

REBEL DIPLOMACY IN THE SAHEL

Analysing rebel groups' use of public diplomacy – the cases
of the MNLA and Ansar Dine

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Abstract

How do rebels choose to interact with foreign audiences, why do they do it, and what factors may explain variation in such strategic communications? Developments in technology, specifically in instant communication and social media, have transformed what it means to have power and a voice on the international stage. In the post-Cold War and post 9/11 world, it became clear that ‘winning hearts and minds’ of foreign publics had become important for policymakers. One of the subsequent theoretical schools that aimed to investigate this phenomenon was public diplomacy. Public diplomacy was previously state-centric, investigating how governments appealed to foreign audiences. In line with a recent line of research, however, this thesis looks at how non-state actors may strategically interact with such audiences. Using Gilboa’s Nonstate Transnational Model of Public Diplomacy and Leonard’s variables of public diplomacy, the strategic interaction with foreign audiences of two rebel groups in the Sahel is analysed. Firstly, the MNLA, a Tuareg secessionist group active in Mali. Secondly, a Salafist group called Ansar al-Dine, also Malian, but one that has been declared a terrorist organization, has acted across Malian borders, and has ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). By juxtaposing two rebel groups with entirely different aims and ideologies, this thesis aims to propose first steps in researching the public diplomacy by rebels, an area as of yet very understudied, and infer broad conclusions about factors that may explain variation in rebels’ public diplomacy choices.

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1. Introduction

How do rebels choose to interact with foreign audiences? There are plenty of examples that illustrate cases in which rebels have deliberately and proactively engaged with audiences that were not directly part of the conflict the rebels were engaged in. In the civil war against the Sri Lankan government, the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) actively lobbied their cause in various third party states by sending out political counsellors and establishing offices in foreign countries (Huang, 2016). In Libya's civil war, the rebel-organized National Transition Council (NTC) used Twitter to rally material support from the United States (B. T. Jones & Mattiacci, 2017). In the 1990s, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) changed the character of their conflict with the Nigerian government and Royal Dutch Shell from an ethnic to an environmental issue, and were thereby able to increase media interest to such an extent that the group became a champion of environmental NGOs (Bob, 2005a). Meanwhile, rebel organizations that utilize terror methods such as Al-Qaeda actively use social media including Twitter and YouTube to recruit fighters, raise material aid, and to outline their version of the conflicts they are partaking in to a world-wide audience (Yarchi, 2016).

How is one to understand how and why rebels engage with the foreign publics, and how can one understand variation in how they do so? The majority of research on rebels has mainly focused on two features: firstly, internal features to armed groups, such as the differences in their objectives and how they use violence, group identity and ideologies, and the relationship with the local population with which they interact (Arjona, 2009; Crocker, Chester A; Hampson & Aall, 2007; Mampilly, 2011a; Robbin, 2014; Weinstein, 2006). Secondly, research has looked at external factors, such as the role of military action and communication in counter-insurgencies, and discussions surrounding limited statehood and its relationship with the creation and perpetuation of rebel groups (Heger & Jung, 2017; Shurkin, Pezard, & Zimmerman, 2017; Warren, 2017). Rebels' engagement with external parties such as third-party states, foreign civil societies or NGOs, represent a relatively recent development in the literature that looks at violent non-state actors. As of yet, not much has been written on the subject.

Owing to the fact that rebel engagement with foreign audiences is a relatively new academic subject, the question of how to understand rebels' strategic use of communication with these audiences has been approached from different fields of study. The phenomenon has been studied in the discipline of political science, as well as others, such as the discipline of communications. It has been approached from a variety of fields of study, including

interdisciplinary ones, such as rebel governance and propaganda. In this thesis, the theoretical field adopted is that of public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is a sub-field of diplomatic studies, that was perhaps best defined by Bruce Gregory, who argued that it should be understood as “an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes and behaviour; to build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values” (Gregory, 2012: 353). Despite Gregory’s comprehensive definition that includes non-state actors in the theoretical framework, public diplomacy has almost exclusively been applied to states (Gilboa, 2008; Pacher, 2017).

The study of the strategic communications¹ by rebels towards foreign publics has taken researchers all over the world. One area that has not been studied extensively enough yet, despite an extremely varied landscape of rebel groups, is the Sahel. The region was once described as “a toxic cocktail of rebels, weapons, refugees, drought, smugglers, and violent Islamic militants” (Stewart, 2013: 3). Owing to the variety in rebel groups, the region provides a veritable laboratory to investigate how various rebels communicate with foreign audiences.

This thesis, therefore, aims to stimulate debate on topics that the literature has not yet explored: firstly, it aims to add understanding on rebels’ engagements with foreign publics. Secondly, it aims to investigate these communications through the lens of the field of public diplomacy, thereby adding the non-state element to a state-oriented school. Finally, it seeks to contribute to understanding one of the more volatile and complex landscapes in the world in terms of violent non-state actors, namely the Sahel. Though it will be further discussed below, it is worth highlighting here why public diplomacy provides a good insight into studying the rebel engagements with foreign audiences. Daryl Copeland, a scholar of public diplomacy, stated that within “the information-saturated 21st century, the party with the best story, the most compelling narrative, is most likely to win the day” (Copeland, 2013). Copeland applied this definition to states, though it can be argued that his statement is equally, if not more, applicable to rebels. In order to explore the nexus between public diplomacy and rebel groups, therefore, this thesis is guided by the following research question: *Why, and how do rebels in the Sahel engage in public diplomacy, and what may explain variation between groups?*

¹ ‘Strategic communications’ is a term that is understood by many as a variant of public diplomacy employed by the security communities of governments (MoD) and international organizations. In this thesis, only the term ‘public diplomacy’ will be used as the umbrella term describing the phenomenon, with ‘strategic communications’ considered one facet of public diplomacy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Public Diplomacy

The following section elaborates on the development of the school of public diplomacy, its place within the field of study of diplomacy, and the difficulties in using it as a theoretical concept. It will then briefly analyse two central debates within the school, namely the audiences towards which public diplomacy is targeted, and the role of non-state actors. The second section of the literature review focuses specifically on the public diplomacy of rebels.

The school of public diplomacy has been confused with, and approached from, a wide variety schools of thought including public relations (PR), propaganda, international public relations (IPR), public affairs, and psychological warfare (Gilboa, 2008; Melissen, 2005). Most recently, and arguably most comprehensively, it has been a sub-school of the school of diplomacy, known as public diplomacy. The variety of approaches to public diplomacy led Eytan Gilboa, a public diplomacy scholar, to argue that no “comprehensive and integrated framework” exists for the school, and that diversity of opinion about where some of the concepts end, where others begin, and how they overlap, persists (Gilboa, 2008: 73). These influences led Gilboa to argue that public diplomacy is “probably one of the most multidisciplinary areas in modern scholarship”, and though some of its weakness may be found in this fact, it is also a strength of the school (Gilboa, 2008: 56). Despite some confusion about the subject, and despite the influence of many other theoretical schools on the concept of public diplomacy, it has become a term used both by scholars and by practitioners.

The difference between the umbrella-school of diplomacy and the school of public diplomacy is most often described in terms of the actors that undertake public diplomacy and the audience that is targeted. Traditional diplomacy is orchestrated between state actors of different countries, and is highly formal, institutionalized, interpersonal, and used for signalling a country’s position, its grievances, or to create alliances (Gilboa, 2001: 2). Public diplomacy, on the other hand, is more fluid in who may exercise it and who the targeted audience is. This distinction has drawn some resistance, as some have argued that public diplomacy has, in the 21st century, become so integral to the field of diplomacy that it is unnecessary to classify it as a sub-set of diplomacy, and rather believe that it has become part of mainstream diplomacy (Melissen, 2005: 11). In the words of Gregory, “public diplomacy is what many more diplomatic actors do much or most of the time” (Gregory, 2012: 353). However, considering the tensions that still exist in the definition of public diplomacy, as well as the fact that rebels

cannot be said to exercise true diplomacy as they are not a state, this thesis will remain grounded within the theoretical framework recognized as ‘public diplomacy’.

Public diplomacy experienced its first boom in interest during the Cold War, as it became clear that ‘winning hearts and minds’ as an alternative to military methods of war-making had become important. The United States and the Soviet Union employed broadcasting and other methods to capture publics in various countries and convince them of the superiority of their own ideologies (Gilboa, 2008; Melissen, 2005). The 9/11 attacks and the war in Iraq re-emphasized that engaging with foreign publics was essential in what appeared to be an ideological war against radical Islam (Melissen, 2005). In the course of the 21st century, the significance and emphasis placed on public diplomacy has only increased. In the current context of hyper-connectivity and instant communication, public opinion has become a force to be reckoned with in international politics, and technological advancements in instant communications have revolutionised the way in which social movements are created and perpetuated (Copeland, 2013; Hocking & Melissen, 2015; Kampf, Manor, & Segev, 2015; Melissen & Caesar-Gordon, 2016).

Public diplomacy, therefore, is a relatively new field that has increasingly captured the imagination of academicians and policymakers alike in their attempts to understand how states and groups communicate and establish relations with foreign publics. The following section will analyse and point out two main debates ongoing in the field of study, namely the definition of publics in public diplomacy, and the role of non-state actors.

The definition of ‘publics’ in the field of public diplomacy has garnered a lot of debate. A ‘public’ is most commonly defined as individuals, or sets of individuals, with whom a public diplomat establishes and maintains a relationship (Hallahan, 2000). There have been various attempts at creating a typology of the various publics that exist (Fitzpatrick, 2012). No consensus exists on such a typology, though Andreas Pacher’s work is useful in this regard. He proposed a typology of six strategic types of publics: governmental and nongovernmental, foreign and domestic, and elite and non-elite – a typology which he then values on two dimensions: firstly, the public’s strategic importance related to the diplomat’s objectives, and secondly, the power of the individual or set of individuals within their group (Pacher, 2017).

Part of the debate on publics is that the discussion is intertwined with the aims with which public diplomacy is undertaken. Signitzer and Coombs, for example, argued that public diplomacy occurs when “governments and private individuals and groups influence directly or indirectly those public attitudes and opinions which bear directly on another government’s foreign policy decisions” (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992: 138). In this definition, Signitzer and

Coombs typify public diplomacy as an alternative way of affecting a foreign government – in this way, the final audience of public diplomacy is the government, not a public. However, others have broadened the definition of the aims of public diplomacy, such as, for example, Jan Melissen, who argued that “the shorthand definition that immediately conveys the essence of public diplomacy is that it involves ‘getting people on your side’” (Melissen, 2006: 23). Unlike other definitions such as the one by Signitzer and Coombs, Melissen’s definition does not restrict public diplomacy to affecting foreign governments, and instead implicitly allows publics a much greater role as targets of public diplomacy. Considering the increased importance of civil society in international affairs, seeing only governments as the final audience of public diplomacy does not reflect the realities of who such diplomatic efforts are aimed at in this digitized, instant communications-oriented 21st century.

Public diplomacy is a relatively new field of study, and its application to non-state actors, even newer still. The application of public diplomacy to non-state actors and rebels is increasingly seen as acceptable and necessary. Phenomena such as the rise of the impact and significance of public opinion, technological improvements in instant communications, and new geopolitical contexts, such as the Cold War and the post-9/11 security paradigm, have all played a part in cementing the role of non-state actors on the international stage. Owing to such contextual developments, various scholars and practitioners have noted the increased importance of non-state actors as practitioners of public diplomacy. In his book *Real-Time Diplomacy: Politics and Power in the Social Media Era*, Seib argued that in the 21st century, “ordinary members of the public, through the use of information technology, are developing new competencies for global engagement and mobilization across a cross-section of economic and security issues” (Seib, 2012: 7). Non-state actors, therefore, are increasingly recognized not only as significant audiences for communication efforts such as public diplomacy, but are also increasingly able and willing to wield such power on a global scale. Rebels, as a subgroup of non-state actors, absolutely fall within the group that may use public diplomacy. Rebels have often been extremely vocal in communicating who they are and what they want to foreign publics. The examples used by Seib, such as the Arab Spring in 2011 and Iran in the 2000s illustrate this point (Seib, 2012). Digitization allowed groups and individuals not previously interested or capable of expressing their desires on the world stage to do so.

Public diplomacy, therefore, has increasingly become a more important subfield of the school of diplomacy. In parallel, it has also become more significant to policy-makers as the geopolitical context moved from the Cold War to the 9/11 security paradigm. The rise of digitization and its role in instant communication and social media is the latest development in

the study of public diplomacy. Such developments have changed the game of public diplomacy and have transformed ‘the public’ both into a more important target and actor of public diplomacy.

2.2 Rebel Diplomacy

So little has been written about the phenomena of rebel diplomacy that there cannot be said to be one large school of thought surrounding the subject. In fact, rebel diplomacy is informed by as large a variety of theoretical schools as public diplomacy analysed in the previous section. This second part of the literature review, therefore, puts together the work done on comparable phenomena that are sometimes described with a different label. Rebels, in this instance, are defined as violent non-state armed groups operating in national or transnational geographic areas.

One place in which one can find work done on rebel diplomacy is in the school of rebel governance. In an influential book edited by Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly, named *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, Bridget Coggins wrote about a concept that she coined ‘rebel diplomacy’ (Coggins, 2015). She conceptualized ‘rebel diplomacy’ as “when rebels engage in strategic communication with foreign governments or agents, or with an occupying regime they deem foreign” (Coggins, 2015, 106). Coggins’ argues, in line with the theoretical school of rebel governance, that more emphasis should be placed on the non-violent actions and communications of armed non-state actors during a time of conflict. She finds that effective diplomacy can provide short-term benefits, such as resources, support, or training, and it can finally help violent non-state actors achieve their goals of new statehood or legitimacy for a new regime.

Coggins’s conceptualization of ‘rebel diplomacy’ focuses on relations between violent non-state armed groups and states through ‘official’ bi- or multilateral diplomacy. Significantly, however, she spends the majority of her article arguing that such relations are very rare, owing to political, social, normative, and logistic hurdles that stand in the way (Coggins, 2015). As such, her work constitutes more of an analysis of the hurdles faced by rebel groups attempting to use diplomacy than an attempt to empirically provide evidence for such phenomena.

Coggins’ argument is also based on the assumption that rebel groups are working towards independence or secession, and she is not alone in this. Her work is limited in that it depends on the assumption that only non-state actors with the desire for statehood, or seeking legitimacy for a new regime, will engage in diplomacy. However, one may question whether

looking at armed groups through the lens of nation-building really constitutes the best way of analysis into such phenomena. Zachariah Mampilly, for example, argued that understanding armed groups through the lens of the aim of statehood is a teleological argument, instead of focusing on these groups as a “discrete analytical category itself” (Mampilly, 2011, 27). This thesis will look at the Sahel region, where not all rebel groups are secessionist. For example, the Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria also fall under this conceptualization of a ‘rebel group’, though they are by no means secessionist (Mikailu, 2016). Similarly, groups that utilize terrorist methods and are oriented around an Islamic Salafist ideology are also rebel groups whose public diplomacy has been studied (Yarchi, 2016).

Similar to Coggins’ understanding of what rebel diplomacy is, Reyko Huang’s work defined rebel diplomacy as “a rebel group’s conduct of foreign affairs during civil war for the purpose of advancing its military and political objectives (...). [In other words] a rebel group’s wartime political tact—as “rebelcraft”—in the same way that diplomacy is a form of statecraft in international relations” (Huang, 2016: 90). With this definition, Huang researches quasi-official actions taken by rebel groups, such as communicating with governments and setting up ‘embassies’. Her research focuses on quantitatively finding and measuring the impact of a variety of variables that explain why or why not, and how, rebel groups pursue diplomacy. She identifies variables such as whether rebels are secessionist, Marxist, whether they provide schools (being indicative of whether they engage in governance), and whether they have a legal political wing (Huang, 2016: 111). In fact, she finds statistically significant results that show that secessionism is indeed a relatively good predictor of whether or not a group will engage in rebel diplomacy, as argued by Coggins. However, because her work is dated, it does not take into consideration the more modern methods of communication used, such as social media, which have dramatically decreased the cost and difficulty of reaching audiences. For any conflicts in the 21st century, especially after the turn of 2010, disregarding such methods of communication as part of rebel diplomacy means missing out on the majority of communication efforts that rebels undertake.

Rooted firmly in the modern methods of communication is Clifford Bob. Bob aimed to understand why certain armed groups became *causes célèbres* on the international stage and others did not. His book, *The Marketing of Rebellion - Insurgents, Media, and International Activism*, studied the efforts by armed groups to gain support from NGOs and Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs), composed of journalists, activists, bureaucrats, foundations, and NGOs. He looked specifically at the risky and proactive strategies that rebel groups employ to

rally external help in a context of domestic despotism and international indifference, a process he labelled ‘rebel marketing’ (Bob, 2005b).

Bob’s work measures the success of ‘rebel marketing’ by looking at the international response, and whether or not groups were given the support they lobbied for. His book is important in that he does not only focus on the official use of communication between an armed group and a foreign government – he broadens the tools that armed groups may use significantly, including social media, broadcasting, personal physical exchanges, and much more. In fact, by doing so, Bob’s work takes into consideration a much more comprehensive image of the capabilities of rebels in engaging with foreign actors than Coggins and Huang. Bob’s analysis is important and innovative firstly because of how he measures the success of rebel marketing, whilst also relying heavily on new technologies to understand how this ‘rebel marketing’ is undertaken.

Taking into consideration the recent developments in instant communications and technology in the public diplomacy of rebel groups is a rather rare avenue of research. A recent approach to the use of technology in rebel diplomacy is the work done by Jones and Mattiacci, who argue that social media, and in particular Twitter, is a unique form of public diplomacy through which rebel groups embroiled in a conflict can garner international support (B. T. Jones & Mattiacci, 2017). Their work analysed the Libyan civil war and found that rebel’s public diplomacy provided them with an important tool of image projection. Their research provides the only quantitative empirical work done on the phenomenon of rebel diplomacy by means of social media, and they produce a methodological and theoretical framework to approach such issues.

Another facet of research that has been able to pull digitization and rebel communications with foreign audiences together is research done on groups that utilise terrorist methods. These fall within the ‘Islamic extremism’ umbrella that has been such a large part of the post-9/11 paradigm. Terrorists’ use of social media, videos distributed on the web, instant communication with wide publics internationally, have fascinated observers and produced a host of research. Such research has taken many different formats. Some have analysed the social media usage of terrorist groups in terms of quantity, others have focused on doing in-depth discourse analyses among many other avenues of research (Al-dayel & Anfinson, 2018; Menkhaus, 2014; Torres-Soriano, 2016; O. Walther & Christopoulos, 2012). Interesting in particular is Moran Yarchi (2016) who used the theoretical framework of public diplomacy on four terrorist organizations: Hamas, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State. He found that terrorist groups use public diplomacy to varying extents, differing primarily in whether they

aim to change the international environment in which they operate (Yarchi, 2016). One of the most important implications of Yarchi's work is that it improved our understanding about the groups themselves, how they portray themselves, and also what their aims are. Yarchi's work also demonstrates that the methodologies used and advocated by scholars of public diplomacy are applicable to non-state groups.

Significantly, the work done by scholars interested in terrorist public diplomacy, such as Yarchi, Ranstorp (2007), and Holbrook (2014), to name a few, has similarities to the work done by other scholars who focused on rebels, as opposed to 'terrorists'. In literature focused on terrorists, in which the most often used examples are ISIS and Al-Qaeda, these groups' communications with foreign publics has been studied extensively by academicians and policymakers alike. However, the two strands of analysis – of terrorists versus all other types of rebels – have been religiously kept apart. Taking a wider definition of rebel groups to include terrorists as well as rebels, therefore, allows one to use methods, analyses, and patterns discerned in both schools. After all, one could argue that terrorists are rebel groups too, and that the only difference between terrorists and rebels is the label they get bear and perhaps the methods they use.

2.21 Academic and Social Relevance: Concluding the Literature Review

The academic relevance of this thesis is therefore threefold. Firstly, it aims to apply public diplomacy, a field of study that has remained tied primarily to states, to non-state actors. Secondly, it aims to understand specifically the way the way that rebels engage in public diplomacy. Thirdly, it aims to take into consideration the latest developments of communication technology in such engagements. Rebel diplomacy remains an ill-defined and insufficiently researched phenomenon, that merits more research. The use of social media in understanding trends in rebel diplomacy is essential, as it has revolutionised the access armed groups have to the international sphere. As Jones notes, the future of civil wars lie to a great extent in new technologies in mass and social media (S. G. Jones & Johnston, 2013). Much work remains to be done to understand the variation in communication methods and aims of armed groups throughout the world, and the reasons why they engage in it.

One should also cast a thought to the societal relevance of this thesis. Social media provides unfettered access for academicians to get closer to rebel groups than ever before. At the same time, social media in its various forms is increasingly coming under fire for being a haven for terrorist groups and violent non-state actors, and access is increasingly being

restricted. At the time of writing, Facebook is in hot water regarding its role in distributing fake news, and firms such as Cambridge Analytica have demonstrated that social movements can be hijacked or even created from scratch by those who have the means (Cadwalladr, 2017; Cadwalladr, 2018). In reaction to ‘the dark side’ of social media, the space is becoming increasingly regulated. Researchers are taking advantage of a unique period of time in our history where such movements and their communications are still largely available to the public.

The post-9/11 paradigm on security, and the fact that Islamic extremism is present in the Sahel, has meant that the majority of the solutions to the crises in that region devised by international and regional players have focused on combating these crises militarily, specifically in reaction to groups that are Islamic. In the realm of practitioners, many have stressed that understanding how these groups are different, how they operate, what really their needs and interests are, and how they communicate these, is necessary (Armstrong, 2013; Boeke, 2016a; Francis, 2013; Lecocq et al., 2013; Lounnas, 2014; Stewart, 2013).

Finally, in academic as well as other circles, rebels tend to be reduced to a set distinction of definitions: either they are ‘warlords’, or ‘rent-seekers’, concerned primarily with the extraction of resources in the political-economy line of theory proposed by Collier, for example (Crocker, Chester A; Hampson & Aall, 2007); or they are understood in terms of a desire to create a new state and are analysed primarily in the lens of state-building. In its most extreme fashion, these groups are considered ‘irrational’ actors for the violence they choose to use. Understanding the agency behind how these groups choose to engage with the international stage is an essential and overlooked aspect of violent non-state actors, and one that may improve the world’s interaction with them.

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Gilboa’s Nonstate Transnational Model of understanding diplomacy is one of the few models that accounts for non-state actors (Gilboa, 2001, 2008). Gilboa defines this model as being designed to analyse the public diplomacy used by NGOs, non-state groups, and individuals across national boundaries by using global news networks and media events (Ibid.: 60). His model is based to some extent on the assumption that non-state actors engage in public diplomacy with the ultimate aim of affecting other governments (Gilboa, 2008). However, considering the literature reviewed above and the impact that publics other than governments can have today, this assumption will not be carried forward. Instead, Gilboa’s model will be

used to investigate how public diplomacy is used to achieve “their domestic goals by creating linkages with influential individuals, and groups in foreign societies” (Gilboa, 2001: 6).

Gilboa’s Nonstate Transnational Model will be supported by Leonard’s variables that he proposed in his 2002 book, *Public Diplomacy* (Leonard, 2002). The variables proposed by Leonard are particularly helpful in a comparative analysis, which is the method that this thesis will adopt. The framework, as put together by Gilboa based on Leonard’s work, distinguished between three dimensions of public diplomacy: news management, strategic communication, and relationship building, as well as three spheres: political/military, economic, and social/cultural. Leonard also included two types of diplomacy and five diplomacy instruments, but these are less relevant for use in studies on the public diplomacy of rebels, and outdoes the scope of this work, and as such, will not be used.² Gilboa’s Nonstate Transnational Model will therefore be used in conjunction with the three dimensions and three spheres of public diplomacy as proposed by Leonard. However, where Gilboa and Leonard’s model falls short, is that it does not allow to specifically analyse why there might be variation in the public diplomacy used by different rebel groups. This is why the last and final part of the theoretical framework that will be used in this thesis is based on work done by Huang. (Huang, 2016).

Huang’s work is, as mentioned above, one of the few that accounted for the reasons why variation might exist in the use of diplomacy by rebel groups. According to Huang’s research, secessionist groups are statistically more likely to engage in diplomacy than non-secessionist groups because they seek formal international recognition (Huang, 2016). However, as illustrated by the literature review above, this assertion is by no means certain. A variety of rebel groups previously not associated with public diplomacy have been seen to have used it, such as rebels that operate under Islamic aims (Yarchi, 2016). Moreover, Huang’s work does not take into consideration recent developments in communications technologies. As such, her work should be qualified with regards to more modern methods of communication: future research should investigate to what extent secessionist aims may indeed be a factor in expecting a rebel group to use rebel diplomacy.

This thesis will use only one of Huang’s variables that explain the variation between the rebel diplomacy: whether or not the group is secessionist. It was beyond the scope of this paper to analyse more than one variable. This thesis will, therefore, essentially carry out a scope-testing exercise: Huang identified secessionism as a significant variable in explaining

² These include: cooperation and competition; and five public diplomacy instruments: NGO diplomacy, Diaspora diplomacy, political party diplomacy, brand diplomacy, and business diplomacy.

variation in how groups employ rebel diplomacy – however, the literature review illustrated that non-secessionist groups also use public diplomacy. Therefore, this thesis aims to take a closer look at secessionism as a variable and its effect on variation in the use of rebel diplomacy. In doing so, it will compare a secessionist group to one that does not have secessionist aims. Moreover, based on the work analysed in the literature review, Leonard's variables were applied to the research conducted by those who had studied the phenomenon of rebel diplomacy. Based on the work done by Coggins, Huang, Bob, Yarchi, and several others, therefore, Leonards variables were used to determine whether the groups analysed were involved in either strategic communication, news management, or relationship building.

From all of these various sources of input, therefore, based on Huang's argument that whether a group is secessionist will affect whether they become involved in rebel diplomacy, as well as Leonards variables of public diplomacy, and Gilboa's Nonstate Transnational Model of public diplomacy, the following three hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Both groups that are secessionist in nature as well as groups that are not secessionist will proactively engage in rebel diplomacy

H2: Secessionist groups are more likely to engage in the strategic communication and relationship building aspects of rebel diplomacy

H3: Non-secessionist groups are more likely to engage in the news management aspect of rebel diplomacy.

The limitations of this theoretical framework and hypothesis should also be mentioned here. Firstly, the hypothesis does not include a measure for the *success* of the public diplomacy that the rebels engage in. This is contrary to some other important literature in the field of public diplomacy including work done by Jones and Mattiacci (2017) and Bob (2005). Though analysing the response to the rebel diplomacy employed by groups would be a good measure of the groups' diplomatic success, analysing both the differences in the aims and tools of rebel diplomacy as well as its success is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Important to note, therefore is that this thesis will not seek to find a definitive answer to what may fully explain variation in rebels' use of public diplomacy, nor will it seek generalizable results. Rather, it will take a first step in comparing the methods and aims of rebel diplomacy as used by two groups with very different ideological aims in order to further understanding how different rebel groups may initiate public diplomacy.

3.1 Methodology

The methodology that this thesis will employ is that of a small-N comparative case study, combined with content and discourse analysis of the rebels' output. Gilboa argued that case studies were a useful way of studying public diplomacy, as the strength of that method would be to "prepare the ground for generalizations needed to construct theories and models" (Gilboa, 2008: 70). It is not the aim of this thesis to propose new theories, but using such a methodology has other uses. Bob (2005) used a comparative case study approach and described his method as "unabashedly qualitative" (Bob, 2005: 10). Whilst he admitted that qualitative case studies were not appropriate tools to answer all types of social science questions, he argued strongly that "in seeking to grasp the motivations and strategies of two or more sets of political actors, particularly as they interact with one another, qualitative analysis is superior to quantitative or statistical methods" (Bob, 2005: 10). By juxtaposing the rebel diplomacy of two rebel groups with very different aims, several inferences may be made about the differences and similarities between the diplomacy practiced by different rebel groups. As Gilboa argue, "comparative analysis is essential because it demonstrates both similarities and differences among actors and programs" (Gilboa, 2008: 70).

The methodology that will be employed is a qualitative analysis of the output created by the rebel groups analysed. A general database containing significant output generated by the rebel group was collated, and organized in chronological order. The data contained in this database includes posts on social media websites, including but not limited to Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram, and contact with the rebel group as reported on by news local, regional and international news agencies. Reports regarding interpersonal attempts at relationships are also included.³ The data is primarily geared towards covering and understanding the rebel groups' engagement with foreign influential individuals, media companies, NGOs, artists, civil society, and foreign governments. Particularly significant events for the rebel groups were analysed more in-depth, such as the making or breaking of alliances, important battles, or contact with influential actors. For all the data gathered, but especially for the data gathered of these particularly significant events, in-depth discourse and content analysis, as well elements of process tracing were used in order to trace causal mechanisms behind the decisions made in the engagement with foreign actors of the rebel groups.

³ A copy of this database is available upon request

Case studies suffer from several operational weaknesses. Firstly, it is difficult to account for all the possible independent variables that may affect the phenomenon one wishes to study, augmenting the scope for possible confounding variables. Secessionism may only be one of a variety of different factors that affect why and how a group might use rebel diplomacy. As Mampilly argued, there is no one master variable to explain why armed groups choose to provide governance, and the same can be said for rebel diplomacy (Arjona, Kasfir, & Mampilly, 2015). Moreover, by having already identified secessionism as the main independent variable of interest, one risks selecting evidence that fits the expected trend. There is, therefore, the danger of making conclusions based on spurious inferences (Levy, 2008). The following two sections, in which the case selection as well as the selection and operationalization of the variables will be explored, will explain how these operational weaknesses of Small-N case studies were anticipated and mitigated to the largest degree possible.

3.2 Case Selection

Of the rebel groups present in the Sahel, many have attempted to stake their claim and tell their story, and have done so through strategic choices in their modes of communication with publics and leaders on the international stage. Many of these groups have Twitter accounts and websites, and are active in creating public messages that are distributed to various audiences, from foreign civil societies to third party governments, for support of all kinds. The case for this small-N case study was not based on random selection, inducing the serious risk of selection bias. However, randomness in the selection of cases in a small-N study is often not possible. As such, in accordance with Levy, the selection of cases for this thesis was done carefully, and guided by theory (Levy, 2008).

The two cases that have been selected are Ansar Dine and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA by its French acronym), from the period of January 2011 to April 2018. The MNLA's aims are secessionist, intent on declaring and maintaining the independence of the Republic of Azawad, a territory that roughly covers much of the North of Mali. Ansar Dine, on the other hand, seeks to impose strict Sharia law across Mali, keeping the country intact but implementing a rigid theocracy. Its relationship with AQIM indicates that Ansar Dine also harboured transnational aims in countries such as Nigeria, Chad, and Mauritania.

In other ways, the groups are remarkably similar. Both exist within Mali, and they fall within the transnational trends that have defined many of the conflicts in the Sahel, operating

across borders when it suits them. Both are also allegedly involved in illicit trading across the Sahel (Molenaar & van Damme, 2017; Strazzari, 2015). Both have strong roots within similar ethnic groups. The MNLA is a Tuareg group, that is composed of several of Tuareg tribes, including Songhai, Peulh and Moor (MNLAmov.net). Similarly, Ansar Dine is also primarily composed of Tuareg, hailing primarily from the Ifora tribe (Cline, 2013). The groups were allied for a short time from 2011 to the start of 2012, and Ansar Dine's leader, Iyad Ag Ghaly, was one of the most prominent leaders of the 1990 to 1995 Tuareg rebellion that was the precursor to the formation of the MNLA.

Usually, in case studies, cases should be independent to allow for unaltered analysis. However, in the case of Ansar Dine and the MNLA, the two groups shared common foundations and common aims, at least for a few months in 2012. Though the groups being related does increase the chances of drawing conclusions that are spurious, using the MNLA and Ansar Dine as two cases in a small-N comparative analysis is still a relevant academic exercise. This is especially because by being so similar in all but one variable (the main independent variable of interest) several significant potentially confounding variables can be controlled. These control variables are based on the literature, especially Huang, Bob, and Jones and Mattiacci's work, and include variables they deemed important enough to either study or control for in their own work. Control variables include the country of origin of the rebel group, tribal elements, their source of wealth, the constellation of regional and national powers that affect the group, and state penetration into the area in which the armed group is present. In both groups, these variables are all similar enough that they are less likely to be confounding variables in explaining the variation in the rebel diplomacy used. Any confounding variables that may have been overlooked will be taken into consideration in the conclusion.

The timeline of this thesis was chosen because it was in 2011 that both groups were created and became active, shortly before the 2012 coup d'état that plunged Mali into violence. During this period of insecurity and volatility, a wide variety of actors, including the government and an array of armed groups were attempting to stake their claim in Mali by military means and by means of rebel diplomacy. The disarray of the time illustrates exactly the actions that rebel groups undertook to stake their claim in the country, and to define their narrative on who they were, what they wanted to achieve, and who they were going to communicate with to achieve this. The temporal scope of this thesis ends in early 2018. This extended timeline not only ensures that the thesis remains as relevant as possible, but is also a result of the data that forms the basis of the research: the majority of the data being mined from

social media and instant communications provides the luxury of tracing the phenomenon under study all the way until the present day.

3.3 Variables and Data

The main independent variable is the rebel groups' aim, whether they are secessionist or not. The independent variable will be operationalized by looking at any output by the rebel groups that elucidate their views on who they are and what they want to achieve. Website, blogs, and statements made orally in radio or television broadcasts will be used for this, as well as any judgments made by external actors.

The main dependent variable is the rebel diplomacy employed by the selected cases. This is operationalized over three dimensions: strategic communication, news management, and relationship building. Within these dimensions, the following spheres will be taken into account: political/military, economic, and social/cultural. Data will be found for each variable by looking at the following tools: websites, blogs, social media accounts, radio appearances, television appearances, reports by think tanks and other academic institutions, news media, and accounts of personal meetings between the representatives of the selected rebel groups and third-party actors whether they be governments, NGOs, or civil society.

There are several limitations to the data that will be used. Firstly, language barriers. The researcher does not speak Arabic, and some of the output created by Ansar Dine is in that language. However, owing to academic interest in terrorist groups, much of the Arabic has been translated into English. Moreover, both the MNLA's and Ansar Dine's Mali-based approach means that much of their communication is done in French, a language that the researcher does speak fluently. The majority of the data used will be primary materials – in other words, output directly created by the two groups. However, owing to time restraint and language restraints, secondary materials, such as reports by think tanks, news media reporting on rebel communications, and other academic investigations, will also form a valuable part of the material used.

4. Background to the Malian Conflict, Ansar Dine, and the MNLA

The Malian insurgency officially began in 2012, but was preceded by significant social grievances in the North of the country that gave rise to the formation of Tuareg irredentist groups and Islamic groups. The following is an overview of the Malian insurgency, with a

focus specifically on introducing the two main cases to be analysed, the MNLA and Ansar Dine.

The story of the Malian insurgency starts with the MNLA. The MNLA was created in October 2011. It was formed out of a young, political, tech-savvy Tuareg movement, called the Mouvement National de l'Azawad (MNA), which merged with a more hard-line and military-oriented group to create the MNLA. The group's main objective was freeing the people of Azawad from the illegal occupation of Azawadian territory by the Malian government (MNLA.mov, 2011). It launched its offensive on 17 January 2012 by attacking an army garrison in the town of Menaka near the Niger border. By March, MNLA leaders announced that their forces had seized control of most of northern Mali.



Figure 1

On 6 April, the MNLA formally declared the independence of Azawad – Figure 1 illustrates the geographic range of the newly found Republic (Centanni, 2012). On 15 June 2012, Bilal Ag Acherif was formally designated as the interim president of Azawad (Cline, 2013).

The formation of the MNLA must be seen as the latest in a series of Tuareg uprisings in the North of Mali dating from the first rebellion in 1918. The MNLA is primarily a Tuareg uprising, despite the fact that it has branded itself as representing all the peoples living in Azawad (Cline, 2013). The group itself described their ranks as follows: “old rebels from the uprisings of the 1990s, of 2006, fighters who have returned from Libya but who mostly participated in the liberation of that country, volunteers from the various ethnicities of northern Mali [mainly Tuareg, Songhai, Peul and Moor] and both soldiers and officers who have deserted from the Malian army” (Cline, 2013; Shurkin et al., 2017). Especially the Tuareg who returned from Libya were an impactful group. The fall of the Ghaddafi government in 2011 meant that many Malian Tuareg who had originally fled Mali's difficult economic conditions and had joined Libya's army came back. It was estimated that in October 2011, between 2,000 and 4,000 Tuareg returned to Mali, bringing weapons and trained military men from foot soldiers to high-ranking officers (Stewart, 2013).

In the south, discontent was growing about what Southern Malians perceived as the government's mishandling of the military response to the Tuareg insurgency. So much so, that

a group of disgruntled soldiers in Kati mutinied, which turned into a full blown coup d'état that would see to the fall of the Touré government (Stewart, 2013). No one expected the coup, as Mali had been lauded as the prime example of a stable multiparty democracy in Africa for 20 years, that since the 1990s had been considered by EU policy makers as a bulwark against radical Islam in Africa (Bleck & Michelitch, 2015; Solomon, 2015). However, underlying societal issues, including the perceived marginalization of Tuareg tribes in the North, budgetary differences between the North and South of Mali, and Southern discontent at concessions the government appeared willing to make to the Tuareg all led to the Malian conflict.

Another consequence of serious economic, political, and environmental grievances in the North led to the invasion of Northern Mali by regional extreme Islamic groups, and to the creation of home-grown Malian Islamic extremists. Social and environmental disparity had already been laying the foundations for religious extremism in the North of Mali. From the 1980s, the unimpressive educational infrastructure of Mali increasingly made room for madrasas to spring up – Koranic schools that teach Salafi/Wahhabi brand of Islam; by the end of the 1980s, 25% of primary school-aged children attended these schools (Chauzal & Damme, 2015; Stewart, 2013). Classes were taught in Arabic – not Mali's native language French, thereby exacerbating the differences between the North and the South (Chauzal & Damme, 2015). Drought and desertification increased food insecurity in the entirety of the Sahel – since 1998, Mali's average annual rainfall has decreased 30% (Stewart, 2013). Finally, over 53% of Mali's population is under the age of 18, and many young Northerners are unemployed (Lacroix, 2017).

One of the home-grown Islamic groups that sprung up was Ansar Dine. The name 'Ansar Dine' roughly translates to 'Defenders of the Faith'. The group was established in November 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a legendary figure on the Malian political and social scene, who remains the leader today. The group aims to impose their version of Shari'a on the country, and rehabilitate the authority and leadership of the religious elders, the *Ulema*, whilst maintaining the territorial integrity of Mali (Chauzal & Damme, 2015). The group was declared a terrorist organization in 2013 by the United States (US Department of State, 2013). It is primarily made up of Tuareg fighters, hailing in particular from the Ifoghas (also called the Iforas) tribe, one of the most powerful Tuareg tribes in the Sahel, to which Iyad Ag Ghali belongs as well. The group is also known to include Berabiche Arabs from the Timbuktu area (Francis, 2013; Lounnas, 2014). Its membership is, as far as we know, almost exclusively Malian, in what seems to be a deliberate policy on the part of the decision-makers (Welsh, 2013).

Ag Ghali’s status as legendary figure is based on a long history of being at the centre of political revolutions in Mali. He was heavily involved in the Tuareg rebellions of the 1990s, and later became involved in negotiations between Western nations, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Algeria over kidnappings in the Sahel (Stewart, 2013: 41-44; Lounnas, 2014). At the same time, he was also appointed Malian Consul to Saudi Arabia, where he was exposed to and subsequently converted to Salafism (Lounnas, 2014). His influence throughout the 1990s and well into the 21st century remains considerable. In an interview conducted by Chauzal and Damme, a young inhabitant of Agadez stated that “We always admire him as much as he is a hero” (Chauzal & Damme, 2015). Similarly, a desert mediator stated that “He can bring peace ... or war, no one in Kidal will work against him” (Chauzal & Damme, 2015). Ag Ghali has, since the formation of Ansar Dine, evaded capture.

So, by the time that the Northern Tuareg rose up in an insurgency against the Malian government, and Southern soldiers had orchestrated the military coup d’état that saw the fall of the Touré government, several Islamic groups were already active in the North of the country: Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the *Mouvement pour L’Unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest* or, in English, the Movement for the Oneness and Jihad in Western Africa – an AQIM offshoot (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine (Boeke, 2016b; Lecocq et al., 2013). These groups, in an



Figure 2

alliance with the MNLA, the biggest and most powerful Tuareg group in the region, took over the North of Mali. Once control had been established in the North, the originally secular and secessionist movement was hijacked by the militarily superior jihadist groups, who forced out the MNLA – and turned the North Islamic (Boeke, 2016b). The jihadist groups controlled Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, where they imposed strict Shari’a law, including dress regulations for women, transgressions of which were severely punished (Stewart, 2013: 41). Figure 2 illustrates the territory of Mali that was under the Islamist groups’ control as of 6 September 2012 (Centanni, 2012).

The jihadist groups governed the North until 2013, when their sudden attack on the South of Mali drew a French military intervention in retaliation (Boeke, 2016b). The French

operation, named Operation Serval, liberated the North of Mali, and Ansar Dine found itself having to lay low. Various analyses interpreted Ansar Dine's laying low not as a defeat, but rather as a tactical retreat, though there is no question that their space to operate was significantly squeezed by the French and subsequent UN offensive (Lefèvre, 2016).

In 2015, after long negotiations first in Ouagadougou and later in Algiers, a peace agreement was signed by armed rebel groups in Mali with the Malian government. The MNLA signed the peace agreement in part owing to their difficulties on the battle field. In the first three years of the conflict, the MNLA demanded the independence of Azawad. Early in 2012, it briefly allied with the Islamists in the North of Mali including Ansar Dine, AQIM, and MUJAO. When it was defeated by the Islamists and the alliance between the MNLA and the jihadists fell apart, the MNLA found itself without funds, allies, and power, forcing them to turn to the Malian government as allies, and giving up the dream of becoming independent in the process.

The peace was signed between the Malian government, the Platform, and the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), to which the MNLA belonged and had taken a leading role (Nyirabikali, 2015). In the CMA, the MNLA was joined by the *Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad* (HCUA), the *Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad* (MAA), a faction of the *Coalition du Peuple de l'Azawad* (CPA), and a splinter group of the *Coordination des Mouvements et Fronts Patriotiques de Résistance* (CMFPR-II) (Nyirabikali, 2015).

From 2015 onwards, Ansar Dine's period of relative quiet came to an end when they increased their attacks. In 2015, 106 attacks were registered as having been committed by Ansar Dine, and in 2016 this number increased by 50% to 257 attacks (Weiss, 2017b). In March 2017, Ansar Dine and one of its most active subgroups, the Macina Liberation Front, a group primarily made up of Fulani that had been tasked by Ag Ghaly to take action south of the Niger river, merged with Saharan branch of AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun (Weiss, 2017). After the merger, the group became known as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) under leadership of Iyad Ag Ghali (Weiss, 2017). Consequently, its aims became far more focused on regional and international jihad, as opposed to Mali's territorial particularities. When the group merged into JNIM in 2017, attacks increased to an all-time high.

2017 marked the peace agreement’s two-year anniversary and the end of its interim period. During this milestone it became excruciatingly clear that the negotiated peace had not managed to bring about actual peace (Lacroix, 2017). Groups integral to the peace process such as the CMA to which the MNLA belongs, Ansar Dine’s successor JNIM, as well as a host of other armed groups, continue to perpetrate attacks. Figure 3 illustrates the attacks committed in 2017 up to 17

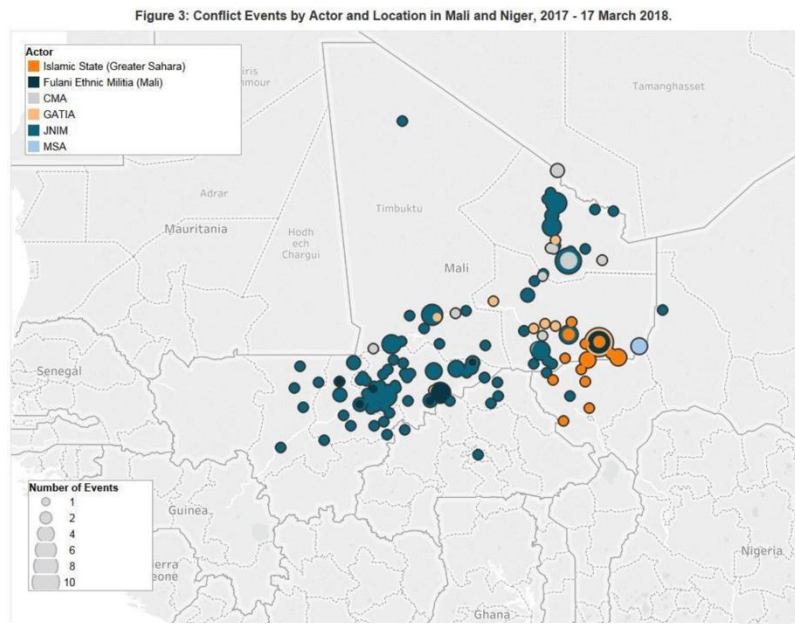


Figure 3

March 2018 by group and number of events (MENASTREAM, 2018). On 24 January 2018, the UN Security Council gave the parties to the Bamako Agreement an ultimatum: they had until March to show progress in the peace accords or face sanctions (Enca.com, 2018). Mali remains one of the most dangerous places to be a peacekeeper, and the central and Northern areas of the country, as well as the Kidal region, remain volatile at best (Duval-Smith, 2017; UN, 2018). Armed groups are still vying for power and influence in the country and in the region.

Ansar Dine and the MNLA, therefore, were both big players during the Malian conflict. The following two sections analyse the rebel diplomacy of Ansar Dine and the MNLA.

5. The Rebel Diplomacy of Ansar Dine

5.1 Strategic Communication

The strategic communications aspect of rebel diplomacy focuses on how rebels communicate their identity: who they are, what they stand for, and their overall goals. Reasons for which rebel groups might initiate such strategic communications are numerous. For Ansar Dine, it is a way of defining and advertising their particular brand of jihad. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos best stated it when he wrote that owing to there not existing one dogma or Islamic ‘pope’, there is no real unified jihadi canon – especially in the Islam of Africa, where groups

nearly never source their ideological and theological corpus from one place (Perouse de Montclos, 2018: 51). Justifying, constantly reiterating, and sometimes recalibrating the identity of the group and what they stand for in terms of religious aims, and means to achieve these, is an important aspect of Islamic extremism in Africa (Perouse de Montclos, 2018). Part of the difficulty of Ansar Dine's strategic communications was that their identity was partially imposed exogenously upon them, when the US designated them a terrorist groups in 2013, in a move that heavily affected Ansar Dine's strategic communications. There are two major media that Ansar Dine used to broadcast its strategic communications. Firstly, foreign news outlets such as television and radio broadcast media. Secondly, social media tools such as YouTube and Telegram. Each medium was used in a slightly different way and with slightly different aims.

5.11 Using the Foreign Press

Ansar Dine did not often use the press to reach out to foreign publics, and their few ventures into using this medium are suggestive of the hurdles that the group faced in engaging in strategic communications. Their efforts at using the foreign press to broadcast their strategic communications is also telling in regard to the group's aims, and the publics they intended to reach. In using news outlets to broadcast their identity, Ansar Dine's strategic communication focused on grandstanding and ideological doctrine. There were three types of foreign press that Ansar Dine used to disseminate messages: Western news agencies, regional news agencies, and news outlets tied to, and writing in favour of, other terrorist groups.

On the very rare occasions that Ansar Dine spoke to international news agencies, the group also emphasized the way they interpreted their religion and their aims for Mali. Speaking to IRIN, for example, on the 22nd of June 2012, Sand Ould Boumama explained that "Shari'a has to be applied [in Mali] whether the people like it or not, we will enforce it. We are not asking anybody's opinion. We are not democrats. We are servants of Allah who demand Shari'a" (IRIN, 2012).

The group used regional outlets more often. The main messages that Ansar Dine disseminated through regional news agencies, especially early in the Malian conflict, were all about their aims in Mali. For example, it was through regional media companies, such as Sahara Media, that they explained to a wider audience why the group was destroying Sufi shrines in Timbuktu, and how this was a holy and righteous thing (Kaka, 2012). Using regional media was as much a logistic choice as a choice of which public to address. The report by Sahara

Media was done by that company because they were one of the only news agencies able and ready to face the security context in that city when the Islamic groups came in. Using regional media also had an intended or unintended consequence for which public these stories reached first: mainly regional ones (Prieur, 2013).

From 2017 onwards, when Ansar Dine solidified its relationship with AQIM, a new type of news outlet was made available to the group. News outlets that were either controlled by Al-Qaeda or AQIM, or that were heavily in favour of those two groups' aims, were made available to Ansar Dine when it transformed into JNIM by allying itself with the two regional groups. For example, *al-Massar*, a Yemeni news source tied to al-Qaeda, released an interview with Ag Ghaly, in which he threatened France and the UN Mission in Mali known as MINUSMA (Bachir, 2017). Ag Ghaly stated that "Our enemies are the enemies of the Muslim people, Jews and Christians, but France remains our historic enemy in this part of the Islamic world. France and its supporters, such as the US, Germany, Sweden, and West African countries that have joined them: Chad, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Niger" (Bachir, 2017). By joining together with AQIM, Ansar Dine was able to draw on some of its strategic communications resources, partially to express the more regional aims that the alliance had forced on Ansar Dine by joining the alliance.

The limited use of the foreign press by Ansar Dine highlights the extent to which this was not a medium they were comfortable in, nor found conducive to their aims. Early in the Malian conflict, the group sometimes used foreign press to proclaim their identity, but not regularly enough to constitute a strategy of rebel diplomacy. The fact that when Ansar Dine was in contact with news agencies, they were most often in contact with regional agencies, implies one of two things. Either, that their messaging was angled towards a regional audience, or otherwise that the limitations in the tools they could use for strategic communications were limited to regional tools.

Ansar Dine's aim in using the foreign press was to grand-stand and showcase their war in Mali and their method of waging it as holy and legitimate, hammering in especially on the elements of Ansar Dine's identity that could be recognizable to other groups. When Ansar Dine turned into JNIM in 2017, the tools they could use to engage in strategic communications increased to include AQIM and Al-Qaeda's news companies. Moreover, by having made the alliance that turned Ansar Dine into JNIM, the group's aims shifted as well. Where the strategic communication of Ansar Dine prior to the alliance was focused on their aims for Mali, after the alliance, their aims were expressed far more in regional terms, denoting allies and enemies within the region and within the Western world.

5.12 Setting up media branches

Ansar Dine's most significant efforts at the strategic communication aspect of rebel diplomacy were made via their own personal media branches, mostly disseminated through Telegram. Since 2012, Ansar Dine has set up three media companies. On the 28th of February 2016, the group established Rimaah Media (SITEintelgroup, 2016). Two other media agencies were also set up subsequently, Al Tamkin media, and then finally, when Ansar Dine became JNIM, az-Zallaqa (SITEintelgroup, 2018). These media branches were used to message to Ansar Dine and JNIM's allies, as well as regional and international stakeholders, such as news agencies and civil society.

Ansar Dine used their media companies in part with the aim of humanising and legitimizing their struggle. For example, by means of their Telegram account, Ansar Dine released photos of four men who had perpetrated a suicide attack on 14 April 2018 on Timbuktu Airport (figures 4-6)

(Telegram, Az-Zallaqa) The pictures are jarring, not least because the image of 'jihadi' that foreign publics most often have clashes entirely with the photos provided. Three pictures showcase smiling, young faces, hinting at a certain shyness, all the while posing with guns. These photos are emblematic of some of Ansar Dine's use of Telegram and visuals. The images were chosen not to grandstand Ansar Dine's power or illustrate how many infidels or enemies they had killed, but rather to show how Ansar Dine sees themselves: as the good guys, fighting against foreign oppression and aggressive enemies. The young men on the photos both show that those fighting with Ansar Dine are ordinary human beings that others can relate to, that they are not outcasts, and that they are valued by the organization they gave their life for. The messages with which these pictures were disseminated were all in Arabic, illustrating that the target audience of these communications is regional.

Especially significant for Ansar Dine's strategic communication were the videos and audio recordings released on YouTube and Telegram. There are three videos especially of note.

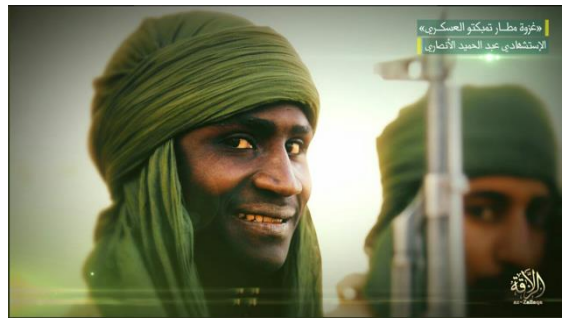


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Firstly, a video released on 11 March 2012, which was distributed to proclaim the formation and the aims of Ansar Dine. Another video was distributed on 26 May 2017, and once Ansar Dine morphed into JNIM, it released another video on 21 March 2018.

Iyad Ag Ghali's first 2012 video⁴, was Ansar Dine's first public statement made regarding their identity, in which they declared to be fighting for the imposition of Shari'a law, and not the independence of Azawad. The video was released on YouTube. In the video, Iyad Ag Ghaly can be seen dressed fully in white, leading his men in prayer. The video also features scenes of the attack of Aguelhok and what appear to be dead Malian soldiers lying in the sand. The video spends long seconds showcasing what appear to be large caches of weapons now in control of Ansar Dine. The film then features a mixture of demands towards the Malian authorities, as well as propaganda aimed at encouraging young Malians to join the movement. In the video, Cheick Aoussa, a spokesperson for Asar Dine, states that, "The group intends to establish Shari'a on its members and other Muslims for peace and salvation of Mali. In fact, Mali sent soldiers to our land and we defended ourselves" (Ahmed, 2012).

The language used in Ansar Dine's first video is Arabic, though at the 7th minute, Cheick Aoussa's words are translated into Tamasheq, a variant of the Tuareg language, illustrating that one particular aim of this video is to reach out to other Tuareg in Mali and beyond. Unlike the photos of the suicide bombers, this video is meant to grandstand the group's military prowess, as illustrated by the large deposits of military material. The video is also an effort as framing the conflict as a defensive war for Ansar Dine – casting Mali as the oppressor of the North that Ansar Dine is fighting. Great care is taken in making Ansar Dine as attractive as possible, in terms of recruitment, as well as portraying the group's aims and goals as righteous and supported by Allah.

The two later videos released by JNIM are very different. Firstly, the majority the May 2017 video is in English – illustrating the extent to which the video was aimed beyond local and regional audiences, to 'the West'. The video was posted on YouTube, and though it has since been removed for violating YouTube's terms of use, the video is still available in several places.⁵ The first part is dedicated to detailing the crimes and corruption of the Malian government, whilst also pointing an accusatory finger at the French forces in the country for

⁴ The video can be accessed on Youtube at (last accessed 28 April 2018):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=tr6C49Zvhlc

⁵ JNIM's video released on the 26th of May 2017 may be viewed here:

<https://jihadology.net/2017/05/26/new-video-message-from-jamaat-nu%E1%B9%A3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimin-repulsion-of-the-transgressors/> (last accessed 29 April)

their support and complicity. The majority of the video focuses on combat, such as the 19 July 2016 attack at Nampala where 17 soldiers were killed and more than 35 others were injured. Abdul Rahman al Sanhaji, a senior official for AQIM's Sahara branch, is featured heavily and shown to be present during the attack. In his speech, he notes that Arabs, Tuareg, Bambara, and Fulani are all gathered as one to overtake the base (Weiss, 2017a). The fact that a high-level AQIM commander features in the video, prior to Ansar Dine actually officially allying with the Al-Qaeda affiliate was both a way of showcasing Ansar Dine's powerful allies, and a way of re-orienting their goals, from Malian to regional. The video of 21 March 2018, that can also still be accessed⁶, is a return to the Arabic language, though in terms of content is similar to the previous video.

Especially the final two videos released by Ansar Dine and JNIM are excellent efforts of strategic communication. They are shot professionally, with drones and Go-Pros. Both videos are remarkably rousing, with energetic music and speeches. The training drills that are portrayed show an organized and unified front, and the messages are focused especially on the victorious nature of the war, and the fact that they are fighting against the Malian and Western aggressors. The fact that the last two videos were released when Ansar Dine's relationship with AQIM was intensifying may also suggest something about the influence AQIM may have had in helping Ansar Dine develop their strategic messaging.

Interesting as well is the choice to use Telegram as a way of disseminating their messages. Telegram is known for being one of the 'safe' methods of communication for rebel groups, as its encryption was developed with the aim of safeguarding privacy. The app is relatively unique, as it allows users to communicate completely securely, as well as disseminate messages to 'followers' (Counter Extremism Project, 2018). The app made significant waves in the public sphere, where for example UK Prime Minister Theresa May denounced the app as being 'home to criminals and terrorists' (Cook, 2018).

5.13 Conclusions on Ansar Dine's strategic communications

Ansar Dine and its successor JNIM's strategic communications were focused on creating and disseminating a narrative on what the groups stood for, how they interpreted their religion, and that they were both 'the good guys', as well as a real power and threat on the battlefield. Their

⁶ The March 21st, 2018 video may be accessed here: <https://jihadology.net/2018/03/21/new-video-message-from-jamaat-nu%E1%B9%A3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimin-deterring-the-tyrants-2/> (last accessed 29 April)

messages disseminated through Telegram were essential in achieving this. Early in the Malian conflict, Ansar Dine's strategic communication was much more amateurish, their videos grainy. When they did speak to foreign press, the messages were ad hoc. From 2015 onwards, we see a development in Ansar Dine's strategic communications, becoming much more adept at illustrating that they are the righteous fighters against a cruel aggressor, whilst at the same time also aiming to illustrate how utterly successful and important its actions are. It is only when Ansar Dine turns into JNIM though, that the strategic communication becomes 'professionalized', most probably with the help of AQIM.

5.2 News Management

News management is the effort by rebel groups to control the news about a particular conflict. This does not include strategic communications, which are aimed at communicating a group's identity and their aims. Rather, it is about controlling the stream of information that comes out of a conflict to their own benefit.

Ansar Dine's rebel diplomacy efforts in news management can broadly be described in two ways. Their early period was typified by a deliberate ambiguity in their news management, a strategy that allowed them to remain on a variety of opposing sides for as long as possible. This ambiguity also stemmed from fragility within the organization and discord at its highest levels. Secondly, in later instances when Ansar Dine did choose to proactively engage in news management as an essential feature of their strategy of rebel diplomacy (once their organization had matured), they used a wide variety of outlets to pursue the strategy. The outlet used depended on which message they wanted to distribute.

5.2.1 Ambiguity in the early years

Especially in the early stages of the Mali conflict, Ansar Dine's news management efforts seemed intent on maintaining as much ambiguity as possible. Their deliberate ambiguity aided them to continue cooperating to their own gain with groups that had declared each other their enemies, such as in particular the MNLA and AQIM. Their ambiguity manifested itself in a deliberate refusal to claim responsibilities for attacks, avoiding giving statements and comments to newspapers regarding particular occurrences, and hiding behind other groups who were willing to claim the attacks that Ansar Dine had actually perpetrated.

In the early months of the rebellion, the MNLA and Ansar Dine were allies. It is during this time that the majority of Northern cities fell to the insurgency. Retroactively, it has been

possible to determine that the majority of those cities were taken by the jihadist groups, namely Ansar Dine, MUJAO, or AQIM. However, the MNLA claimed the majority of those attacks. The MNLA's reasoning for this will be further explored in the section the MNLA's rebel diplomacy, though on the part of Ansar Dine this was a deliberate strategy too: they maintained their silence for two main reasons: firstly, to not aggravate their relationship with the MNLA, and secondly, to delay or prevent powerful international actors from considering Ansar Dine a terrorist group, which would have significantly increased the military heat on the group. This despite the fact that Ansar Dine is believed to have already been in a loose alliance with AQIM at that time (Lecocq et al., 2013).

The relationship with the MNLA was important to Ansar Dine, especially in the early period of the conflict. It provided the group with the international legitimacy of associating with a secessionist group, which endows a lot more legitimacy than being a terrorist group. Indeed, it may have partially been Ansar Dine hiding behind the MNLA's news management that kept the group from being declared a terrorist association until 2013. The MNLA and Ansar Dine are also both based in Tuareg culture: fighting among Tuaregs would not be beneficial to Ansar Dine until they were powerful and attractive enough to win a contest with the other group – which in 2011 and 2012 was far from certain. However, the MNLA had declared AQIM their primary enemy, and therefore, in order to maintain their alliance with the MNLA, Ansar Dine did not want to make explicit the fact that they were loosely allied with AQIM. Moreover, AQIM had already been designated as a terrorist group, and too-close association with such a group would likely incur the wrath of Western powers much earlier, at a stage when the whole north of Mali had not yet been placed under their control. Very little official news management communication put out by Ansar Dine, therefore, exists in those early days of the rebellion between the formation of Ansar Dine in 2011, and the 11 of March 2012.

The video that Ansar Dine released on 11 March 2012 previously discussed in the 'strategic communication' section also was relevant for news management, as they used it to claim their first victorious attacks on Tessalit, Aguelhok, and Kidal. Once the video was released, statements from Ansar Dine became much more frequent, but maintained ambiguity about its relationship with both the MNLA and AQIM. Ag Ghaly ignored calls by various governments to publicly disassociate himself from AQIM, whilst he was also involved in several efforts at orchestrating a formal alliance with the MNLA. Lecocq and his colleagues argued that "by far one of the most experienced political figures in Mali's political quagmire, Iyad has pursued exactly this kind of ambiguity to place himself in the centre of every possible

outcome of the conflict” (Lecocq et al., 2013). One message in particular that highlights such ambiguity was put out on the 24 March 2012, when Ansar Dine sent a message to Agence France Presse (AFP) to manage the news about the military conquests already accomplished, and what was to come. The spokesperson stated that “Thanks to the Grace of Allah the all-powerful, thanks to his blessings, we will soon take our lands of Kidal, in the Adrar of the Iforas, cradle of the Tuareg”, “the wish our sheik Iyad Ag Ghaly will soon be realised. Islamic law will apply throughout the whole region of the Adrar” (AFP, 2012). Couched in veiled language, Ansar Dine’s comments to the AFP made it appear as though Ansar Dine both supported the Tuareg claim of the Adrar that the MNLA had outlined, as well as the imposition of Shari’a law, an aim different to the MNLA’s goals, and more in line with those of AQIM. In simpler terms, the message seems carefully calibrated not to declare their allegiance.

Similarly, on the 8th of April, Ag Ghaly was asked by Reuters about reports that Abu Zeid and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, two AQIM emirs in the region, had visited Timbuktu and had walked around, even greeting families, accompanied by Ag Ghaly. Despite this question being asked after the dissolution of Ansar Dine’s alliance with the MNLA, Ag Ghaly was adamant: “This question will have no answer” (Thiam, 2012). Even when the alliance with the MNLA fell apart, Ag Ghaly’s answer to Reuters illustrates that, in his opinion, Ansar Dine’s relationship with AQIM required more ambiguity than clarity. Ansar Dine’s early news management, therefore, was a deliberate decision to stay away from news management, and let ambiguity on the battlefield and in the realm of communication be a tool to its advantage.

It would, however, be an exaggeration to attribute every element of the early news management of Ansar Dine as strategically intended. Indeed, as described in the ‘strategic communication’ section, Ansar Dine did communicate with foreign news agencies during this time. Some of their comments pertained to news management, such as when Ansar Dine was explaining to the international media the state and future of a *protocole d’accord* they were developing with the MNLA. But contact with the press during these negotiations were oftentimes confused, and sometimes downright contradictory (Thurston, 2012). For the majority, Ansar Dine’s early news management was based on a desire to not give too much away, and to take advantage of ambiguity. Though there was definitely a strategy to pursue ambiguity to some extent, simple miscommunication and misalignment within the organization may also have contributed to these nebulous news management efforts.

5.22 Maturing into control

After initial ambiguity on its news management efforts by design as well as by lack of internal alignment on certain topics, Ansar Dine's efforts developed by the time that it solidified its alliance with AQIM and had fully turned its back on the MNLA. From this period of time onward, we see a concerted effort on the part of Ag Ghaly to manage news information better.

The 8th of April 2012 is the first time that we see structural steps taken by Ag Ghaly to set up a system with which to orchestrate communications with regional and international foreign press agencies, specifically with the aim of news management. Prior to this, journalists were contacted by Ansar Dine spokespeople when the latter had a statement they wanted to make. On the 8th of April, Ag Ghaly set up a small cell to collect questions from the press – after which he would transmit his answers in Arabic (Thiam, 2012). This move was interpreted as Ag Ghaly, who had never before had a body dedicated to communications with the press, being anxious to improve his public relations deficit, especially in comparison to the very vocal MNLA (Thiam, 2012). International news agencies, such as Reuters, AFP and Jeune Afrique, eagerly took advantage of this new direct line of communication. Ansar Dine took advantage too, using it to claim attacks, make statements on strategic positions and the developments of the insurgency, and to react publicly to events. On 29 December 2014, for example, Abdoul Ag Attaher, a member of Ansar Dine, in a call with Agence France Presse (AFP), said that “we succeeded in attacking the enemies of Islam today at Tessalit (...) The primary enemy of Islam is France. The countries who work for France on the lands of Islam are also our enemies” (AFP, 2014d).

Ansar Dine's focus on news management may also have been a result of the strengthening of ties, or at least the increasingly more outspoken and secure committal of Ansar Dine to AQIM. Indeed, during this time, it became clear that Ansar Dine was to AQIM as was the Taliban to Al-Qaeda, with Ansar Dine playing host and facilitating AQIM ties to the local population (Francis, 2013; Lounnas, 2014). Such a relationship between AQIM and Ansar Dine fell well within the global meta-strategy proposed for Al-Qaeda by Abu Musa al-Suri, one of the most influential ideologues who had argued for world-wide Islamic resistance, and Abu Bakr Naji's book 'The Management of Savagery', published online by Al-Qaeda, which encouraged Jihadist group to integrate themselves with their social environments (Lounnas, 2014). Indeed, Ansar Dine's alliance with AQIM most probably also meant that communication methods used by Al-Qaeda would have been communicated to Ansar Dine too. After all, Al-Qaeda's efforts at news managements, in terms of controlling the narrative about events ongoing on the ground, are well studied (Holbrook, 2014; Ranstorp, 2007).

A significant step forward for Ansar Dine in its news management strategy as well as their strategic communication strategy was the establishment of their own media arm. Rimaah Media, Al Tamkin media, and az-Zallaqa were not only used to disseminate messages about Ansar Dine's identity, but also to provide Ansar Dine's updates on what was happening on the ground. There are two main takeaways from this element of Ansar Dine's news management. Firstly, the messages in and of themselves tell us a lot about why and with what aims they undertook such news management, and secondly, their choice of medium allows for a deeper analysis of current social media flows: almost all of Ansar Dine's news management through Al Tamkin and Az-Zallaqa went through Telegram.

Messages disseminated by Ansar Dine's media agencies aimed at controlling and framing specific occurrences on the battlefield, mostly to make Ansar Dine seem as powerful victorious as possible. For example, on the 14th of April 2017, JNIM put out a statement regarding one of the MINUSMA bases, during which three suicide car bombs infiltrated the base, and two detonated. One UN peacekeeper was killed, 10 were injured, and 7 French military were wounded. France reported that 15 jihadis were killed. In strategic terms, therefore, the attack of 14 April was not a success for JNIM – they had incurred significant losses, whereas the fatality of their opponents was minimal. In JNIM's statement, the jihadist group said the attack was a response to the deaths of several of its high-ranking commanders in recent French raids, specifically one on 3 April 2017, during which Haydara al Maghrebi, a Moroccan commander within JNIM, was killed. What this statement clearly illustrates is how JNIM aimed to frame such skirmishes. Firstly, the aim of this message was to show that the April 14 attack was in 'self-defence' after the French aggressor struck first. Secondly, the number of jihadi dead and wounded was not mentioned. JNIM's operation was a tactical failure, and yet the group failing to mention this illustrates a strategy in news management aimed at controlling the narrative on the course of the war. The group aimed to portray itself in the most successful and victorious way possible.

These media agencies became particularly important to Ansar Dine when it came to news management, and some of their updates illustrate how anxiously news management was kept up to date. For example, on 12 March 2018, al-Tamkin media released a statement “Regarding the Dissemination of Forged Statements”, of which an English translation is provided in figure 6 (MENASTREAM, 2018). In order to counter any future attempts at forging news management pieces regarding “operations falsely attributed to the Support for Islam and Muslims Organization [JNIM]”, Ansar Dine’s media arm Al-Tamkin media changed the old design of their statements, from blue to a red background, “to cut off the means for those who wish to distort the image of the mujahidin”.⁷

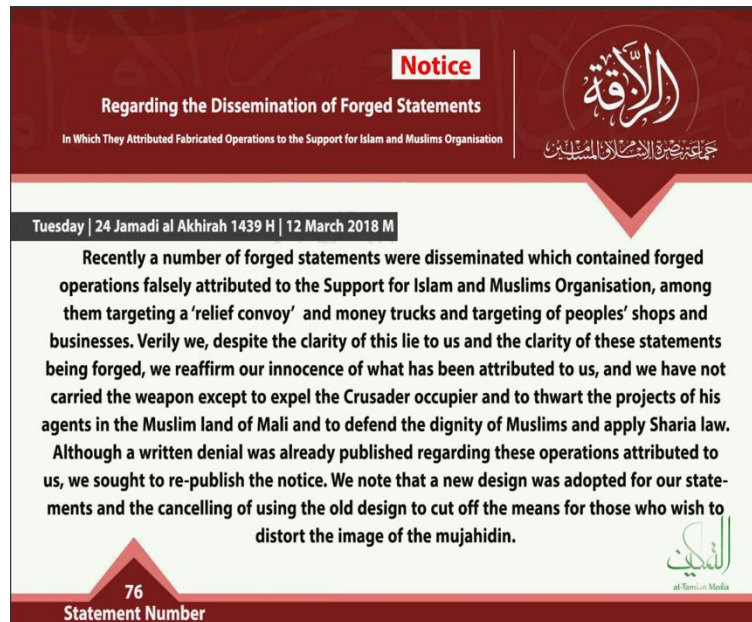


Figure 6

Updates on the status of alliances were also essential for the news management operations of Ansar Dine. The most significant example of this is the video released on 3 March 2018, when Ansar Dine officially declared itself to have merged with other jihadi groups to form JNIM. Significantly, the release of this video is emblematic of how JNIM used social media websites. Ansar Dine and JNIM never took to Twitter and Facebook. Telegram, the highly encrypted messaging service tipped by governments as being a ‘safe haven for terrorists’, was used instead. With this video message, the group did not just outline the group’s creation, but also claimed a largescale attack on 2 March 2018 on Burkina Faso’s capital Ouagadougou, when at least eight gunmen launched coordinated assaults across the city, targeting the French embassy and the Burkinabe army headquarters. At least 8 people were left dead, and another 80 wounded.

⁷ Translated by @MENASTREAM

5.23 Conclusions on news management

News management was a significant part of Ansar Dine's rebel diplomacy. With it, they focused primarily on showcasing the course of the conflict as they saw it. In particular, the focus of their news management lay with claiming their victories, demonstrating their relevance on the Malian stage, and declaring their alliances. The aims for which they tried to achieve this vary depending on the context of the battle.

Similar to their strategic communication facet of rebel diplomacy, Ansar Dine used the foreign press to a limited extent when trying to control the narrative about what was happening on the ground in Mali. However, it was not the easiest tool for Ansar Dine to use, as their leadership had to actively avoid capture and hide, making it hard to orchestrate interviews with reporters. Ansar Dine's status as terrorist organization worsened the logistical hurdles for Ansar Dine to use the foreign press. Far easier, therefore, to control the flow of news management through their own media sites. These sites were followed and read either by foreign reporters, thereby spreading the message of Ansar Dine wider, or by regional stakeholders either looking for information on the Malian conflict, or potential recruits. Through these sites, regular updates were provided on the battlefield, and became the primary method of direct communication. Telegram proved an essential tool in creating, maintaining, and disseminating a news management strategy. Ansar Dine's profile could not be deleted as it would be on other social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and it allowed Ansar Dine enough of a platform for its messages to reach large audiences.

5.3 Relationship Building

Building relations is necessarily relatively hard for groups that have been designated terrorist groups, especially in the post 9/11 paradigm of today. It should come as no great surprise, therefore, that when it comes to relationship building with foreign states, NGOs, or other groups, such relations were often limited to sentiments similar to those of French President Hollande, who stated that "there can be no question of negotiating with terrorist groups" (Hollande, 2012). Interestingly, however, as many analysts of terrorist organizations have seen, state relationships with terrorists are not all that rare. Usually, such relations are analysed from the point of view of the state, and not from the rebel group. Though the latter also has a great deal of agency in initiating or responding to relationship building efforts.

Ansar Dine could be said to have tried to establish relationships with foreign governments and other groups, either through social media or personal connections. In

analysing their strategic communications and news management approaches, two observations may be noted about Ansar Dine's relationship building efforts. Firstly, they made some attempts, especially early in the Malian conflict, to establish relations with other states, or at the very least welcome relations initiated by states. Secondly, their communications may hint at Ansar Dine using the other aspects of the rebel diplomacy to signal to other potential relationship partners. Any other relationships sought with groups or states by Ansar Dine is implied, however, and relies more on deductive inference than explicit proof.

5.31 The Algerian Experiment

To be clear, Ansar Dine was never particularly interested in creating relationships with foreign governments and groups. Especially when they had become JNIM, and aligned themselves much more closely with AQIM, relations with foreign states and NGOs became almost non-existent. However, when Ansar Dine was still Ansar Dine, and its relationships with the MNLA and AQIM were ill-defined and ambiguous, efforts at relationship-building can be seen. Specifically, with Algeria. Algeria had stated their desire to negotiate with Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and AQIM (Lounnas, 2014: 823). According to Lounnas, the Algerian attitude was a reaction to the country's experience in the civil war of the 1990s (Lounnas, 2014). Owing to their experiences Algeria proactively tried to orchestrate a rapprochement between Ansar Dine, the MNLA, and the Malian government – which meant creating a relationship with all the actors (Lounnas, 2014: 824). Algeria sought and maintained intense negotiations with Ansar Dine that, in November 2012 led to talks and an agreement in December of that year. Here, both groups agreed to reject terrorism and engage in negotiations with Bamako to solve the conflict. The seven-point agreement basically stated that Ansar Dine and the MNLA would secure regions under their control, avoid mutual confrontation, and seek the release of Western and Algerian hostages held by AQIM and MUJAO.

Unfortunately, immediately after the Ansar Dine representatives had signed the agreement, the deal fell through. On 11 January 2013, Ansar Dine, together with AQIM and MUJAO attacked Malian troops in Mopti, the last city still held by Malian forces, effectively turning their backs on the agreement they had signed. This in turn triggered operation Serval, the French military operation. The attack was a major surprise to the Algerian authorities, who interpreted it as a betrayal, and the sudden switch in Ansar Dine tactics remain unexplained (Lounnas, 2014). It would not be surprising that pressure from other jihadi groups, including AQIM and MUJAO, and especially the implications of their support on the battlefield, forced

Ag Ghaly's hand. What it does illustrate is that relationship building was an extremely risky and difficult aim for Ansar Dine to achieve. After all, groups such as AQIM and MUJAO through their aim of establishing the caliphate, do not believe in initiating relations with states. Ansar Dine's consideration of such an alliance suggests the extent to which the group began as a local Malian group with local Malian political and social grievances that formed the foundation of the group; Salafism became a method of expressing such local aims.

5.32 Implied Relationship Building

If we leave the realm of certainty behind, and delve into implications and insinuations of Ansar Dine's rebel diplomacy output, it might provide more insight on relationship building. Considering a few messages discussed in the previous 'strategic communications' section, some messages seem unrelated to the reality of Ansar Dine's war in Mali. For example, Ansar Dine threatened France and other European states in 2013 and 2014, during a period in which the rest of their rebel diplomacy was angled more towards regional publics with the aim of affecting change in Mali – specifically, during a time that 'the West' was not considered their enemy by their own words and actions. Some of Ansar Dine's messaging on this topic, therefore, may have been an attempt at signalling willingness to build relationships with other stakeholders.

The big player on the scene in the Sahel during this time is AQIM, a group that holds a relationship with Al-Qaeda and all the funds and support that are linked to that group. Hussein Solomon, an established academic in the realm security studies, wrote that various groups in the Sahel, including AQIM, were funded by Saudi Arabia, though his claims are hotly contested (Perouse de Montclos, 2018; Solomon, 2015). Threatening France and other European powers did not fall within Ansar Dine's aims. Especially during the time that they made these claims, all other communication they had put out related to the national struggle in Mali. It was during this time, for example, that Ansar Dine still stressed their aims of maintaining the territorial integrity of Mali (Flood, 2012). However, it was also during this time that we see Ansar Dine attempting to make high level connections with AQIM. What better way to signal to a regional power in the shape of AQIM and perhaps even its alleged sponsor, Saudi Arabia, and to distinguish yourself from all the other groups in the Malian quagmire than to signal that your aims are similar to theirs? Most relationships between Al Qaeda, AQIM and any international sponsors are likely conducted personally. But Ansar Dine's relationship building efforts may also have been expressed through its communication

to signal their positioning on interests of engaging in certain alliances, and reaping the financial, material, and reputational benefits these alliances are sure to bring.

Reading Ansar Dine's communications as efforts to message potential allies remains supposition and deductive inference, but is by no means fantastical. Various messages brought out by Ansar Dine do not easily fall within the parameters of the aims that Ansar Dine stated to hold. This could just be grandstanding or confused and ill-organized messaging. Though it may also be deliberate messaging at big regional players. When one considers that Ansar Dine's transformation into JNIM brought it much closer to Al-Qaeda, and that their communications drastically improved in quality the closer the alliance became, this may indicate an increase in funds and experience Ansar Dine could draw on by virtue of their relationship building efforts.

5.34 Conclusions on Relationship Building

Relationship building, therefore, does not form a large part of Ansar Dine's rebel diplomacy. The relationship with Algeria was abandoned despite serious efforts on the part of that country to initiate them. However, the development of the system of alliances that transformed Ansar Dine into JNIM suggests that much work went on in interpersonal terms between representatives of AQIM, its sponsors, and Ansar Dine. These personal negotiations may be reflected in the communications put out by Ansar Dine and by JNIM.

Recently, some have hypothesized that the Islamic groups on the Malian and Sahelian stage such as JNIM may be pulled into negotiations. For example, Tiébilé Dramé, a former foreign minister who helped negotiate the Ouagadougou Accord, Ali Nouhoum Diallo, a former president of the national assembly, and Mahmoud Dicko, the president of the High Islamic Council of Mali and one of the country's most powerful clerics have recently all come out in support of negotiating with terrorists, and Iyad Ag Ghaly has been flagged as one of the actors with whom negotiations could occur (Hasseye, 2018). Perhaps a new era of relationship building is opening up to Iyad Ag Ghaly's terrorist group.

6. The Rebel Diplomacy of the MNLA

6.1 Strategic Communication

Strategic communication, or communication specifically aimed at explaining who the MNLA is, what they stand for, who they were representing, and the way in which they were going to

achieve their goals, was essential to the Tuareg group. One of the original organizers of the MNLA stated that as a new group, “We created a ruling council, a military *état-major*, commanded and coordinated by Mohammed Ag Najim and other senior officers. (...) And we also created a political bureau, which set about analysing and considering all the political aspects *including how to raise awareness amongst the international community, especially regional powers*” (emphasis added) (Atallah, 2012; Cline, 2013). Strategic communication, in terms of raising awareness of their plight, was therefore a goal that the MNLA had held since its inception. The international community was an increasingly important audience for the MNLA, and Paris became the place where the Tuareg group, victoriously, and yet possibly prematurely, declared their independence on April 6th 2012.

Despite, or perhaps owing to, a lack of credibility on the battlefield, both in terms of military inferiority as well as scandals in their treatment of civilians and challenges to the MNLA’s claim they were representing all Azawad people, the MNLA placed great effort behind their strategic communication. The two themes we see are that firstly, the MNLA used their strategic communications to gain, increase, and maintain their legitimacy. Secondly, that they worked hard at maintaining the credibility of this legitimacy. The MNLA used a variety of tools to achieve this, which will be outlined below.

6.11 Pulling Together a Toolbox

The tools that the MNLA used as part of their strategic communications were varied. Firstly, it has to be stressed that the MNLA was the successor to the MNA – a young, tech-savvy political group. It was the MNA that provided the foundations both in infrastructure and in message for the rebel diplomacy that the MNLA still uses today. The most significant medium of this infrastructure is the MNLA’s website, at www.mnlamov.net. Through this website, the MNLA has broadcasted every major piece (and the majority of their minor pieces) of strategic communications. The MNLA’s messages are written in French, Arabic, and English, illustrating the reach they wanted their message to have – further than just within Mali or within their region (Lecocq & Klute, 2013).

The website (a screenshot of which is provided in figure 7) is set up strategically. For example, it illustrates how many views each blog post has garnered. For each of the blog-posts on the website, the number of views



Figure 7

lies between 2,500 and 10,000 views. By showing such numbers, the MNLA is able to illustrate to the extent to which their cause has reached audiences, and is able to measure and boast the success of their strategic communications. Naturally, one cannot be sure how many of these views have either been manually input by the MNLA website-owners, or how many of the views are MNLA members themselves clicking on it to increase the view-count. However, what is clear is that part of the audience of this website are foreign journalists. Al Jazeera, Le Monde, France 24, BBC, and even a host of US networks have all used the website extensively as a source of information and a way to get in touch with the group. For a rebel group that is relatively famous in interested circles but cannot be said to have captured the hearts of a global audience, the number of views on these blog posts is relatively remarkable. Significantly, at the end of each blog post, one or more, or a combination of the following information is given: the name, phone number, and address for a contact person – either one who wrote the blog post or for one of the leaders of the MNLA movement. By providing such contact information, a motif that is visible throughout the MNLA's campaign lasting to today, it becomes clear that engaging with the international community was central to the MNLA's strategic communications.

This level of approachableness increased when in 2014, the MNLA set up their official Twitter and Facebook pages. On Twitter, you can find the MNLA at @MnlaNews. On Facebook, they have three main pages, all with thousands of subscribers: @mnlamovnews (4,000 followers), @cpa.azawad (2,500 followers), and @mnlamov (5,000 followers), and dozens of subsidiary Facebook pages. The MNLA's social media accounts were used for slightly different reasons. The Facebook and Twitter pages were predominantly geared towards news management and will therefore be discussed further in the following section. The Facebook page, which was more recently also linked to various Instagram accounts, all

tweeting under the #Azawad, were also used for strategic communication. The method of communicating strategic messages here, however, was very different from the types of messages and blogs placed on their website. On Facebook and Instagram, the MNLA relied more heavily on the use of pictures. Some pictures illustrate what life really is like in Azawad, showing for example, pictures of men digging a well. Others, on the other hand, use shorter forms of communicating important messages, by using satirical cartoons or pictures that appeal to the emotions of whoever sees them. The tone is sharper and more to the point. It also appeals to a wider audience – many of the photos posted on its groups and subsidiary groups are written in English (see Figure 8).

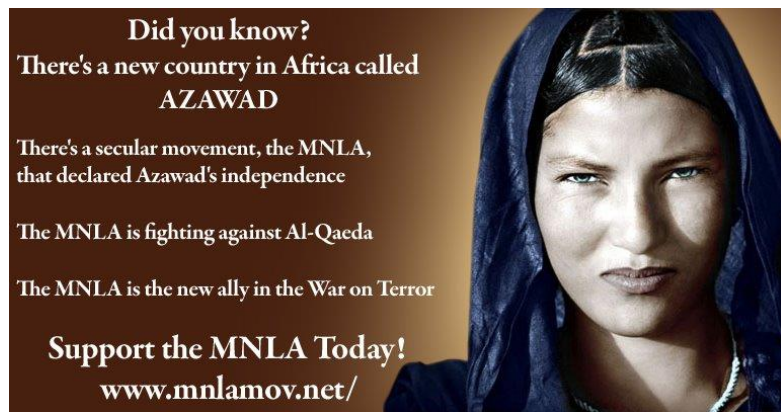


Figure 8

The final medium through which the MNLA engaged in strategic communications was by using foreign media, especially French TV broadcasting. The leaders of the MNLA have given many interviews on French television. One of the most famous of MNLA's leaders, Moussa Ag Asseri, the spokesperson for the MNLA in France, was often on French television after being the one to announce and to further explain the declaration of independence of Azawad, which occurred on the 6th of April 2012. The choice of this particular medium may have been based on a variety of factors. Firstly, the vast majority of the MNLA leadership, and a large portion of their fighters, speak French. As such, appearing on French TV did not have the large barriers to entry as appearing on English or other-language shows. This language barrier did not only apply to conducting the interview itself, as it also allowed the MNLA to access a large portion of mainstream French society by appearing on their evening news. The MNLA worked hard on their message and believed it a solid enough one to be able to perhaps find some support in a foreign French-speaking constituency.

Three main tools, therefore, in the toolbox of the MNLA's strategic communications: their own website, their social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter, and international broadcasting. The MNLA used these tools to organize their strategic communication along two main lines: to *legitimise* their existence and their struggle, and to create and maintain the *credibility* of this legitimacy.

6.12 Seeking Legitimacy and Credibility

Many of the early efforts of the MNLA in their strategic communications were about gaining and maintaining the legitimacy of the war they were fighting. The broad lines of argument that the MNLA used in their strategic communications were all continued from the MNA's method. The MNA had outlined three main goals of strategic communications and laid the foundations for the infrastructure to disseminate it. Those goals were to firstly, frame the conflict appropriately; secondly, to ensure that the MNLA was considered a representative for 'the people' of Azawad; and thirdly, to use the lexicon of international law.

The first post ever written by the MNA is a remarkably accurate depiction of the line of reasoning the MNLA would adopt from 2011 onwards in its fight to free Azawad from the Malian government. The post was written on 3 November 2011. Firstly, it frames the conflict in Mali, stating that Mali has endured and suffered under "50 years of colonization".⁸ It states that the MNA "in the face of successive crises in the region of Azawad and the need to find solutions the MNA has been suggested as the most pertinent group to respond politically to the needs and grievances of the people of Azawad." The legitimacy, as can be seen from this quotation, comes not from the MNA believing that they are the correct answer for Mali, but rather that an unseen but significant force or group has "suggested" the MNA as the best solution to the crisis for the entirety of the people of Azawad. In following MNLA communications, such a sentiment crops up time and again. Significant also is that the MNA immediately referred to both the regional and international community as stakeholders in Azawad's liberation fight. They quote the French newspaper *Le Monde* for having their facts wrong about a particular hostage who was killed by Islamists, and state in the strongest terms that they do not have anything to do with terrorists. Finally, albeit briefly, the legality of the Malian governments actions is questioned under international law. Every single one of these trends defines, either in its entirety, or partially, every blog post that the MNLA since wrote on its website.

One of the first goals of the MNLA in their strategic communications, therefore, was to continue framing the conflict as the MNA had done. The MNLA declared the year 2010 a year of "security, political, economic, and environmental crisis", and the 50 years preceding it as having massacred the Azawad people by their having been "socially marginalised and economically asphyxiated" in a post on 3 November 2011. Any territory that they took over they declared "liberated" from the oppressive Malian government (see for example a post from

⁸ See bibliography for all MNLA website posts by date

7 February 2012). Of all their aims in strategic communication, however, this was probably the easiest to sell to foreign audiences. After all, the 2011 Tuareg uprising was the latest of four. Tension with the Bamako government had always been high, especially in what the North perceived as favourable treatment to the South. Indeed, prior to the 2011 uprising, the North of Mali, and the region of the Sahel in general, was experiencing severe political, security, economic, and environmental difficulties. The strategic communications of the MNLA, therefore, were based on an everyday reality for many, and not hard to convince outsiders of.

The second goal of the MNLA's strategic communications was to endow them with the legitimacy of representing all the peoples in Azawad. This would prove more challenging. Nearly every single one of their blog posts on their website, or Facebook and Twitter posts mentions that they are representing "*notre peuple*", or 'our people'. Even when acknowledging the variety of peoples in Azawad, it does so as an afterthought, following sentences such as "*on ne célèbre pas ainsi une autorité, un gouvernement, quand un peuple est opprimé, nié, humilié par ce même gouvernement*" – "we do not celebrate an authority, a government, when a people is oppressed, denied, humiliated, by that same government" [emphasis added] (posted on 3 November 2012). The MNLA even improved on the MNA by one important step in symbolism, by adopting explicit nationalist symbolism such as a flag for Azawad (as seen in



Figure 9

Figure 9), and sending people abroad to represent them in different countries, both with the aim of illustrating that the MNLA acted with the consent and approval of the people of Azawad (Lecocq & Klute, 2013).

The strategic communication goal of depicting Azawad as a homogenous whole was essential within the region. Anecdotal evidence gathered by the United Nations mission in Mali (MINUSMA) suggested that the MNLA recruited fighters across the border in Niger, especially in the border communities of Diffa and Tillabéri ("United Nations," 2016). The United Nations report argued that an essential facet of the MNLA's appeal to young men in the border regions of other countries was by exploiting notions of shared identity ("United Nations," 2016).

The MNLA adopted this position despite the fact that Azawad and the region that surrounds it is made up of a variety of social groups that differ among tribal and religious lines – and not all in agreement with the MNLA. In fact, the MNLA struggled to maintain its legitimacy on the ground. Its fighters were reported to be undisciplined, committing theft,

robbery, plunder, and rape in the territories they occupied (Amnesty International, 2012; Lecocq & Klute, 2013). Moreover, UN evidence also shows many cases of people switching sides between the MNLA and the Islamic groups, based on which group was able to pay them higher wages, which was winning on the battlefield at that particular time, or even which was in control of the various lucrative people and drug trafficking routes ("United Nations", 2016; O. J. Walther & Christopoulos, 2015). A great amount of pragmatism as opposed to ideological conviction either in favour of secession or Wahhabism ruled the soldiers of the Malian war. However, creating the perception that the MNLA represented all the people present in the country, and even further afield in the region, was a strong factor in ensuring that the MNLA continued to exist, even when their battlefield achievements and their funds dried up.

The MNLA's grand plan behind their strategic communications hit a snag when they were forced, prior to the 2015 peace agreement in Algiers, to leave their singular identity behind and become part of the *Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad* (CMA), the alliance of Northern, mainly Tuareg groups that stood for increased autonomy of the North of Mali. The CMA included less extreme groups than the MNLA, and others who believed in very different routes towards an Azawadi homeland. The alliance with the CMA was a huge hurdle to the continuity of the MNLA's strategic communication, as it would make it more difficult for the MNLA to continue portraying themselves as the best option, and first unique choice for Azawadis to represent them. The MNLA's solution was to maintain their strategic communications, whilst also taking charge of a portion of the strategic communications of the CMA, and the latter group's better reputation in the region.

In their latest few posts, the MNLA's official website posted blogs from the point of view of the CMA. However, it maintained a role of special importance for the MNLA. For example, on 4 March 2018, a post described how Bilal Ag Acherif, the MNLA's Secretary General, had been appointed President of the CMA, entrusted with the full and correct implementation of the 2015 Peace Accord, simultaneously advocating the Coordination, whilst emphasizing the MNLA's singular role. Similarly, in their post on the 28 April 2018, "The CMA welcomes the rallying of the political, social and military forces of the Congress for Justice in Azawad (CJA) for the benefit of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) on Saturday, March 31, 2018". This complex sentence appears to have been written from the point of view of the CMA, and yet its objective is to further the agenda of the MNLA.

Despite the MNLA joining the CMA, the strategic communication machine of the MNLA kept churning, ensuring that it would use as much of the CMA's legitimacy and

credibility as it could, whilst also maintaining the strategic communications on the part of the MNLA to keep the group relevant and part of the conversation. However, since the peace agreement, many more rebel groups have sprung up – some more radical than the MNLA in their desire and methods to create an independent Azawad. Meanwhile, the MNLA is bound to the terms of the treaty, which would in fact see the disbanding of the MNLA into official state institutions (Nyirabikali, 2015). Strategic communications, therefore, have become more important, and yet harder than ever for the MNLA in 2017 and 2018.

The third goal of the MNLA's strategic communications was international law. The use of international law was only possible owing to the MNLA's strategic communication efforts at creating a perception of the people of Azawad as a homogenous whole. The MNLA were in fact relatively adept at using international legal lexicon, illustrated, for example, by their 13 February 2013 Declaration, a document which they formatted exactly as a UN Resolution. The group also had intimate knowledge of the inner workings of UN agencies (Niezen, 2017). Their line of argument was based on various aspects of international law. First and foremost, they based themselves on the declaration of human rights, and especially focused on the right to self-determination. In their accusations against the Malian state, they referred to language and logic based on the international court of justice, accusing the Malian government of war-crimes and crimes against humanity (as seen, for example, in their 22 February 2013 post). Finally, they also referred to the rights of indigenous peoples (Lecocq & Klute, 2013). The latter is not surprising, as prior to the Malian uprising, the Tuareg had a very well-respected international reputation. Since the start of African peoples' involvement in indigenous human rights forums in the mid-1990s, Tuareg representatives were active participants, recognized as assertive and knowledgeable members in meetings such as those of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, the World Health Organization, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC), a coalition of African Indigenous Peoples' Organizations (IPOs) (Niezen, 2017).

The MNLA's use of international law did not stop at just using the language. They were well-versed enough in its practice that it was with this language that they chose to interact with the international community: the group challenged states by calling into question their record of rights compliance as members of the international community (Niezen, 2017). The link between using international law and being able to portray their fight as a legitimate one was essential to any international support they were likely to get. For example, after the declaration of independence of Azawad on April 6th, 2012, Bilal Ag Acherif was formally appointed as interim president of Azawad, and the MNLA formally requested that ECOWAS consider that

Azawad be considered a sovereign state and that African countries not launch military operations against it (Cline, 2013).

A large hurdle to the credibility of the MNLA to use the lexicon of international law was their relationship with terrorists in the region. In the early months of the Malian uprising, the MNLA allied with Islamists in the region. The relationship between the MNLA and the terrorists was during this period, however, very ambiguous. Though they admitted relations with Ansar Dine, they consistently declared AQIM and MUJAO to be their enemies. In a press release on July 15th 2012, the MNLA stated that they “refused to respond to provocations [by] constant narco terrorist groups that parasitized our legitimate struggle visibly with a mission to divert controlled [sic] its permanent objective of conquest of freedom, democracy, justice and dignity for our people.”(Cline, 2013; Rosato, 2016). Likewise, around the time of the battle for Gao, the MNLA condemned the international community in a post on 12 July 2012 for not supporting its fight against “terrorists.”

However, within Mali, the MNLA’s assertions that they had nothing to do with the Islamic terrorists that were sharing the same geographical zone did not convince everyone. According to a senior intelligence officer in the Malian army “For the Malian security forces, it’s really hard to distinguish between who is a terrorist and who is [not]. Very difficult. The two groups operate in the same space with the same methods, and they must be in communication. Ultimately, for us there’s no real difference. The [MNLA] do acts that are terroristic, so we consider them terrorists” (Shurkin et al., 2017). Equally, the international community was not convinced of the credibility of the MNLA’s organization. It was noted by one academic that the once positive image of the Tuareg on the international stage had turned sour, with the varied tribal group nowadays being associated more closely with drug and people trafficking and armed insurrection than eloquent speeches at the highest levels of the UN (Niezen, 2017).

6.13 Conclusions on Strategic Communications

The MNLA clearly attributed a lot of importance to communicating their identity and the story of the Malian conflict. Though the MNLA faced challenges to their legitimacy and the story they were trying to sell, the one greatest characteristic of the MNLA’s strategic communications was its longevity. One can trace a clear line of intent and strategy from the MNA’s to the MNLA’s to the Coordination’s strategic communications. The group had a way they wanted to engage with foreign publics, and they did. The fact that the MNLA’s identity

remained after the group had been subsumed into the Coordination alliance proves this point. The situation in Mali, however, is unlikely to get any better for the MNLA, even within their alliance of the CMA. More and more groups cropped up after the peace agreement, and the landscape as well as the peace deal itself has made it harder for the MNLA to distinguish itself.

6.2 News Management

Where the MNLA's efforts at strategic communication were thought-out in terms of how best to appeal to the audiences they wanted to reach and how to do so, the group's news management appeared less so. In fact, it is in news management that the MNLA could probably be said to have made their biggest errors in their rebel diplomacy strategy. This section first outlines how the MNLA used their news management as a way of scheming and manoeuvring, a tactic that backfired badly. Only when the MNLA learned of their mistakes around the year 2014-5 onwards do we see a better approach to news management.

6.21 Scheming and Manoeuvring

The MNLA were acutely aware of the importance of news management in Mali and further afield in the region and the world. Unlike other rebel groups in the country and the region, the MNLA took great care to maintain the phone and internet power lines wherever they could (Bruijn, Pelckmans, & Sangare, 2015). By doing so, the group was able to circulate updates around Mali and in the region on the state of the insurgency. Especially in the earliest months of the fighting in 2011 and 2012, the MNLA circulated victorious videos illustrating great victories they accomplished against the Malian army (Bruijn et al., 2015). Remaining in touch with regional and international external actors, including governments, NGOs, and foreign media companies is a motif that crops up time and again when looking at the MNLA's rebel diplomacy. In their news management, the MNLA used the same tools as they did for their strategic communication, namely their website and their Facebook and Twitter pages.

The aims the MNLA pursued in their news management efforts were questionable. Unlike in their strategic communications, where the group may have stretched the truth about their legitimacy and credibility to act for 'the people of Azawad', the MNLA's news management stretched the truth to the point of lying. What was worse: it got caught in the lie. The group used their website to distribute what they called regular *communiqués* of news. In 2011 and early 2012, the MNLA used their *communiqués* to claim their victories in Kidal, Tessalit, Aguelhok, Gao, and Menaka, along with a variety of other Northern towns and cities

and released information on the attack, photos, and videos of their supposed victories against the Malian army, such as, among many examples, their 22 and 26 January 2012 posts. However, it soon became common knowledge that the only town the MNLA actually conquered was Menaka (Bøås & Torheim, 2013). The other cities were taken by an alliance of the Islamic groups, Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and AQIM, with the MNLA either barely present, or present on the fringes of the fighting. In the battle of Gao, for example, the MNLA managed to take over one of the outskirts of the city, whilst the Islamists lay claim to the city centre (Lecocq & Klute, 2013). During these early months of the insurgency, the MNLA had allied with these groups owing to their superior military might. However, where the Islamists did not claim any of these attacks until they did so retroactively in late 2012, the MNLA claimed all of them.

There are a variety of reasons for which the MNLA may have claimed these attacks despite having had little to no legitimate reasons to back such claims up. First and foremost, claiming these attacks increased the relevance of the MNLA in Mali and in the eyes of the international community. A secessionist movement able to rally and conquer two thirds of a country within three months was a movement that was bound to raise interest abroad, and would force external actors, who were part of the MNLA's preferred public, to take the group into their considerations. Moreover, claiming these attacks fit within the strategy of the MNLA's strategic communications. By stating that the MNLA had been the one to conquer the North, the group increased its legitimacy as the main representation of the people of Azawad, and gave this legitimacy credibility by backing it up with military might.

Unfortunately, however, the strategy backfired badly, when, owing to the information spreading that the jihadists were taking over the towns instead of the MNLA, the latter became implicated in the Islamic cause. This was an accusation made by Malians, regional actors, and the international community in the form of government statements and media reports that the MNLA would be unable to truly cast off for a long time, arguably lasting until today. It did not help that during this time, the MNLA was also accusing the Malian government of working together with Islamist groups to move drugs and other illicit materials across Mali and the Sahel (Curtis, 2015). Though the Islamic groups were absolutely involved in such illicit trades, there is little evidence of the involvement of the Malian government. The MNLA, therefore, engaged in a method of news management that on further investigation by international media companies, the UN, and various governments, were too easily discredited – delegitimizing many of the MNLA's efforts at keeping track of the news and being considered a legitimate distributor of news.

The decision to make claims that turned out to be easily discredited may also have come from a complex system of alliances that pulled the MNLA in a variety of different directions. On the one hand, the MNLA needed the Islamist groups to conquer to North, despite consistently naming AQIM their “true enemy”. On the other hand, they needed the support of the international community. The complexity of the situation increased when Algeria initiated their attempts to create an agreement between the Malian government, Ansar Dine, and the MNLA. This was basically foreign governments trying to pull Ansar Dine away from the other Islamic groups, but also meant that the MNLA was once again closely associated with a group that had jihadi aims. Some observers argue that these negotiation attempts forced the MNLA for a short time to adopt slightly more radical Islamist rhetoric – indeed, during this period of time, the MNLA declared that shari’a law would be upheld in Azawad, a line of messaging that had previously not been adopted (mnla.mov, 2012). The dissolution of the MNLA-Ansar Dine alliance, however, solidified the MNLA’s turn away from Ansar Dine. Consequentially, the group found itself forced to turn to the Malian government for help to “rid the North of the terrorists”. During this period of time, the MNLA began to frequently call for negotiations with the Malian and French governments in their news management *communiqués*, such as the communiqué posted on 7 May 2012. In fact, when the French Operation Serval started in 2013, the *communiqués* emphasized the MNLA’s victories against the Islamists more heavily than their victories against the government.

2011 to early 2013 was a period of time marked by the MNLA using their news management as a way to scheme and manoeuvre the news in such a way so as to give the group more visibility on the world stage and to portray themselves as victorious, proactive, and capable. However, unlike their efforts at strategic communications, their news management efforts were transparent: the fact that the international media, NGOs, and the UN recognized the falsehoods discredited the group greatly. The MNLA’s news management shed doubts about the groups relationship with the Islamists, and for a significant amount of time, observers were not clear on whether there were any differences at all between the MNLA, Ansar Dine, AQIM, and MUJAO.

6.22 Lessons Learned

It was only from mid-2013 to 2014 that the MNLA moved their news management efforts away from boasts that could not be backed up. During this period of time, their posts emphasise women’s rights, youth support, and a host of civil society and socio-political issues, whilst

constantly reiterating their desire for dialogue with the Malian government. This dialogue occurred under the auspices of the Algerian-led Peace Accord that started at the end of 2014. During this phase, the MNLA's news management became important for a wholly different reason, and that was to differentiate it from the other groups that were included in the Malian peace process.

The MNLA initiated a strategy of news management that was more focused on the socio-cultural implications of events of the insurgency. For example, the MNLA took the opportunity to, in a post on 11 March 2013, illustrate their support for the history of Timbuktu in a communiqué that outlined how MNLA fighters saved and were now safekeeping three trucks filled with ancient manuscripts from the historic city. It is also during this time, that the group's news management's communiqués were used to illustrate the MNLA's success not in defeating the Malian or French army, but rather in illustrating their victories against what they called "*narcoterroristes*". In their communiqué of 11 February 2013, for example, the group explains that "Since the beginning of the foreign military intervention in Mali led by the French army, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad has demonstrated by the acts its total availability for the fight against terrorism and cross-border crime", before outlining several ways in which the MNLA recently achieved this goal.

With the backdrop of the peace agreement it became essential for the MNLA's news management to not make the same strategic errors they had at the start of the conflict. The MNLA's news management efforts during this time are therefore marked primarily by updates on the peace agreement negotiations. In the agreement, the MNLA ended up with a lot less than they had originally intended – there was hardly any increased autonomy, and no mention of federalism. For some people of Azawad that had supported the MNLA, the agreement was a bitter disappointment (Vall, 2015). The MNLA's news management, therefore, focused on attempting to convince their constituents of the hard work that the MNLA's leadership were putting into the agreement, with updates given on meetings, speeches given, and hopeful messages for the future of Azawad. At the same time, the news management continued to aim to illustrate to international audiences that the MNLA was an essential group in the peace process who should be listened to owing to what was occurring on the battlefield, and based on the narrative they were putting out as part of their strategic communications.

6.23 Conclusions on News Management

News management was important to the MNLA throughout the Malian conflict. Miscalculation in a complex game of alliances in 2011 and 2012 meant that the group's efforts at news management were largely discredited. The international community was sceptical of the MNLA's claims that they had nothing to do with the Islamic groups in the region, and by being associated with such groups, the MNLA lost a great deal of support, both internally and with NGOs and governments. Their attempts at news management improved from around the middle of 2013 onwards when the group became more cautious in their news management.

The peace negotiations were a significant factor behind the change of strategy in the MNLA's news management. For the MNLA to be taken seriously regionally as well as internationally, news management was important to illustrate the MNLA's achievements, and for the MNLA to create news that would be considered credible by the citizens of Mali (from whom they drew power) and the international community (whom they needed to be taken seriously by).

6.4 Relationship Building

Building relationships regionally and internationally was essential to the MNLA, if they were ever to achieve their goal of an independent Azawad. But, as noted by many scholars of limited statehood and secession, significant hurdles stood in their way. On 6 April 2012, the MNLA unilaterally declared the independence of the republic of Azawad. To this day, not a single country has recognized that declaration. Though their relationship building tactics started from the earliest time of the insurgency, the MNLA's strategy became pronounced under the auspices of the 2015 Algeria Peace Accords. In the lead up to these accords, MNLA found themselves having to let go of their idea of a free and independent Azawad. Lobbying for, and raising awareness of Azawad continues to this day, as the MNLA continues to be active in politics and combat. The MNLA pursued relations with international governments and NGOs through the Algiers Peace Process and outside of it.

6.41 Relationship building under the auspices of the Peace Process

The Algerian Peace process meant that the MNLA had access to high levels of foreign governments. Prior to the start of the official negotiations, the MNLA (in their alliance with the CMA), together with the Malian Government and the Platform officially recognized the

Algerian government as chief mediator, in a move that side-lined ECOWAS's previous mediation efforts, and to some extent also side-lined MINUSMA (Boutellis & Zahar, 2017).

The MNLA's desire for regional players to play the most important part in the negotiations may be indicative of the fact that they believed the regional players could best help them towards achieving their goals. The MNLA was always aware of the power that Mali's regional neighbours have: for example, MNLA's demarcation of the Azawadi territory stuck carefully to the original Malian borders, essentially claiming only the north east of Mali, despite the fact that one can find Tuareg peoples in Mauritania, Algeria, and Niger. This decision was probably a calculated move not to provoke military responses from other countries (Cline, 2013). Moreover, a unique aspect of the Algerian Peace Process was that the lead mediator, Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra, invited a host of co-mediators, including the UN, AU, ECOWAS, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Niger, and Nigeria (Boutellis & Zahar, 2017). This 'college of mediators' all had a stake in the negotiations, and, importantly for the MNLA, it gave the group a way of interacting with the highest levels of regional players.

The Malian peace process, from the point of view of many of the rebel groups that were party to it, was probably experienced as something akin to the distribution of rents. The decision to maintain territorial integrity and give the Malian government the majority of the power for the implementation of the peace meant that the agreement was primarily focused on political representation. As such, a scramble for political power ensued, in which rebel diplomacy played an extremely important role. Boutellis and Zahar noted that the peace negotiations were marked by a "fragmentation and re-composition of armed groups", a phenomenon in which actors came to be more focused on potential individual perks than the overall peace process (Boutellis & Zahar, 2017). They even identified a second trend of "clanization" where larger groups broke up along clan, or tribal lines, during the appointment of new interim authorities in the Northern regions, a trend that also was partially owed to power struggles at the local level (Boutellis & Zahar, 2017). Similarly, Ibrahim Maïga found that, since 2012, the number of armed groups associated with the peace process rose from two (the MNLA and the HCUA), to eight (Maïga, 2016). Maïga found that the creation of such groups occurred in tandem with the three phases of the peace negotiations and was punctuated with violence as each new group emerged onto the scene.

The negotiations, however, were not kind to the MNLA. As the number of groups on the Malian stage increased, the relative influence of the MNLA decreased, even as the group, as well as some its allies in the CMA continued to orchestrate military operations. None of the

regional countries privy to the negotiations would risk granting Azawad much more autonomy, as the Tuareg tribes present in their respective countries might be tempted to rise up in an armed insurgency themselves. The game was therefore stacked against the MNLA, and relationship building through the Algiers Peace Agreement, faced large hurdles.

6.42 Finding Relationships Elsewhere

Limited possibilities with the mediators of the deal forced the MNLA, either alone or in its alliance with the CMA to search for other avenues of relationship building. France and other Western countries featured heavily in the MNLA's efforts.

The MNLA's interest in creating a relationship with the French was present since 2013, when the group's alliance with the Islamic groups fell apart, and Operation Serval was taking back territory in Northern Mali. The relationship between the French and the MNLA was relatively useful for both parties. French defence minister Jean-Yves le Drian told France 24 that "I say this for today, as I say it for tomorrow: the Tuareg, except for those who let themselves be indoctrinated by terrorist groups which we firmly condemn, are our friends" (Armstrong, 2013). Indeed, for the French, having the MNLA as allies would mean having a partner on the ground alongside the Malian military, able to help clear the North of Islamists. For the MNLA, despite the fact that they saw the French as part of the problem in the colonization of Azawad, they would be a strategic and strong ally.

Today, the situation in Mali has made it more and more difficult for the MNLA to illustrate to the French government why the latter should invest in a relationship with the Tuareg group. In recent reports released in 2018, the UN and other observers noted that the situation in Mali has worsened significantly (Security Council Report, 2018), and that a host of new groups have burst onto the scene in Mali. Comparatively, though the MNLA is still a relevant group, its ability to have an effect on the Malian stage has decreased. Any relationship with the French, therefore, would only be possible for the MNLA if they had something to offer to them. In 2018, it appears as though they do not.

Throughout the MNLA's trajectory, other countries have also been approached as potential partners in the group's relationship building efforts. On 31 January 2014, king Mohammed VI of Morocco received the Secretary General of the MNLA, Bilal Ag Cherif and a spokesperson in Marrakech (Taleb, 2014). Similar to the Algerians, however, Morocco could not endorse independence or excessive amounts of autonomy for the Tuareg cause. The communiqué released about the meeting stated that the king wanted to "reiterate the kingdom

of Morocco's aim to preserve the territorial integrity and stability of the Republic of Mali, and emphasized the importance of contributing towards a compromise that would allow the fight against Islamic groups" (Taleb, 2014).

The MNLA has remained very active in trying to get NGOs on its side. They pursued relationships with a wide variety of NGOs outside of the peace process. For example, in 2014, Moussa Ag Assarid travelled to the Netherlands as a representative of the MNLA to set up a temporary embassy with the New World Summit NGO at the BAK (Basis voor Actuele Kunst) in Utrecht. The 'New World Embassy: Azawad' exposition was done in conjunction with artists and documentary-making and was a way for the MNLA to reach out to new audiences and try to create relationships with publics abroad.

6.43 Conclusions on Relationship Building

The MNLA has a good story about who they are and what their struggle is. They have used this to garner favour and sympathy all over the world. When it comes to official relations with governments, the MNLA had a first preferred medium: the 2015 Algerian Peace Process. However, the peace process was not as good a backdrop for orchestrating relationship building as it could have been for the Tuareg group, as illustrated by the fact that they have kept no explicit allies following the agreement. Owing to such limitations, the MNLA decided to look elsewhere, finding NGOs willing to take the time to help them spread their story, and meeting with high levels of other governments, such as the French and the Moroccan one. Neither group, being foreign state or NGO, however, has been able to help further the Azawad case to a great degree.

7. Conclusion

Conclusions on the school of Rebel Diplomacy

The engagement with foreign audiences by rebel groups has traditionally been looked at through various lenses: state-building, terrorist communications, or rebel governance, to name a few. These lenses have produced important pieces of work; however, they are rarely mixed. The fact that these groups are studied separately and each within a different theoretical framework limits our understanding of common threads. For example, because the communications of terrorists are often seen as a distinct analytical category, one risks assuming that terrorist groups are unique in their method of operating, whilst they may actually share a lot of similarities with other types of rebel groups.

By using public diplomacy, this thesis used a lens that had already been applied to both terrorist and secessionist groups. This permitted, firstly, the consideration of the extent to which secessionism is indeed a significant precursor to a group using public diplomacy – essentially carrying out a scope-testing exercise of Huang’s findings. Secondly, by comparing an Islamic terrorist group to a secessionist group, the hope is to move beyond the simplifications and preconceptions attributed to each group. Islamic terrorism has, in the post-9/11 paradigm, become so contentious as to sometimes be separated from the local context within they thrive; they are viewed within a cloud of mistrust, prejudice, and fear. The attitudes towards secessionists are more empathetic, their struggle viewed a fight of the oppressed, despite these groups sometimes not differing from the former.

Social media, engagement with regional and international press, and interpersonal contacts of both secessionist and terrorist groups is constantly monitored by practitioners in the field of security and international relations. Some think tanks have dedicated teams to track these communications and news updates. Even large multinational corporations such as Shell spend manpower and money on tracking social media on topics important to them. Governments around the world are also catching on, though perhaps at a slower pace. In academics, ‘digital’ has become a new trend in research, though it is still very much at its beginning stages. With an analysis of which tools rebels use, how they used them, and why, this thesis will have contributed, in a small way, to what will hopefully be growing academic interest.

By focusing on the Sahel, this thesis was also able to contribute to a body of literature that focuses on non-Western public diplomacy, which in English-language academics remains too rare. The ‘West’, in particular the United States and Europe, tend to over-estimate their own importance in international conflicts: when a terrorist group such as Ansar Dine threatens the West, such messaging is taken as an existential threat to its way of life. However, the rebel diplomacy of Ansar Dine and the MNLA illustrates that both groups believed their regional constellation far more important as a target of their rebel diplomacy than the far-off ‘West’. If rebel diplomacy is the quest for power with foreign audiences, which audiences are most likely to endow it with power? Far-off Western states that are uninvolved unless it involves their own national security interests? Or regional players whose actions have daily consequences for rebels? Looking at the rebel diplomacy that these two groups employed illustrates a reality of insurgency that is not often looked at: it can lead to a better understanding of the local and regional context of the conflict of the group, which invariably shapes its desires and methods.

The cases of the MNLA and Ansar Dine - So What?

Rebel diplomacy is, in essence, the attempt by rebel groups to garner power beyond the scope of the conflict they are engaged in. Both the MNLA and Ansar Dine found foreign publics worthwhile targets of engagement, though they both engaged in these engagements differently, and with varying aims. By virtue of the fact that the methodology employed in this thesis was a small-N comparative case study, no generalizations can be made regarding rebel groups and their use of public diplomacy. However, tentative conclusions may be drawn that could provide options for avenues of future research.

Firstly, it is essential to accord rebel groups agency in how they engage with foreign publics. Both the MNLA and Ansar Dine took proactive choices to engage with foreign audiences. For Iyad Ag Ghaly, setting up his own media arms was a deliberate choice in which the cost of setting up and maintaining these offices was worth it in order to achieve his aims. Similarly, the MNLA were strategists in portraying themselves on the world stage, deliberately moulding their message along lines that could be sold abroad. Sometimes, choosing *not* to engage with foreign audiences was also a choice taken by these rebel groups, as illustrated by Ansar Dine refusing to claim attacks they committed early on in the Malian conflict, and the MNLA taking a step back after having been caught peddling untruths one too many times.

That said, one should not accord rebel groups strategic mastery over their engagement with foreign publics. The rebel groups made plenty of mistakes in their messaging, let opportunities pass by, or simply did not have the internal cohesiveness to act. Taking into consideration the agency of rebel groups, even when these groups appear internally fractured, is essential in understanding the role of their diplomacy efforts.

The tools that the MNLA and Ansar Dine used were also remarkably similar, as they used foreign press, social media, and interpersonal relationships to undertake their rebel diplomacy. Cheap, easy to use tools were available both to Ansar Dine and the MNLA, and both jumped at the opportunity to use them. The specifics of how the groups used social media, however, differed. Facebook and Twitter were great for the MNLA, for whom the more people could stumble on to their Facebook profile, the better it was. Meanwhile, Ansar Dine put more stock by the heavily encrypted Telegram application, keeping their communications untraceable, and though they were limiting their reach, maintaining safety standards was their first priority. Though it is in no way a bygone conclusion that rebel groups will use the tools that the MNLA and Ansar Dine used, social media retains low barriers of entry.

Similarities in the rebel diplomacy used by the MNLA and Ansar Dine, therefore, provides some evidence in favour of Hypothesis 1, which stated that “both groups that are secessionist in nature as well as groups that are not secessionist will proactively engage in rebel diplomacy”. Though no generalizations can and should be made from small-N studies, the fact that both of these groups engaged in the practice and used similar tools may hint towards a larger trend.

There were also significant differences in how Ansar Dine and the MNLA used rebel diplomacy. Ansar Dine found itself facing hurdles that the MNLA did not, such as easy access to international news agencies. This complicated Ansar Dine’s efforts at strategic communications and news management, and forced them to find alternative means to engage in such practices. They did so in the creation of their own media branches, that were used to communicate their identity and any news to the outside world. Indeed, many of Ansar Dine’s engagements with foreign publics were covert owing to their means of communication being cut off (their YouTube channels being shut down constantly), but overt enough that their message did spread widely, partially owing to their reputation as terrorist group. The MNLA, meanwhile, used all legitimate methods of communication to engage foreign publics. They could travel internationally, use international news outlets, and social media. And yet, the group found that their rebel diplomacy largely did not allow them to meet their goals of an independent Azawad. Indeed, the question of which group was most successful in their public diplomacy is a difficult one to answer, and one that merits further research.

Regarding the hypotheses proposed in previous sections, therefore, some tentative results can be drawn. It was expected that the MNLA would engage primarily in strategic communications and relationship building, whereas the non-secessionist group, in this case Ansar Dine, would primarily use news management. Indeed, when it came to relationship building, the MNLA was far more active and far more explicit in their pursuance of relationship building efforts than was Ansar Dine. Conversely, Ansar Dine’s efforts at relationship building were primarily marked by an inability to create relations when it came to Algeria and other states, either owing to battlefield alliances or their inherent ideological beliefs. Despite these differences, both groups were equally engaged with strategic communications. Both groups also engaged in news management, to varying levels of success and with slightly different tools.

Is secessionism, then, a significant factor in accounting whether a group engages in rebel diplomacy? The answer would appear to be no, contrary to Huang’s argument, as both the MNLA and Ansar Dine proactively engaged in the practice. The ease and cost of such

engagements, as well as the fact that both groups believed that they could gain something from rebel diplomacy suggests that the phenomenon does not belong solely in the realm of secessionist groups. However, the rebel diplomacy that Ansar Dine and the MNLA used differed significantly – both faced a different set of hurdles in using rebel diplomacy, and both had different aims for which they engaged in the practice. As such, the groups were forced to use different tools, and their diplomacy differed greatly based on the status of the conflict they were in. Secessionism, therefore, can to a certain extent explain the difference between different types of engagement in rebel diplomacy.

In the digitized world of today, both a secessionist group and an Islamic group engaged in rebel diplomacy during Mali's insurgency. To what extent these results may be generalized is a question for future research. At the very least, one can say that rebel diplomacy is a lens that yields important insights into the thinking and activities of rebel groups.

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