans de lutte sur tous les fronts et pour combler les attentes du peuple de l'Azawad, qui a montré ses preuves à porter dans son cœur le MNLA, à travers des manifestations grandioses en Azawad, dans les camps des réfugiés et chez les Azawadiens de la diaspora, la direction politique du MNLA doit veiller à :

Une politique de cohésion sociale, de promotion des cadres dévoués à la cause, la mise en place d'une plate forme des revendications communes par tous les mouvements ;

trier davantage les éléments perturbateurs/ou mercenaires venus grossir les rangs au compte de l'ennemi ;

Sensibiliser encore plus le peuple de l'Azawad sur les idéaux nobles de la lutte, afin d'éviter que des brebis galeuses et sans base sociale tentent une récupération du peuple sur fond de dupe ;

Approcher particulièrement les chefferies traditionnelles avec tous les honneurs dus à leur rangs ;

Écarter sans hésitation l'Algérie de la médiation au profit d'une médiation neutre ;

Refuser de s'asseoir autour de la même table des négociations avec des groupes ou acteurs constitués par le Mali pour le Mali afin de peser lourd contre l'Azawad ;

Exiger du Mali un préalable aux négociations (elles ne peuvent porter que sur les modalités de l'AUTONOMIE et rien d'autre ou pas des négociations) ;

Ériger des stèles en hommage aux dignes et vaillants fils de l'Azawad qui ont donné leur âme pour extirper notre peuple du joug sauvage Malien , à savoir entre autres Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, le colonel Bouna Ag Attouyoub, le colonel Wari et d'autres soldats inconnus.

L'Azawad aux Azawadiens, la lutte ne fait que commencer, nous vaincrons inchallah, avec ou sans les traîtres. Bonne fête d'indépendance à toutes et à tous !!!

Mossa Ag Attaher, October 11, 2014

Nous voulons la paix mais pas une paix:

Qui ignore le faible;

Qui met de côté l'orphelin;

Qui nie le génocide cycliquement dramatique qui a visé notre peuple;

Qui camoufle le relent assassin des agissements de Bamako;

Qui Stigmatise notre peuple au point de le réduire au statut de bandit;

Qui refuse d'admettre que la justice est le socle de toute paix;

Nous voulons d'une paix qui garantisse les droits légitimes et inaliénables du peuple de l'Azawad;

Nous voulons d'une paix qui soulagera les coeurs des parents des victimes à travers une justice transitionnelle qui mettra la lumière sur les exactions, toutes les exactions commises par le pouvoir assassin malien et son armée genocidaire contre notre peuple de 1963 à nos jours.

Nous disons non à la paix du simulacre mais oui à la paix réelle et réaliste.

Le temps des Azawadiens au gros turban qui signent sans relire le contenu est résolu!

Chaque mot

Chaque terme

Chaque thème

Chaque phrase

Chaque paragraphe jusqu'à la virgule près seront visités, étudiés, révisités jusqu'au plus profond de leur "âme" !

C'est avec un esprit serein et une détermination sans faille que nous affronterons à nouveau très prochainement la suite du processus politique sous l'égide de la communauté internationale.

L'Azawad vivra et vaincra!

Non-Official Account 5, December 2014

١٤١ قتيلا، ١٣٢ طفلا و ٩ مدرسين في هجوم لطالبان على مدرسة في باكستان..... يا اله ما هذا الاسلام؟! ما هذا الجهاد؟! كيف يمكن ان يقتل أطفالا مسلمين باسم الاسلام؟! لماذا نبقى مكتوفي الأيدي؟! أين هؤلاء العلماء (علماء الدين) حتى مجرد تنديد؟! لو كان الامر يتعلق بطلق اللحية او الحيض والنفاس لخرجوا لنا مئات الفتاوى والكتيبات.... الذين يقومون.... بهذه الجرائم، يفعلون ذلك باسم الدين، اذا على علماء الدين مسؤولية كبيرة

Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, January 10, 2015

Ces attentats terroristes, qui se multiplient de plus en plus, sur différents territoires, et contre différentes personnes de toutes confessions religieuses, démontrent la nécessité absolue de donner une priorité totale au renforcement d'une plus grande coopération concertée dans la lutte contre ce fléau.

Non-Official Account 3, March 2015

Ils ont tort pendant plus de 50 ans et ils sont les premiers à crier justice, le peuple de l'azawad n'a pas oublié les assassinats collectifs, barbares et racistes, l'enlèvement et les viols des femmes, la destruction du cheptel, l'empoisonnement des puits pastoraux... dont il a été victime durant toutes les insurrections et qui ne ciblent que des paisibles citoyens, à cause de la couleur de leur peau. les

actions éventuelles de la CPI doivent couvrir toutes les atrocités et autres débordements commis contre les azawadiens de la part d'un état sanguinaire et viscéralement raciste:L'état du Mali,de 1963 à nos jours.des preuves irréfutables existent,reste à activer la machine judiciaire pour ne plus promouvoir l'impunité dans laquelle nagent les militaires et certains politiques,complices des tous les crimes,crimes de sang et crimes économiques dans l'azawad.A tous les azawadiens,et à toutes les azawdiennes disposant des preuves d'exactions commises contre des citoyens azawadiens de les mettre à la disposition du MNLA pour l'aider à faire émerger le droit au profit de notre peuple.puisse dieu aider le peuple de l'azawad dans sa lutte noble,portée par le MNLA. Amen!

Non-Official Account 4, May 2015

ما الفرق بين داعش ومليشيات مالي؟؟
قبل عصر الكاميرا كنا نسمع عن هذه الوحشية في طفولتنا
حتى يكاد العقل لا يصدق ذلك !!

اليوم في عصر الصوت والصورة ها نحن نرى أنواع الجرائم الانتقامية
من التعذيب والاعتصاب والحرق والقتل بالرصاص والاعدام شنقا والتمثيل بالجثث.

منهج وحشي
يجمع بين النازية والفاشية واللا أخلاقية
ويجمع بين العصور القديمة ومنهجية داعش

أقول أن مقتل هؤلاء الشباب بهذه الطريقة الانتقامية والبشعة
يضع في تصوراتنا أن الدور القادم قد يكون على أي واحد منا
وربما النعي القادم يحمل اسم واحد منا ...

وعلى الحركات الأزوادية إعادة النظر في الموقف جيدا ..
فقد ولي زمان المجاملات القبلية ولم يعد مكان للمجاملات السياسية.

Non-Official Account 3, September 2015

Il est devant la CPI,pas parcequ'il est terroriste,mais parcequ'il est TARGUI !!!

Maintenant qu'il s'agit d'un Targui,le monde entier vibre de solidarité dans les qualifications et dans les stigmatisations,quelle aberration !

Il n'y aura jamais de paix dans ce monde tant que l'injustice devient un terrain fertile pour les inconscients...

quand nous qualifions la Communauté internationale de groupe de bandits,nous n'avons peut être pas tort, au regard de leur mépris pour l'espèce humaine et particulièrement à l'endroit des Touaregs ...des monuments qui passent devant des vies humaines,une incohérence,qui reflète l'image réelle de l'ONU.

Nous rappelons à la CPI que de 1963 à nos jours le peuple de l'azawad,notamment sa composante blanche n'a connu que massacres et humiliations sans

hésitation par l'armée malienne, y compris des femmes et des enfants, depuis 2013, sous les yeux de la communauté internationale, en tête de laquelle, la France de Barkhane, de << DROITS DE L'HOMME >>, sans aucun bruit de la part de ceux qui compatissent pour la destruction des monuments. Si la communauté internationale veut être crédible et écoutée, elle aurait dû, interpellé le capitaine Konaté, le célèbre bourreau des Touaregs et des Arabes, dans le sillage de

l'opération Serval, le capitaine Beredougou Koné, l'auteur des massacres historiques de Leré, le capitaine Dibi Silla Diarra, ou le boucher de l'Adrar... tous ces poltrons et criminels qui n'ont jamais été inquiétés pour avoir commis de génocide et crime contre l'humanité, au contraire, ils ont été tous promus, félicités pour leur barbarie... la CPI est attendue aussi pour les traduire devant ses organes, à moins qu'elle ne soit une CPI de couleur et de préférence...