Rebel diplomacy and digital communication: public diplomacy in the Sahel

MICHÈLE BOS AND JAN MELISSEN*

Rebel groups of a variety of ideological persuasions have put communication with foreign countries high on their list of priorities.[1] These efforts, often made through digital media, are aimed not just at other states or powerful individuals, but also at publics outside their own sphere of operations. In the absence of recourse to regular diplomatic channels, rebel groups mostly engage in relations with foreign publics broadly conceived, including foreign elites, international organizations and civil society groups and individuals. Such communications can increase their visibility and influence internationally. In the 1990s, for instance, the Nigerian Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) attracted a great deal of media attention that helped reframe the character of its conflict with the oil and gas multinational Royal Dutch Shell as an environmental rather than an ethnic issue. This turned MOSOP into a popular champion worldwide that still captures the imagination of protesters and environmental NGOs today, with all the monetary and popular support that comes with such recognition.[2]

The reduced ability of governments to control information flows as a consequence of the spread of new communication technologies has empowered rebel groups and other non-state actors to amplify their voice internationally.[3] Wherever a local group embroiled in conflict believes that involving foreign publics and elites may be beneficial to its cause, social media provide a pathway. As Seth Jones and Patrick Johnston note, new technologies in mass and social media will be of decisive importance in future civil wars,[4] and new communication tools projecting rebels' identities are at the core of their survival strategy.

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1 Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'State, media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine: citizen curators of digital disinformation', *International Affairs* 94: 5, Sept. 2018, pp. 975–94.

2 Clifford Bob, *The marketing of rebellion: insurgents, media and international activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 54–116.

3 Nina Hall, 'Norm contestation in the digital era: campaigning for refugee rights', *International Affairs* 95: 3, May 2019, pp. 575–96.

4 Seth G. Jones and Patrick B. Johnston, 'The future of insurgency', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36: 1, 2013, pp. 1–25.

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This article contributes to a better understanding of rebel communication with foreign publics that do not have a stake in the rebels' conflict by analysing two distinct cases in the same geopolitical setting of the Sahel region: the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA by its French abbreviation), a Tuareg separatist group, and Ansar Dine, a group with an Islamist ideology that was labelled a terrorist organization by the United States in 2013. These two rebel groups both have their roots in Mali and the armed conflict that broke out there in 2012. At the opening of the digital age, both were quick to adopt new communication technologies to advance their causes. We look at the motivations behind the engagement of the MNLA and Ansar Dine with foreign audiences, a phenomenon we interrogate through the theoretical framework of public diplomacy, and which in this article we call 'rebel diplomacy'. Following Bruce Gregory's inclusive definition, we view public diplomacy as 'an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub- and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes, and behaviour; build and manage relationships; and influence thoughts and mobilize action to advance their interests and values'.[5]

On the basis of in-depth examination of our two case-studies, we suggest that digital communication has enabled rebel groups to carve out more power on the international stage than they ever had before, allowing them to redefine and expand their spheres of influence and the range of stakeholders in their conflicts. The concept of 'digital diplomacy' captures how new communication technologies are used in the conduct of international relations. Most of the literature in this emerging field concentrates on the use of social media for diplomatic purposes—an approach that is particularly suited to use by rebel groups.[6] Ilan Manor's concept of 'digital public diplomacy' is useful. He describes it as the 'long-term process in which digital technologies influence the norms, values, working routine and structures of diplomatic institutions, as well as the self-narratives or metaphors diplomats employ to conceptualize their craft'.[7] Our concept of 'rebel diplomacy' includes both the public and the digital elements identified by Gregory and Manor.

This change in the power dynamics of small rebel groups has several implications for policy-makers. First, it is important to recognize that non-state, non-western actors are able users of rebel diplomacy, putting time and effort into devising their strategies, their outlets and their own narratives. Second, it is essential to understand the interplay between the local and international aims and communication strategies of such groups. In contrast with recent literature based on quantitative research and looking above all at the effects of rebel social media use on foreign powers, our analysis demonstrates that a qualitative interrogation of public diplomacy techniques can lift the curtain on the motivations behind rebel groups' statements. Taking social media posts at face value—for example, posts indicating that the primary enemy of one of the rebel groups is 'the West'—would be too facile an interpretation to guide western reactions. Third, arbitrary divisions in the

[5] Bruce Gregory, 'Mapping boundaries in diplomacy's public dimension', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 11: 1, 2016, p. 353.
[6] Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes, *Digital diplomacy: theory and practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 4.
[7] Ilan Manor, *The digitalization of public diplomacy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 15.

labelling and consequent analysis of rebel communications have led to a piecemeal examination of such communications, at the expense of shades of meaning in 'rebel talk'. Our qualitative public diplomacy approach takes a critical look at the meanings behind rebel communications and places these within the context of the conflict on the ground.

Our focus on the vast Sahel region allows us to look at non-state, non-western digital public diplomacy, on which there has to date been precious little research. The response to Islamist extremism in the Sahel by international and regional players has focused on combating these crises militarily, specifically in reaction to radical Islamist groups.[8] As long as technology providers do not restrict rebel groups' communications (such restrictions are applied especially to groups designated as Islamist terrorists), the record of their communications constitutes a unique window through which research can be done. Access to social media by rebel groups makes it possible to get closer to the motivations that underpin their public diplomacy and to gain much-needed empirically based knowledge of their communication behaviour on the international stage.

The next section discusses how scholars have conceptualized rebel groups and how they have structured their research, both before and after the emergence of digital platforms. Subsequently, we will explain our own approach. The main empirical part of the article will analyse the online communications undertaken by Ansar Dine and the MNLA. They show how two groups—neither the most famous nor the most powerful—have navigated the physical conflict of the Malian war and the global virtual landscape of social media and digital communications, and what power, or the lack of it, looks like.

From offline to online—in rebel practice and academic research

There is no agreed framework of analysis for the diplomacy of rebel groups that operate in a transnational environment, in terms of either what is perceived as an act of rebel diplomacy or who its intended audiences are. From a political science perspective, and looking specifically at secessionist groups, Bridget Coggins defined 'rebel diplomacy' as 'when rebels engage in strategic communication with foreign governments or agents, or with an occupying regime they deem foreign'.[9] She examines the conditions under which states politically accept secessionist movements.[10] In this view, rebel diplomacy is the mimicking of state diplomacy by breakaway groups that aspire to official dialogue with legitimate members of the society of states; the only audience that rebels reach out to with their diplomatic efforts, therefore, are governments or their agents.[11] Reyko Huang similarly

[8] Denis M. Tull, 'Rebuilding Mali's army: the dissonant relationship between Mali and its international partners', *International Affairs* 95: 2, March 2019, pp. 405–23.

[9] Bridget Coggins, 'Rebel diplomacy: theorizing violent non-state actors' strategic use of talk', in Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly, eds, *Rebel governance in civil war* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 107.

[10] Coggins, 'Rebel diplomacy'.

[11] On mimicking, see Fiona McConnell, Terri Moreau and Jason Dittmer, 'Mimicking state diplomacy: the legitimizing strategies of unofficial diplomacies', *Geoforum*, no. 43, May 2012, pp. 804–14.

found that secessionists are likely to engage in rebel proto-diplomacy, alongside their domestic governance-related activities.[12] Both conceptualizations of 'rebel diplomacy' hinge on armed non-state groups' relations with their preferred audience of nation-states, through unconventional bilateral or multilateral diplomatic channels, and both authors appear to assume that rebel groups aspire to the representational trappings of state-based diplomacy. Importantly, their research does not include public diplomacy by rebel groups targeting foreign publics, or their recent conversion to online communication strategies.

Drawing heavily on all facets of rebels' interaction with foreign publics, Clifford Bob investigated a phenomenon for which he coined the term 'rebel marketing', analysing how armed groups made extensive use of social media, broadcasting, personal exchanges and many other methods to communicate their brand internationally.[13] Bob identifies rebels' target audience as transnational advocacy networks, a group of entities that includes among others NGOs, media companies and civil society. Looking at the effects of rebel marketing efforts by non-state groups, he asks why certain rebel groups became *causes célèbres* on the international stage and others did not. To this end, he focuses on the response these groups receive and what it is about the competitive external context of rallying support that shows why some groups fail. Our aim, however, is to understand the motivations behind rebel communications and how these are crafted, by two groups that cannot be said to have won the *cause célèbre* trophy.[14]

A remarkable shortcoming of the body of academic work on Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other groups that use terrorist methods is that the analysis of such groups' communications has been fenced off as a completely separate topic of research, whereas in fact their communication patterns show many similarities to those of rebel groups.[15] Coming from the terrorism studies approach, Moran Yarchi treats terrorist groups as a separate analytical unit.[16] Examining different

[12] Reyko Huang, 'Rebel diplomacy in civil war', *International Security* 40: 4, Spring 2016, pp. 89–126 at p. 111.

[13] Bob, *The marketing of rebellion*.

[14] Simon Cottee, 'The calypso caliphate: how Trinidad became a recruiting ground for ISIS', *International Affairs* 95: 2, March 2019, pp. 297–318.

[15] Nadia Al-Dayel and Aaron Anfinson, '"In the words of the enemy": the Islamic State's reflexive projection of statehood', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11: 1, 2018, pp. 45–64; Ken Menkhaus, 'Al-Shabaab and social media: a double-edged sword', *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20: 2, 2014, pp. 309–27; Manuel R. Torres-Soriano, 'The caliphate is not a tweet away: the social media experience of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39: 11, 2016, pp. 968–81; Oliver Walther and Dimitris Christopoulos, *A social network analysis of Islamic terrorism and the Malian rebellion*, CEPS/INSTEAD working papers (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2012); Donald Holbrook, 'Approaching terrorist public relations initiatives', *Public Relations Inquiry* 3: 2, 2014, pp. 141–61.

[16] Moran Yarchi, 'Terror organizations' uses of public diplomacy: limited versus total conflicts', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39: 12, 2016, pp. 1071–83. On the use of digital media by terrorist groups, see also Corneliu Bjola and James Pamment, eds, *Countering online propaganda and extremism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); Simon Tomer, Avishay Goldberg, Limor Aharonson-Daniel, Dimitry Leykin and Bruria Adini, 'Twitter in the cross fire—the use of social media in the Westgate Mall terror attack in Kenya', *PLoS One* 19: 8, 2014, pp. 1–11; Rachel Sullivan, 'Live-tweeting terror: a rhetorical analysis of @HSMPress_ Twitter updates during the 2013 Nairobi hostage crisis', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7: 3, 2014, pp. 422–33; Thomas Molony, 'Social media warfare and Kenya's conflict with Al Shabaab in Somalia: a right to know?', *African Affairs* 118: 471, 2018, pp. 328–51; Innocent Chiluwa, 'Radicalist discourse: a study of the stances of Nigeria's Boko Haram and Somalia's Al Shabaab on Twitter', *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 10: 2, 2015, pp. 214–35; Caitriona Dowd and Raleigh Clionadh, 'The myth of global Islamic terrorism and local conflict in Mali and the Sahel', *African Affairs* 112: 448, 2013, pp. 498–509; Logan Macnair and Richard Frank, 'The mediums and the messages:

types of organizations' social media messages targeting foreign publics, she distinguished between 'limited-conflict' organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah and 'total-conflict' organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. She found that limited-conflict organizations—in a manner comparable to rebel groups—aim to communicate with the international community, and use public diplomacy to try to influence foreign opinion and the international environment within which they operate. Revolutionary, total-conflict organizations, by contrast, do not aspire to any kind of relationship with established international actors or accept the norms and conventions of the society of states. Yarchi's findings underline the importance of our objective to gain a nuanced perception of the communicative behaviour of rebel groups that view the existing society of states as part of their future environment.

The early twenty-first-century literature on 'new public diplomacy' never doubted non-state actors' agility in the sphere of public diplomacy.[17] This literature pointed to the greater prominence of non-state actors and new stakeholders such as NGOs and civil society groups, and to an increasing pursuit of transnational dialogue rather than monologue, engagement in relationship-building, and the interconnectedness of international publics.[18] Moreover, the 'new public diplomacy' literature showed greater awareness of the domestic dimension of public diplomacy.[19] In the second decade of the century awareness increased of how instant communications through social media platforms were revolutionizing the way in which social movements were created and perpetuated.[20] Relatively few scholars of digital public diplomacy, however, have looked at non-western non-state actors in scenarios involving rebellion. By and large, research on public diplomacy concentrates more on the 'centre' than the 'periphery', and its attention has been focused on the public diplomacy of governments. An important exception is Benjamin Jones and Eleonora Mattiacci's quantitative analysis of the use of social networks in the external communication of a single rebel group in the Libyan civil war. They contend that Twitter allows for a unique form of public diplomacy through which rebel groups can garner international support.[21] Their close examination of social media use established empirically how, in a relatively straightforward theatre with one rebel group, one particular type of social platform provided an important public diplomacy tool and, crucially, gained non-official material support from the United States. Like Clifford Bob,

exploring the language of Islamic State media through sentiment analysis', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11: 3, 2018, pp. 438–57; Jad Melki and May Jabado, 'Mediated public diplomacy of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria: the synergistic use of terrorism, social media and branding', *Media and Communication* 4: 2, 2016, pp. 92–103.

[17] Jan Melissen, ed., *The new public diplomacy: soft power in international relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[18] Manor, *The digitalization of public diplomacy*, pp. 12–14.

[19] See esp. the posthumous compilation of the work of Ellen Huijgh, *Public diplomacy at home: domestic dimensions* (Leiden and Boston: Brill Nijhoff, 2019); Katarzyna Pisarska, *The domestic dimension of public diplomacy: evaluating success through civil engagement* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[20] Thomas Zeitzoff, 'How social media is changing conflict', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61: 9, 2017, pp. 1839–43.

[21] Benjamin T. Jones and Eleonora Mattiacci, 'A manifesto, in 140 characters or fewer: social media as a tool of rebel diplomacy', *British Journal of Political Science* 49: 2, April 2019, pp. 739–61.

Jones and Mattiacci look at the effectiveness of public diplomacy in attracting responses from the international community. Once again, our approach contrasts with existing research: we concentrate on the process rebel groups use to execute their public diplomacy and the motivations behind it.

Methodological considerations

In the vast Sahel region, there are many rebel groups staking their claims, telling their stories and seeking foreign support of all kinds. Many, if not most of them, have a digital presence, including websites and social media accounts, and are active in creating messages directed at various publics, from foreign civil societies and NGOs to foreign governments. For our research on the rebel groups' communications, both online and offline, we consider Mark Leonard's three dimensions of public diplomacy—news management, strategic communication and relationship-building—and three spheres of activity: political/military, economic and social/cultural.[22] We follow Eytan Gilboa's argument in favour of comparative analysis in public diplomacy research.[23] Both the groups on which we focus, Ansar Dine and the MNLA, were founded in 2011, shortly before the 2012 *coup d'état* that plunged Mali into violence. Our empirical research spans the period from 2011 to early 2018.

We single out Ansar Dine and the MNLA because they represent a unique comparative case-study. They both operate in the same region and draw their membership from similar sources, yet they have different ideologies—one secessionist, the other Islamist. From an analytical perspective and with a view to policy implications for outside powers, we look for similarities and distinctions between these two rebel groups operating in the same geopolitical context. Significant to our analysis is the fact that both groups failed in their use of public diplomacy, in that they did not receive widespread visibility and support and, apart from their recruitment achievements, they remain relatively unknown to people around the globe. The fact that these two groups linger in relative obscurity is important. Recognition and success in communication can be self-perpetuating. The Ogoni people in Nigeria, for instance, initiated public diplomacy activities themselves, but their efforts were effectively hijacked, or at least amplified and altered beyond recognition, by other actors (including NGOs, media, other governments and civil society) who took up their cause. No such thing occurred with Ansar Dine and the MNLA—all their efforts were their own.

Our chronologically ordered database of source material records 197 instances of rebel diplomacy efforts by both groups within the context of conflict on the ground, providing a real-time comparison of the 'offline' actions of the two groups with their virtual expressions.[24] This database is not a comprehensive overview of all the rebels' engagements with foreign audiences. Rather, it is a

[22] Mark Leonard, *Public diplomacy* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2002).
[23] Eytan Gilboa, 'Searching for a theory of public diplomacy', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616: 1, 2008, pp. 55–77.
[24] A copy of this database is available upon request.

sample of the communications from a variety of media that illustrate rebel diplomacy. For instance, we have not noted every Facebook post that the MNLA has ever made. Rather, we selected a relevant sample following an examination of all the posts on their page. This was done because the focus of our analysis lies in the in-depth analysis of key communications, as opposed to the tallying of types of post. Therefore, samples were chosen for each year from all the media available to us. We categorized each entry in the database by Leonard's three dimensions of public diplomacy (news management, strategic communication and relationship-building), and three spheres of activity (political/military, economic and social/cultural). We use these labels to derive indicative measurements of the thematic priorities of both groups. Our sources come from the MNLA's website, the MNLA's official Facebook and Twitter pages, and uploads onto YouTube that can be directly traced back to the group. We also include interviews given directly by the MNLA leadership to the western and regional press.

For Ansar Dine, we based our research on the videos they circulated and messages they sent out via their three main media agencies. To access these, we used think-tanks that report on these messages and translate them. We also included interviews given to regional and western media. On relationship-building, we used third-party reporting of such engagements, which is often the only evidence that exists of these efforts. The majority of the sources are written in French and Arabic, though some are also written in English; the researchers are fully proficient in French, and we used translations from Arabic by think-tanks.

We compare the methods and aims of rebel diplomacy, as used by these two groups with very different ideologies, in order to understand differences in their motivations and self-perceptions, and how they initiate, maintain and develop their public diplomacy. Our qualitative research cannot fully explain the variation in these rebels' use of certain public diplomacy tools—that is, in the sense of quantitative hypothesis testing. However, we follow Bob in believing 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'.[25] The collected evidence allows us to analyse public communications by rebel groups that target foreign actors—influential individuals, media companies, NGOs, artists and civil society. Our research perspective provides a way to analyse rebel communications that can ultimately improve western and international policy decisions when dealing with countries and regions, such as Mali, where rebel groups are active.

Two rebel groups in Mali's mosaic

Ansar Dine and the MNLA were both active in Mali's descent into turmoil, which reduced a nation that had for 20 years been lauded as the prime African example of a stable multiparty democracy and a bulwark against radical Islam

[25] Bob, *The marketing of rebellion*, p. 10.

into a country torn by conflict.[26] The secessionist story begins in 2011 with the creation of the MNLA, which was formed out of a young, political, tech-savvy Tuareg movement that merged with more hard-line and military-oriented secessionists. The MNLA's goal was to liberate the north of Mali, an area known as Azawad, from what it considered to be illegal occupation by the Malian government in the fourth uprising by irredentist groups northern Mali had seen since 1960.[27] In 2011, the MNLA's numbers were swelled by between 2,000 and 4,000 Tuareg who returned from Libya after the fall of Gaddafi's government, bringing weapons and trained military men.[28] Meanwhile, discontent was also growing in the south about what southern Malians perceived as governmental mishandling of the military response to the Tuareg insurgency. A group of disgruntled soldiers in the southern town of Kati mutinied and caused a full-blown *coup d'état* that overthrew the Touré government.

Serious economic, political and environmental grievances in the north had already led to the encroachment of regional extremist Islamist thinking there. From the 1980s, Mali's unimpressive educational infrastructure had increasingly made room for *madrassas*—Qur'anic schools that teach a Salafi/Wahhabi brand of Islam. By the end of the 1980s, 25 per cent of children of primary school age were attending these schools.[29] Classes in the *madrassas* were taught in Arabic—not Mali's official language, French—thereby exacerbating the differences between the north and the south.[30] One of the home-grown Islamist groups that sprang up at the end of 2011 was Ansar Dine (the name roughly translates to 'Defenders of the Faith'). It aimed to impose its version of shari'a law on the country and rehabilitate the authority and leadership of the religious elders, the *ulama*. In the first years of the Malian conflict, Ansar Dine's aims were limited to the territory of Mali.[31] In 2013, the United States declared the group a terrorist organization.[32] Ansar Dine is primarily made up of Tuareg fighters, particularly from the Ifoghas tribe; its leader is Iyad Ag Ghali, a well-established figure in Malian life who had previously fought for Tuareg independence.[33]

An initial loose alliance between Ansar Dine and the MNLA broke down once Malian government forces had been pushed out of the north in 2012. Ansar Dine and other Islamist groups turned away from their alliance with the MNLA to

[26] Jaimie Bleck and Kristin Michelitch, 'The 2012 crisis in Mali: ongoing empirical state failure', *African Affairs* 114: 457, 2015, pp. 598–623; and Hussein Solomon, *Terrorism and counter insurgency in Africa: fighting insurgency from Al Shabaab, Ansar Dine and Boko Haram* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[27] Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, *A process in search of peace: lessons from the inter-Malian agreement* (New York: International Peace Institute, June 2017).

[28] Dona J. Stewart, *What is next for Mali? The roots of conflict and challenges to stability,* Strategic Studies Institute report (Pennsylvania: US Army War College, 2013).

[29] Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, *The roots of Mali's conflict: moving beyond the 2012 crisis*, CRU Report (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', March 2015), pp. 1–62.

[30] Chauzal and van Damme, *The roots of Mali's conflict*.

[31] Chauzal and van Damme, *The roots of Mali's conflict*.

[32] US Department of State, *Country reports on terrorism 2017—foreign terrorist organizations: Ansar al-Dine*, 19 Sept. 2018, https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bcf1f56a.html. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 7 Sept. 2019.)

[33] David J. Francis, *The regional impact of the armed conflict and French intervention in Mali*, NOREF report (Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2013); Djallil Lounnas, 'Confronting Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib in the Sahel: Algeria and the Malian crisis', *Journal of North African Studies* 19: 5, 2014, pp. 810–27.

seek control for themselves. The militarily superior jihadist groups forced out the MNLA and imposed strict shari'a law.[34] The jihadist groups governed the north until 2013, when their sudden attack on the south of Mali drew French military intervention in retaliation. Faced with a French and later UN military presence in Mali, the Islamic groups in the north, including Ansar Dine, found themselves having to lie low.[35] Ansar Dine's period of relative quiet came to an end when it allied itself more closely with other Islamist groups, including Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): in 2016 the number of attacks it carried out increased by 50 per cent from the previous year.[36] In March 2017, Ansar Dine merged with the AQIM, and became known as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).[37]

In 2015, negotiations in Ouagadougou and in Algiers led to a peace agreement between the Malian government and rebel groups, during which the MNLA publicly gave up the goal of independence. The MNLA joined the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA), a conglomeration of northern Malian groups with the goal of autonomy.

Ansar Dine enters the digital age

Ansar Dine's efforts to communicate with foreign audiences show clear attempts at rebel diplomacy. Their communications were often used as an operational tool—they used news management to frame the conflict and aid them in their day-to-day military goals. Ansar Dine also made efforts to garner recognition and privileges through its communications with foreign audiences, and strategically engaged stakeholders to create the narrative of its identity and enhance its international agency. Roughly 50 per cent of the sample of Ansar Dine's communications was dedicated to strategic communications, and 44 per cent to news management. Ansar Dine was, however, limited in its efforts to communicate with third parties to their conflict, first because its classification as a terrorist organization immediately cut off the prospect of any international recognition—hence its attempts to avoid the dreaded label for as long as possible—and second, because the same terrorist label forced it off mainstream platforms such as YouTube. In response, it turned to creating media channels that its communication branch could disseminate through Telegram, a highly encrypted messaging service, to reach out to regional audiences and news media when they wanted their messages to reach further afield. The terrorist signifier also made relationship-building extremely challenging until the group's transformation into JNIM allowed it access to Al-Qaeda's assets and narratives.

When operational priorities demanded it, Ansar Dine structured its communications to foreign audiences with an eye to maintaining tactical ambiguity. Baz

[34] Sergei Boeke, 'Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: terrorism, insurgency, or organized crime?', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27: 5, 2016, pp. 914–36.

[35] Yuliana Lefèvre, *Escalation of terrorist attacks in Mali demonstrates growing expansion of Ansar Dine,* ESISC report (Brussels: European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre, 2016).

[36] *Ansar Dine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation, July 2018), https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/ansar-dine.

[37] *Ansar Dine*; Jean-Pierre Lacroix, *Security Council report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali* (New York: UN Security Council, 2017).

Lecocq and 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'.[38] This was partly because Ansar Dine was allied in some form with both the MNLA and AQIM, each of which had declared the other its enemy. Between 2011 and 2012, therefore, Ansar Dine's comments to the press refrained from declaring its allegiance either to the MNLA or to other Islamist groups in Mali that had already been designated terrorist groups. The way in which Ansar Dine communicated with foreign audiences left African and western states unsure what to do with it—invite it to the negotiating table or view it as an extremist spoiler to any such process. This uncertainty in part explains why the designation of Ansar Dine as a terrorist group came relatively late, in March 2013.

However, it would be an exaggeration to attribute every element of Ansar Dine's early engagement with foreign audiences as motivated entirely by strategic intent, in other words, related to its overall and long-term aims. When Algiers initiated peace negotiations, it attempted to get Ansar Dine and the MNLA around the negotiating table to sign a *protocole d'accord*. Ansar Dine's communications during this process became highly contradictory, with the group first publicly approving, and then disapproving, the draft agreement.[39] Evidence uncovered after the fact illustrated that factions within Ansar Dine were disagreeing with each other, suggesting that simple internal miscommunication and misalignment also had a substantial effect on Ansar Dine's contradictory communication efforts.

Despite early ambiguity, Ag Ghali's group took several steps that indicate a desire to communicate with audiences beyond its direct context. In April 2012 he set up a system through which to orchestrate communications with regional and international press agencies. This involved establishing a small cell to collect questions from the press, after which he would transmit his answers, a move interpreted as aimed at improving Ansar Dine's public relations deficit, especially in comparison to the very vocal MNLA.[40] International news agencies such as Reuters and Agence France Presse (AFP) and the magazine *Jeune Afrique* eagerly took advantage of this new communications opportunity. Moreover, Ag Ghali selected one person as his primary mouthpiece: Sanda Ould Boumana. It was Boumana who gave an interview to Al Jazeera in a hospital in northern Mali, in which he said: 'We call upon the world … to please give aid to this poor and suffering people,' positioning Ansar Dine as the primary contact in the country for outside aid.[41] Ansar Dine's efforts to communicate with the outside world bore the hallmarks of public diplomacy

[38] Baz Lecocq, Gregory Mann, Bruce Whitehouse, Dida Badi, Lotte Pelckmans, Nadia Belalimat and Wolfram Lacher, 'One hippopotamus and eight blind analysts: a multivocal analysis of the 2012 political crisis in the divided Republic of Mali', *Review of African Political Economy* 40: 137, 2013, pp. 343–57.

[39] Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, *A process in search of peace: lessons from the inter-Malian agreement* (New York: International Peace Institute, June 2017).

[40] Adam Thiam, 'Iyad Ag Ghali : "Ansar dine ne connaît que le Mali et la charia"', *Jeune Afrique*, April 2012, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/176590/politique/iyad-ag-ghali-ansar-dine-ne-conna-t-que-le-mali-et-la-charia/.

[41] May Ying Welsh, 'The "gentle" face of Al-Qaeda', Al Jazeera, 30 Dec. 2012, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/2012review/2012/12/20121228102157169557.html.

aimed at gaining international recognition for the group as a serious contender for power in northern Mali and setting up structural channels to achieve that.[42]

Engagement with foreign audiences remained important to the operational priorities of Ansar Dine. The group continued to use its outreach methods to appeal to more regional audiences and to construct its narrative to help meet military needs. For example, using its Telegram account, Ansar Dine released photos of four suicide bombers who had perpetrated a suicide attack on Timbuktu Airport on 14 April 2018.[43] The pictures show smiling young men, posing with guns. These photos are emblematic of Ansar Dine's use of Telegram and visuals, which are eminently suitable for communicating emotion. They were selected to show how Ansar Dine sees itself: as the 'good guys', fighting against foreign oppression, with the aim of influencing regional recipients of such posts.[44]

Once Ansar Dine was designated a terrorist group, and especially once the group became JNIM in 2017, digital outlets provided it with different ways of communicating the group's aims to a wider public, and its method of representing itself was professionalized. Ansar Dine began reaching out to international publics more frequently, targeting followers of the Muslim faith and drawing international actors into Malian political violence as stakeholders. Its communications gained in both professionalism and regularity as it established its own media branches, which were used to send messages to regional and international stakeholders such as news agencies and civil society groups as well as to allies, primarily through Telegram. Messages disseminated by Ansar Dine's media agencies aimed to control and frame how specific occurrences on the battlefield were presented. This work became particularly important to Ansar Dine, and its communication platforms were rigorously kept up to date. For example, on 12 March 2018, Al-Tamkin Media released a statement 'Regarding the Dissemination of Forged Statements', in which the group took steps to counter any counterfeit news updates 'falsely attributed to the Support for Islam and Muslims Organization [JNIM]'.[45]

[42] In the traditional literature, rebel movements' public diplomacy is mainly focused on recognition by other international actors, above all states. See e.g. on the Taliban, William Maley, *The foreign policy of the Taliban* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 15 Feb. 2000).

[43] Caleb Weiss, 'JNIM claims four suicide bombers used in Timbuktu attack', *Long War Journal*, April 2018, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/04/jnim-claims-four-suicide-bombers-used-in-timbuktu-attack.php.

[44] There is a recent upswing of academic interest in the use of visuals in international politics, especially in scenarios of war and peace. See Simone Molin Friis, '"Beyond anything we have ever seen": beheading videos and the visibility of violence in the war against ISIS', *International Affairs* 91: 4, July 2015, pp. 725–46; Simone Molin Friis, '"Behead, burn, crucify, crush": theorizing the Islamic State's public displays of violence', *European Journal of International Relations* 24: 2, 2018, pp. 243–67; Andrew Barr and Alexandra Herfroy-Mischler, 'ISIL's execution videos: audience segmentation and terrorist communication in the digital age', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 41: 12, 2018, pp. 946–67; Ilan Manor and Rhys Crilley, 'Visually framing the Gaza War of 2014: the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Twitter', *Media, War and Conflict* 11: 3, 2018, pp. 369–91; Ilan Manor and Rhys Crilley, 'The aesthetics of violent extremist and counter-violent extremist communication', in Corneliu Bjola and James Pamment, eds, *Countering online propaganda and extremism: the dark side of digital diplomacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 121–39; Sean Aday, 'Virtual violence: understanding the potential power of ISIS' violent videos to buttress strategic narratives and persuade foreign recruits', in Bjola and Pamment, eds, *Countering online propaganda and extremism*, pp. 140–55; Costas M. Constantinou, 'Visual diplomacy: reflections on diplomatic spectacle and cinematic thinking', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 13: 2, 2018, pp. 388–409.

[45] MENASTREAM (@MENASTREAM), '#Mali: English translation by Tamkin Media of the previous statement regarding fake #JNIM communiqués', 13 March 2018, 16:45, Tweet, https://twitter.com/MENAS-

News outlets that were controlled by Al-Qaeda or AQIM, or that strongly supported those groups' aims, also became available once Ansar Dine merged into JNIM. For example, Al-Massar, a Yemeni news source tied to Al-Qaeda, released an interview with Ag Ghali in which he threatened France and the UN MINUSMA mission in Mali, stating:

> 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.[46]

Ansar Dine believed in the importance of communicating with people outside its immediate membership, though it had a hard time professionalizing its outreach to foreign publics. The group learned as it went along. Despite the difficulties it faced, the group made it clear through its actions that reaching out to foreign publics was high on its priority list, and at some points it did manage to broadcast its narrative on the international stage. It engaged in strategic communication and news management, focusing especially on military and political topics, which account for roughly 90 per cent of Ansar Dine's communications, and social/cultural issues, which were primarily angled towards the imposition of shari'a, such as the execution of criminals and the destruction of the tombs of Timbuktu. The group actively reached out to foreign audiences with the public diplomacy aim of winning hearts and minds, alongside the politico-military objective of recruiting fighters. Only 5 per cent of the material collected from Ansar Dine's communication efforts falls under the heading of 'relationship-building'. Though it did attempt to forge relations with groups outside Mali, for example in Algiers, these attempts were seriously hampered by its ideology and its categorization as a terrorist group.

MNLA rebel diplomacy

In contrast to Ansar Dine's gradual adaptation to the digital age, the MNLA was remarkably tech-savvy in its transnational communications from the start. One of its activists stated shortly after the group's formation that it 'created a political bureau, which set about analysing and considering all the political aspects, including how to raise awareness among the international community, especially regional powers'.[47] In contrast to Ansar Dine, the group considered this external constellation of states and supranational institutions essential to Azawad's recognition and autonomy. The MNLA made extensive use of all three dimensions of public diplomacy—news management, strategic communication and relationship-

TREAM/status/973585913942028289.

[46] Malek Bachir, 'France is our first enemy, says "emir" of new Al-Qaeda affiliate', *Middle East Eye*, April 2017, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/france-our-first-enemy-says-emir-new-al-qaeda-affiliate.

[47] Rudolph Atallah, *The Tuareg revolt and the Mali coup: prepared statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights* (Washington DC: US Government Publishing Office, House of Representatives, 29 June 2012), p. 5; Lawrence E. Cline, 'Nomads, Islamists, and soldiers: the struggles for northern Mali', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36: 8, 2013, pp. 617–34.

building—deploying each when it believed it would have the greatest impact. Depending on the state of play in respect of the fighting or the peace agreements on the ground, messages addressed the political/military, social/cultural or economic sphere. Social media platforms were a game-changer for the tech-savvy MNLA; but this case-study also shows that digital public diplomacy cannot be properly understood without 'offline' contextualization.

Against a backdrop of 50 years of grievances against the Malian government and three previous Tuareg uprisings, the MNLA had plenty of pre-established motifs and messages upon which it could draw. More difficult was the question of credibility; and this it attempted to establish by means of news management. In the earliest months of the fighting in 2011 and 2012, the MNLA circulated videos illustrating great victories it had achieved against the Malian Army.[48] By claiming particular victories, the MNLA was successful in framing the conflict in its own image and increasing its legitimacy in the eyes of foreign observers.[49] A secessionist movement able to conquer two-thirds of a country within three months was bound to attract attention, raising the MNLA's profile among interested foreign publics and leading to its being taken seriously by relevant external actors. Moreover, it allowed the group to assert its legitimacy as the main representative of the people of Azawad.

In order to orchestrate its news management efforts, from its inception the MNLA created a variety of tools and platforms to engage with foreign publics. The most significant element in its communications infrastructure is the MNLA's website: www.mnlamov.net. This platform became one of the group's prime outlets, with posts written in French, Arabic and English, illustrating the reach the MNLA wanted its messages to have.[50] Each blog post has garnered between 2,500 and 10,000 views. Whether accurate or not, these numbers published on the MNLA website and that are represented as functions, automatically reflecting the number of posts a view has garnered, allow the MNLA to measure and boast the success of its strategic communications.

The MNLA's growing reputation as a group to be taken seriously on the Malian scene opened doors in international news broadcasting. The MNLA was keen to forge a relationship with France because of its historical ties to Mali and common language, and indeed it found a willing audience there. MNLA leaders have often appeared on French television; one of the most famous, Moussa Ag Assari, spokesperson for the MNLA in France, announced the declaration of independence for Azawad on French television on 6 April 2012.

However, the MNLA's relationship with Islamist elements on the Malian military scene significantly hampered its reputation, the effectiveness of its news management and its relationships with external actors. Once the truth about the MNLA's relationship with radical Islamist groups came out, the group's assertions that it had nothing to do with Islamist terrorists sharing the same geographical zone

[48] Mirjam E. de Bruijn, Lotte Pelckmans and Boukary Sangare, 'Communicating war in Mali, 2012: on–offline networked political agency in times of conflict', *Journal of African Media Studies* 7: 2, 2015, pp. 109–28.
[49] Baz Lecocq and Georg Klute, 'Tuareg separatism in Mali', *International Journal* 68: 3, 2013, pp. 424–34.
[50] Lecocq and Klute, 'Tuareg separatism in Mali'.

within Mali became hard to sustain.[51] Reports by international NGOs asserted that MNLA fighters were undisciplined and were committing theft, robbery, plunder and rape in the territories they occupied.[52] Furthermore, UN evidence showed many instances of people switching sides between the MNLA and the Islamist groups on the basis of which group was able to pay them higher wages, was winning on the battlefield at that particular time, or even was in control of the various lucrative people- and drug-trafficking routes.[53] The accusation that the MNLA rebels were allied with terrorists did significant damage to the group's international reputation and overall framing by outside observers. In response, the MNLA employed the language of international law by publishing declarations that followed the format of UN resolutions and called upon human rights law, for example, to promote their arguments. In fact, the MNLA is still the sole representative of Azawad in the Organization of Emerging African States since it joined in November 2013.

Finding states entirely unresponsive to Azawad's self-proclaimed independence, the MNLA directed its relationship-building outwards towards civil society groups in other countries, while maintaining its lobbying with official state actors. The group's avenues for strategic communication developed as it set up online platforms on which to engage with foreign publics. In 2014, the MNLA launched official Twitter and Facebook pages. On Twitter, it can be found at @MnlaNews. On Facebook, it has three main pages, all with thousands of subscribers—@mnlamovnews (with 4,000 followers), @cpa.azawad (with 2,500 followers) and @mnlamov (with 5,000 followers). The Facebook pages also link to numerous YouTube accounts, each with its own emotive video about the liberation of Azawad. Facebook was used to provide short news updates, and visuals about the situation on the ground made the MNLA's message quicker to read and easier to digest for users who expect images and not just text. Some pictures illustrate daily life in Azawad; others convey meaning by using emotive pictures; and many of the photos posted on its groups and subsidiary groups have captions and other text in English.

The MNLA's digital efforts to create ties with civil society in a range of countries were underpinned by physical efforts beyond the online sphere. In 2014, Moussa Ag Assari travelled to the Netherlands as a representative of the MNLA to set up an informal pop-up mission with the New World NGO summit in Utrecht. A 'New World Embassy: Azawad' exhibition at the Basis voor Actuele Kunst (Base for Topical Art), held in conjunction with artists and documentary-makers, served as a way for the MNLA to reach out to other publics.

The 2015 peace agreement reached in Algiers saw the MNLA's communications plan hit a snag when the group became part of the CMA, the alliance of northern, mainly Tuareg groups that stood for increased autonomy for the north

[51] Michael Shurkin, Stephanie Pezard and Rebecca Zimmerman, *Mali's next battle: improving counterterrorism capabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017).

[52] Gaetan Mootoo, *Mali: five months of crisis: armed rebellion and military coup* (London: Amnesty International, May 2012); Lecocq and Klute, 'Tuareg separatism in Mali'.

[53] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, *Conflict in the Sahel region and the developmental consequences* (Addis Ababa, Dec. 2016); Olivier J. Walther and Dimitris Christopoulos, 'Islamic terrorism and the Malian rebellion', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27: 3, 2015, pp. 497–519.

of Mali. The CMA included less extreme groups than the MNLA, and others that believed in very different routes towards an Azawadi homeland. Incorporation into the CMA posed a huge challenge for the MNLA's public diplomacy efforts. The MNLA did not want to disband; nor did it want to lose out on the political power that would be handed out as part of the peace process. However, as part of the CMA, the MNLA could not promote its identity as the only group that could legitimately represent Azawadis. The MNLA's solution was to maintain its own strategic communications, while also taking charge of a portion of the CMA's coordinated communications, and thus gaining from the CMA's better reputation in the region.

For the technologically minded MNLA, offline and online actions were intimately connected. Despite, or perhaps because of, its lack of credibility on the battlefield, deriving from both military inferiority and scandals concerning its treatment of civilians, and the challenges to its claim that it represented all Azawadi people, the MNLA put great effort into its strategic communication and news management: taken together, these two categories accounted for more than 90 per cent of material in the database of samples collected. One of the key characteristics of the MNLA's strategic communications was its longevity and relative cohesiveness. One can trace a clear line of intent and strategy from the MNLA's strategic communications to the CMA's, and the MNLA's identity remained intact even after the group had been subsumed into the CMA alliance.

Conclusion

We claim that the public diplomacy perspective provides a much-needed update in research on rebel movements whose communications are no longer restricted to quasi-diplomatic relations with states. Using the framework of rebel diplomacy also allows researchers to zoom in on how online communicative practices relate to rebel groups' declaratory policies. Public diplomacy as a framework, then, broadens our understanding of the motives and behaviour of diplomatic actors, the different contexts in which they operate, and changing practices in the society of states.

By analysing both a terrorist and an irredentist group—types of groups that traditionally have been analysed only separately—we have been able to establish more accurately where exactly the differences and similarities between such groups lie, instead of relying on an artificial division imposed by theory. The case-studies of Ansar Dine and the MNLA illustrate several significant similarities between the two groups in how they communicated with foreign audiences. Both groups conducted public diplomacy with the aim of gaining recognition and increasing their influence at the international level, as well as for operational purposes. Both set up structures to facilitate communications with foreign audiences and allocated resources—both human and financial—to maintaining these structures, including the cost of maintaining an online presence. Each of the two groups framed its conflict primarily in the language of identity, military capabilities and social

change, and both employed strategies of news management, strategic communication and relationship-building. The last of these three dimensions appeared to be particularly challenging for both groups. The MNLA and Ansar Dine also had in common a pragmatism and agility in the use of online tools. The similarities in how they approached their digital communications suggest that, in other conflicts around the world, it may be fruitful to analyse the communications of all non-state parties without dividing them up for analysis according to their stated goals.

There were also significant differences between the two groups: they went about gaining recognition from foreign publics and power in entirely different ways, and each failed in its efforts for different reasons. The MNLA was different from Ansar Dine in according high priority to its communications with foreign audiences from the start. As a group, it had access to all the digital platforms it could get its hands on. Its messages were visual, emotive and in-depth when they needed to be. The MNLA's successful news management campaign was essential in securing its exposure on French television, giving it the opportunity to appeal directly to French and other western audiences. Moreover, the MNLA found it easier than Ansar Dine to engage in relationship-building. The failure of the MNLA lies in the fact that no international outcry at the treatment of Azawadis resounded internationally. This can partially be explained by factors outside the MNLA's control, such as the complexity of the conflict, the reluctance of foreign powers to recognize new African states, and the gradual military weakening of the group on the ground. However, a significant element in the group's failure was its public diplomacy work. The group's inability to create a narrative that was untainted by Islamist terrorism, and its shoddy news management, led to stakeholders such as news media, NGOs and intergovernmental organizations picking holes in its story.

Ansar Dine followed a different and more complex trajectory in its rebel diplomacy, and its narrative was not as well defined as that of the MNLA. Its actions in seeking engagement with the international community before the group was labelled as a terrorist organization and made explicit its allegiance to AQIM and Al-Qaeda bore clear hallmarks of public diplomacy. However, it was not as successful as the MNLA, having started later, and having a system of alliances it needed to keep secret. The group's aim of maintaining strategic ambiguity about its goals and allies meant that it lacked versatility in the tools it used, and had recourse primarily to foreign news agencies where possible. Once Ansar Dine had made clear its alliance with AQIM, and had been branded with the 'terrorist' label, its access to mainstream sites was restricted. When it evolved into JNIM, its public diplomacy fell in with the structures and methods of AQIM and Al-Qaeda, and the new entity had to adjust its narrative accordingly, defining its enemies in much broader terms to include France, the United Kingdom, the United States and their African allies. From 2015 onwards, Ansar Dine's public diplomacy yielded more benefits, to the extent that foreign publics, states, media and NGOs started to confer on the group a degree of influence disproportionate to its actual power on

the ground. By declaring war on the West, Ansar Dine managed to draw support regionally from other international Islamist groups and recruit new Sahel-based fighters.

Our research provides insights for policy-makers seeking to ascertain the nature, intentions and capacities of myriad rebel groups. In attempts to gauge how powerful such groups are, their digital communications can be entirely misleading. In the case of the MNLA, despite or perhaps because of its lack of credibility on the battlefield, digital tools helped the group to present itself as the powerhouse of the north. Similarly, when JNIM declared war on all the countries of the West and their African allies through state-of-the-art communication channels, one questions to what extent that was the attack of a paper tiger, and to what extent the group really had the ability to strike into the heart of 'the West'. Weak or ineffective violent non-state rebels or terrorist groups can use media to give the appearance of strength and capability. An essential question, therefore, becomes how policy-makers can determine the real impact of such groups. This is critical in ensuring that counterterrorism resources are dedicated to fighting real threats and not diverted to address groups that are inherently weak, despite their social media footprint and success stories. Only by understanding the interplay of rebel communications, how they frame their identity and narrative, and their actions on the ground can one reliably assess the threat rebel groups actually pose. Our analysis allowed us to explore questions such as why the MNLA claimed victories that were not theirs: did that mean they were in league with Islamist terrorists and therefore had significant power on the battlefield? Or was it a pragmatic move meant to hide their weakness? We conclude that public diplomacy became for Ansar Dine and the MNLA a way of keeping up the appearance of power. Only for a very short period did these groups' digital self-representation actually reflect their actual power and influence on the ground.

It has become essential for governments to understand the digital public diplomacy of non-state actors and the online activities of rebel groups, for these offer an unprecedented window on the narrative, identity, aims and practices of those groups that have access to digital communications. So far, quantitative research on rebel groups' use of social media has been predominantly concerned with the effects of rebel communications. We claim that an important next step in qualitative research is to give policy-makers in European capitals an improved conception of the motivations that drive these groups' public diplomatic actions.

The first implication of our study pertinent to western policy-makers is that all politics is local, and one way of understanding the local context is by studying rebel diplomacy. Ansar Dine and the MNLA are groups that operate within and subject to a very specific local context, and it is only by understanding this that one can gather a more nuanced understanding of the problems at issue and the solutions available. Ansar Dine was a local group, and—especially in the early years of the conflict—was largely preoccupied with avoiding Tuareg infighting and imposing shari'a law on the territory of Mali, rather than starting a worldwide jihadist campaign. Nor was it the only or most violent group on the stage.

The tendency among analysts to designate Mali-based rebels as Islamist terrorists, and thereby to consider them in that exclusive analytical frame, has limited the West's understanding of the best way to deal with such groups. Doing so may have proved fruitful for large transnational terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. But for Ansar Dine and the MNLA such a distinction becomes an artificial obstacle to interpreting both consequential differences between the rebel groups and their common roots in Mali, taking into account that their recruits come primarily from Mali—or, within a wider region, from the same tribe. For policy-makers, drawing too heavily on arbitrary classifications can stand in the way of subtle but important distinctions.

The digital age has allowed the MNLA and Ansar Dine to gain access to foreign interlocutors and their potential power and influence. Moreover, their communications in and of themselves have provided researchers with unparalleled access into their motivations, processes and goals in engaging foreign publics. These are good reasons for in-depth study of the diplomacy of rebel groups in Africa and elsewhere, and they support our broader point that there is a lot to learn from paying more attention to the public diplomacy of non-western non-state actors.