Introduction:

Although Mali has historically been a country with relatively low, though recurring, levels of violence, a dramatic spike in both violent events and fatalities has occurred starting in late 2011. This centred on a violent campaign for Tuareg secessionism alongside increasing Islamic militancy, leading to a peak of violence in January 2013 which saw 284 fatalities over the course of the month (*see* **Figure 1).** Mali is now the 21st most violent country in the ACLED dataset when measured by the number of violent events over the course of the dataset's coverage from 1997 through 2014.

The cyclical and recurring spikes in violence which Mali has witnessed, although small relative to the post-2011 violence, foreshadowed the violent conflict to come. Key spikes occurred in 1999, and again in 2006-2008 (*see* **Figure 1),** centring on the ethnic and geographic divides which Mali bridges. These have also influenced the geography of political violence in Mali, which has consistently occurred primarily in the Northern regions of Tombouctou, Gao, and Kidal, and since 2011, in the central province of Mopti as well, which straddles the country's Northern and southern halves.

Historically, violence in the three Northern-most regions

has been driven by militant Tuareg groups and centred on concerns over the lack of Northern development compared to the south. From 1997 to 2009, violent Tuareg groups were involved in 24**%** of all violent events in Mali, more than any other single group of actors (*see* **Table I)**. However, since 2009, militant Islamist violence has also become increasingly prevalent in the North, with these groups involved in almost a quarter of all violence between 2009 and September 2014.

Further south, violence in Mopti is overwhelmingly Islamist-related rather than Tuareg. This reflects the southward push of violent Islamist groups into territory outside their northern strongholds. Meanwhile, the majority of violence in Bamako is state violence: half is comprised of riots/protests and less than 20% representing battles or violence against civilians.

In regard to the types of violence, armed battles have been the most prominent form of violence in Mali. ACLED figures demonstrate that almost two-thirds of fatalities in Mali occurred during battles with no change of territory (close to the continental average of 64%), while only 17% of reported fatalities were the result of violence against civilians, considerably lower than the continental average of 29%.
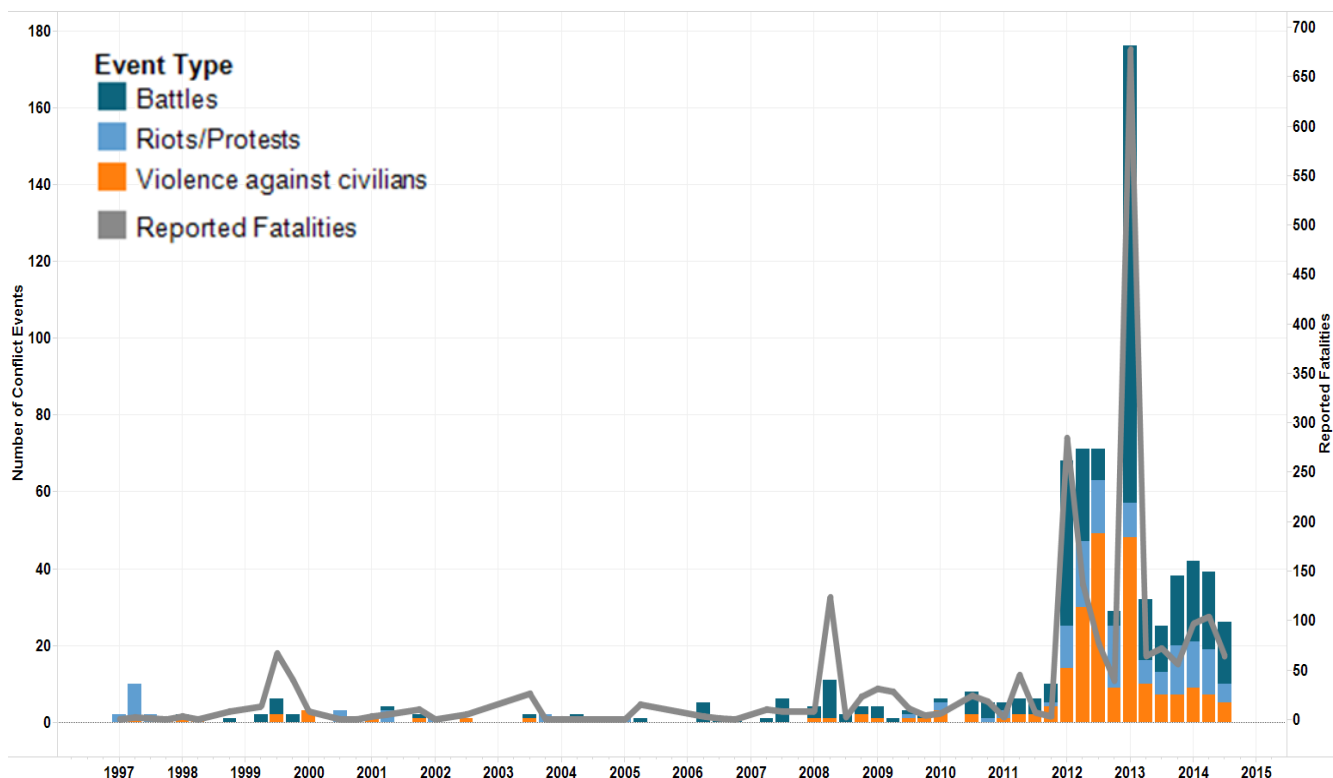

Figure 1: Number of Conflict Events by Event Type and Reported Fatalities, Mali, January 1997 - September 2014.　　1

Actor	1997-2008	2009-2014
Militant Tuareg Groups	25.00%	12.63%
Violent Islamist Groups	6.25%	28.90%
Other Communal/Ethnic Militias	17.36%	2.49%
Rioters (Mali)	4.86%	3.25%
Security Forces of Mali	28.47%	21.91%
Unidentified Armed Groups (Mali)	3.47%	8.23%
Other[1]	13.89%	10.05%
External Forces	0.69%	12.54%

Table I: Proportion of Conflict Events by Actor Type, Mali, 1997-2008 and 2009-Sept 2014.

However, different types of conflict have shown diverging trends. During the 2007-2009 Tuareg rebellion, which was primarily dominated by battles between government forces and Tuareg rebels, the percentage of fatalities from violence against civilians was only 7%. In contrast, since 2009, that number has risen to 19% of all fatalities. This coincides with the increasing activity of militant Islamists whose attacks have been more indiscriminate than those of Tuareg rebels. This greater targeting of civilians has led to an increase from 13% of all fatalities being civilians between 1997-2010 to 18% between 2011-2014.

This report will seek to unpack these dynamics. Section 1 reviews the history of violence in Mali, including levels and locations of violent conflict. This provides the foundation for section 2 which summarizes the rise in political violence since 2011, including state violence and the MNLA insurgency. Section 3 then provides an overview of militant Islamist violence in the country. Finally, Section 4 offers conclusions and implications for Mali's future stability.

History of Violence

A comprehensive analysis of the contemporary patterns of violence in Mali requires that some attention paid to historical patterns of conflict. Contrary to a common perception that the current wave of unrest, which escalated in 2012, is a dramatic departure from previous patterns of violence, an analysis of recorded conflict reveals recurring waves of violence in the past 15 years preceding the current crisis.

Ethnic & Sectarian Violence

Prior to the Tuareg uprising of 2006, one of the key aspects of violence in Mali has been communal violence occurring along ethnic and sectarian divides. This is due to the heterogeneity of the Northern region, which is inhabited by a diverse range of ethnic groups, and is also characterised by considerable intra-group heterogeneity, e.g. the aristocratic *Ifoghas* branch of the Tuareg, who have often opposed the government, versus the traditionally lower-status *Imghad* branch, who have either remained neutral in previous conflicts, or supported the state (Boeke and Tisseron, 2014, 35).

Communal violence has occurred sporadically both in time and location across Mali. Notable incidents include ethnic groups engaging in clashes over land rights, resource access and competing livelihoods in Ségou, Kayes and Koulikoro regions, as well as between Sunni and Shia religionists over the construction of a mosque in 2003.

The majority of violence has been produced through contests between organized, politically defined, ethno-regional groups. Although events are relatively rare, they nevertheless reflect fundamental underlying social cleavages, which re-emerge in conflict in various ways. For instance, the role of ethnic divides in Malian violence during this period is reflected in the first major spike in violence in Mali in 1999.

This juncture saw members of the Kounta ethnic group, identified as supporters of the government, clashing with

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1. The 'Other' category includes protesters, and other militias (including militant student groups, and affiliates of Polisario Front) which are not associated with communal groups or Islamist militias.
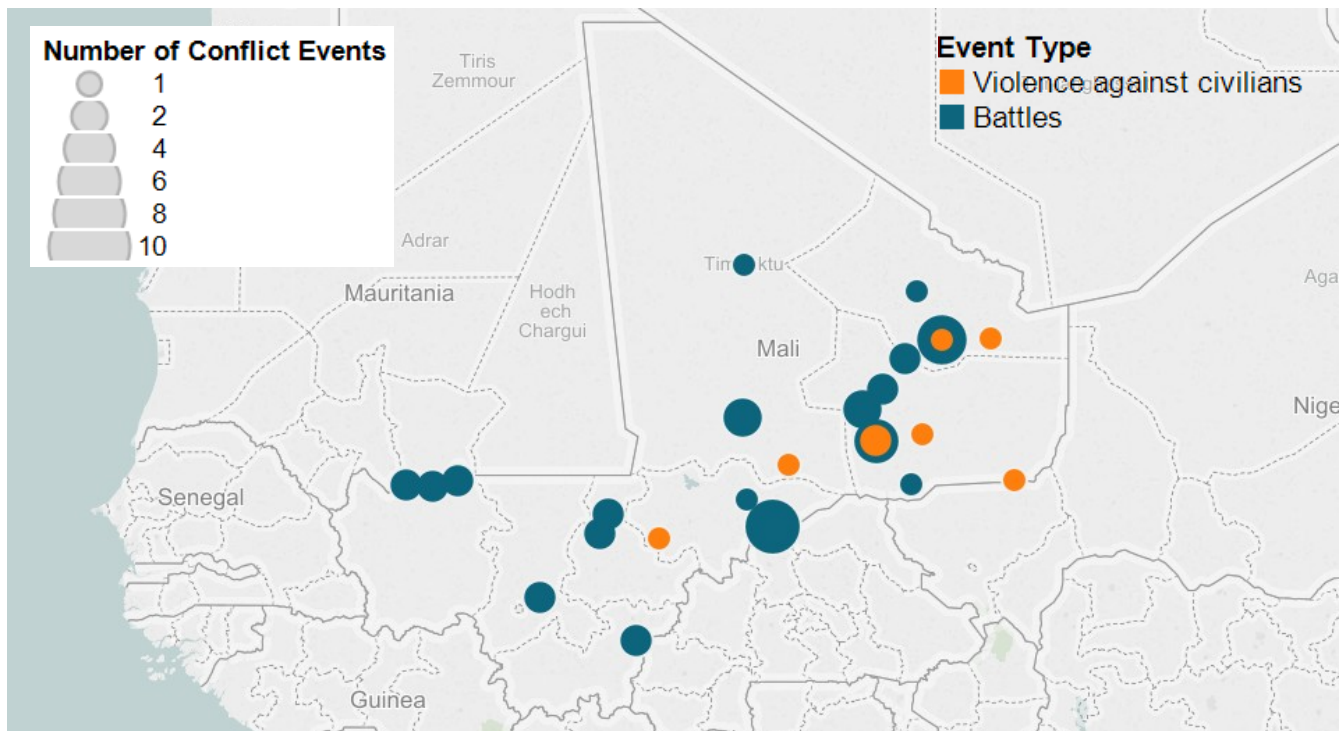
Figure 2: Number of Conflict Events by Type Involving Ethnic/Communal Militias, Mali, 1997 - 2014.

Arabs, identified as pro-opposition, in a small number of high-intensity clashes in Gao.

Although motivated primarily by political concerns, the ethnic divide was reinforced by these clashes, which pitted two groups on opposite political sides against one another. Using these divisions, the central government in Bamako has been able to employ divide-and-rule strategies in the North, particularly in dealing with conflicts with the Tuaregs, as it did to end the 2006 uprising **(Lecocq and Klute, 2013, 429)**.

As **Figure 2** illustrates, while communal violence has occurred throughout Mali, there is a clear concentration in the North, which is particularly notable given the relatively lower levels of population, thereby reflecting a much higher rate of violence per capita.

Secessionism

Another form of violence with a strong ethnic dimension in Mali has centred around demands for Tuareg secessionism, and related calls for increased autonomy of the Northern region. The historic roots of this movement are nominally centred on the desire of the Tuaregs for a homeland, which has been a central feature in Northern

> **"Although the first phase of the 2006-2009 Tuareg rebellion was of relatively low intensity, the second phase saw much higher levels of violence due to an imperfect peace process which did not satisfy all groups."**

politics since Mali's decolonization experience **(Ba, 2014, 1-7)**. In addition to the most recent uprising, beginning in 2012, Tuareg rebellions have occurred historically in 1962-1964, 1990-1995, and 2006-2009 **(see Figure 3)**, but none have led to the level of violence seen since 2011.

The last Tuareg uprising in 2006 was of relatively low-intensity, with only a few conflict events recorded per year between 2006-2007. By 2007, a peace agreement had been signed between the government and the leading Tuareg rebel group. However, other violent Tuareg groups, who had not been involved in the negotiation process and were unsatisfied with the outcome, created the North Mali Tuareg Alliance for Change (ATNMC) in September 2007. This group pushed the conflict into a second phase **(Lecocq and Klute, 2013, 429)**.

Compared to the initial phase of violence from May 2006 to August 2007, the second phase, which lasted roughly from ATNMC's founding in September 2007 to January 2009, led to a significant increase in violent events and fatalities. For instance, in May 2008 alone, 8 distinct bat-

tles took place, including territory coming under ATNMC's control, and at least 117 fatalities were recorded. Between 2006 to 2009, these violent events almost exclusively took place in Mali's three northern-most regions, particularly Kidal.

The majority of these events were battles, with violence against civilians representing only a small portion of the conflict's events in Gao and Kidal. During the conflict, however, ATNMC became increasingly unpopular due to their use of landmines and taking prisoners of war, some of whom were Tuaregs. The highest incident of fatalities against civilians during the conflict came quite close to its end and was due to an ATNMC mine which killed 10 civilians.

The conflict came to a close in February 2009 as a special unit put together by the military, led by a former rebel turned soldier Lieutenant Colonel Elhajj Gamou and consisting solely of Tuareg soldiers of his tribal affiliation, succeeded militarily against the ATNMC (Lecocq and Klute, 2013, 429). However, this military defeat did not address the underlying political grievances, and would prove to be only an interlude as violence resumed in 2012 with the formation of a Tuareg militant group with more radical goals, the Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA). Although this group learned from the mistakes of the ATNMC in terms of alienating the population, the conflict it started would lead to unprecedented violence in Northern Mali.

2012 Crisis - State Violence and MNLA Insurgency

The 2012 crisis drew international attention, and intervention, into Malian security and politics. The most recent wave of unrest has clear roots in the history of conflict in the country and can be divided into four stages, which will be reviewed in turn: 1) the resurgence of violence; 2) the military coup and crisis in Bamako; 3) the escalation of conflict; and, 4) attempts at peace.

Resurgence of Violence in the North

After the lull in violence between 2009-2011, the founding of the MNLA in October 2011 would mark the beginning of a new, and much more violent, phase in the history of conflict in Northern Mali. The MNLA was primarily made up of Tuaregs who were unsatisfied with the unviable political settlement to the previous conflict, and as with all Tuareg groups before them, their operations and gains were focused in the North. Although they were to find themselves fighting Islamist militants and other Tuareg groups as the conflict went on, during their initial efforts to achieve independence for the North in 2012 their main opponent was the Malian military.

These efforts began on January 16 with a clash between the MNLA and Malian military over Menaka, followed by fighting in surrounding towns. Then, on January 24, the
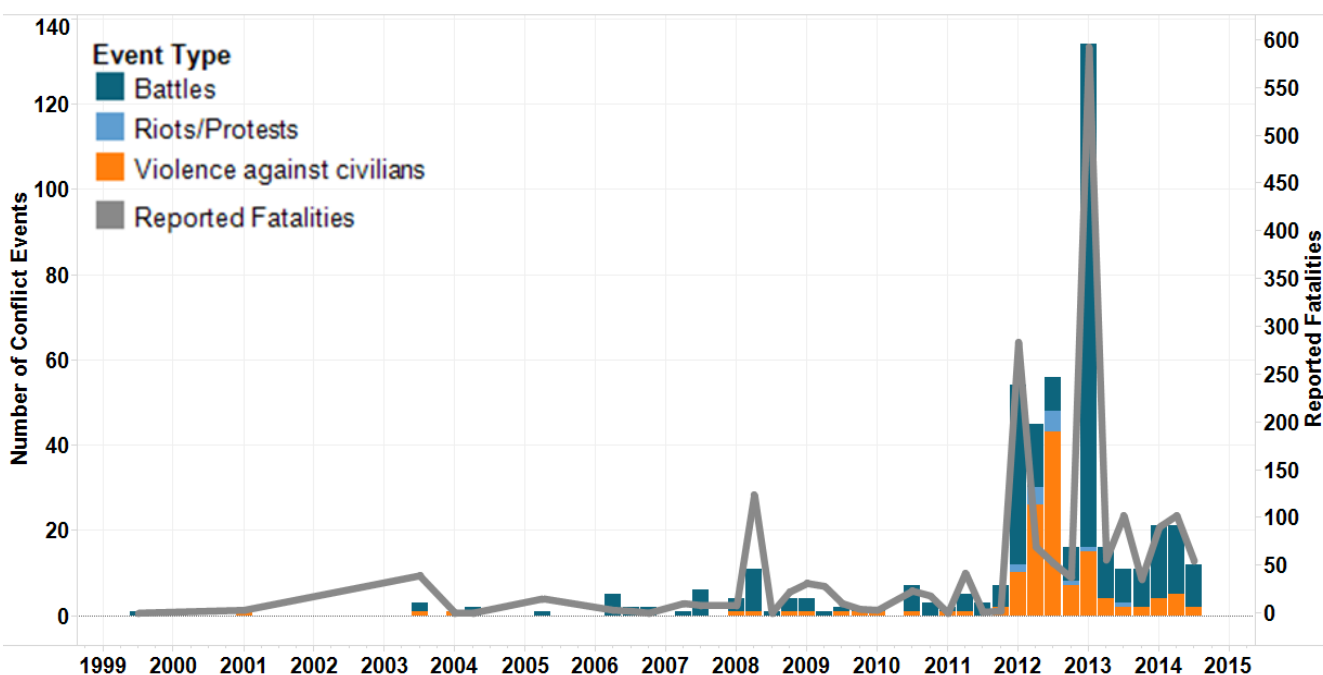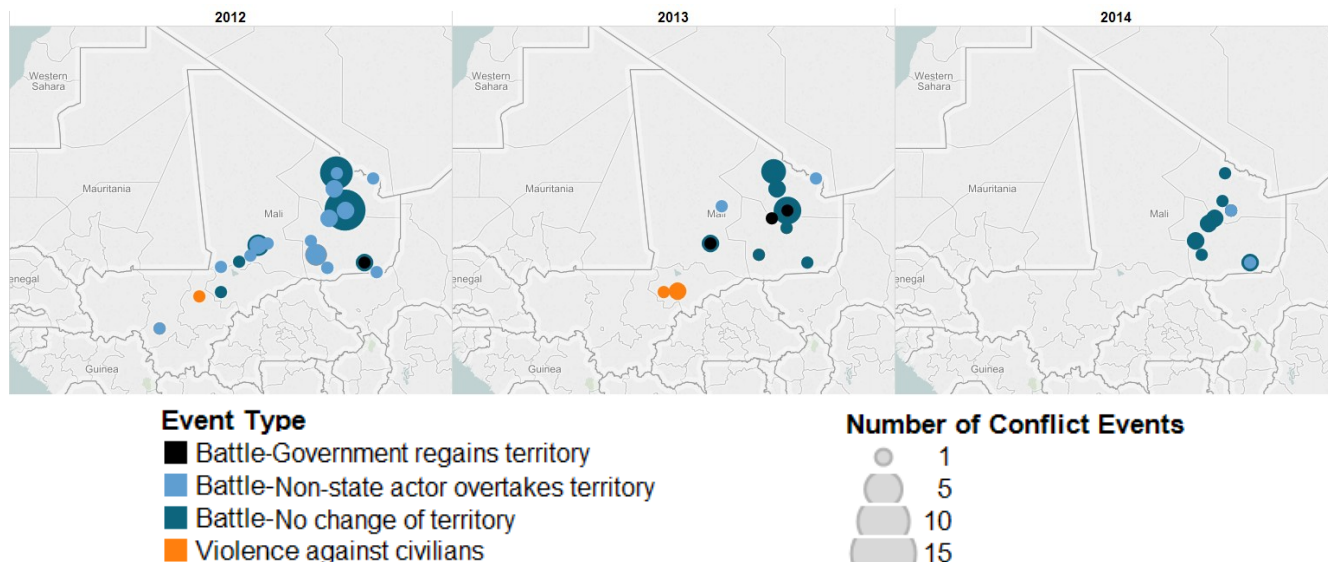

Figure 3: Number of Conflict Events and Reported Fatalities Involving Tuareg Groups, Mali, Q3 1999 - Q3 2014.

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Figure 4: Conflict Events Involving MNLA by Event Type and Location, Mali, 2012-2014.

MNLA captured Aguelhoc and forced the surrender of the Malian military forces opposing them. The MNLA proceeded to execute at least 84 Malian soldiers.

Following these events, the MNLA continued to attack towns primarily in Kidal but also in the Gao and Tombouctou regions, taking control of several, including Menaka, Andéranboukan and Tin Zaouaten, before seizing two military bases in the North along with a number of prisoners in March. During this period, it was reported that Ansar Dine and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) fighters were also present alongside MNLA forces.

As the MNLA and the Malian military fought, other dynamics were also unfolding. In late-January, the Malian capital of Bamako experienced three days of protest against the government's handling of the conflict in the North, while in early February, protesters demonstrated outside the presidential palace before engaging in attacks on Tuaregs in the capital. The insecurity in the North was also motivating militant Islamist groups, including the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and AQIM, to increase their targeting of civilians, with at least 28 incidents reported between January and March.

Within this context, on March 21, 2012, a group of junior officers staged a coup d'état in the capital of Bamako, accusing democratically elected President Amadou Toumani Touré of failing to effectively support the military in defeating the ongoing Tuareg rebellion. This led to President Touré going into hiding, allegedly with loyal military officers (BBC, November 12, 2014). However, on April 30, an abortive counter-coup was launched by soldiers of the

presidential guard who remained loyal to President Touré. The fighting lasted through the night, but failed to achieve its goals, and a few days later the base of the counter-coup forces was captured by the military (BBC, May 2, 2014). Although the initial coup only led to one fatality, the counter-coup resulted in more than 50 reported deaths, with military forces loyal to President Touré representing the majority of those killed. These events as well as associated riots and protests took place almost exclusively in and around Bamako.

Escalation of the Conflict in the North

The initial uprising in the North, alongside instability in the capital, combined to create an opportunity for the intensification and escalation of secessionist violence. In the days directly following the coup, the MNLA proceeded to capture numerous towns in the North with little opposition from the military, including the regional capitals of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, as the military withdrew (*see* Figures 4 & 5).

Members of Ansar Dine often assisted in these fights. Ansar Dine (meaning 'helpers of Islam') began as an Islamist militant group led by a former prominent leader of the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s, and these early events marked the beginning of cooperation between the Tuareg and Islamist militants. However, the withdrawal of the Malian military from the North following the coup had larger ramifications, including the MNLA's declaration of independence of the state of Azawad in April, and then the breakdown of cooperation between the MNLA and

Ansar Dine in May, just days after their agreement to merge and form an Islamist state under sharia law (**Jacinto, June 6, 2014**).

Although it is not clear why the groups fell out, the secularism of the MNLA and the rising violence against civilians by Islamist groups in the North, including AQIM and MUJAO to which Ansar Dine were increasingly closely, were likely causes. This led to several instances of violence between the MNLA and Ansar Dine in May, as well as further violence in autumn of 2012; the latter occurring during an overall drop in violence in Mali. The MNLA was also largely ejected from the major cities during the second half of 2012 by the Islamists (**BBC, November 12, 2012**).

> "These events—including the MNLA insurgency, the coup, Islamist violence against civilians, and Tuareg clashes with Islamists—combined to make 2012 more violent than all of the years since 1997combined."

Taken together, these events – including the MNLA insurgency, the coup, Islamist violence against civilians, and Tuareg clashes with Islamists – combined to make 2012 more violent than all of the years since 1997 combined.

Foreign Military Intervention

Between October and December 2012 foreign military interventions were approved by the United Nations, ECOWAS and France, pushing the conflict into a new phase. Operation Serval was launched by French forces in January 2013, which set off the dramatic spike in violence seen during this month. The goal of the operation was to oust the Islamists who had taken control of many Northern towns, including notable population centres such as Timbuktu, in order to avoid the creation of an Islamist state in Northern Mali. As the French and Malian militaries fought against the Islamists, the MNLA also became involved in the fight against the Islamists, which led to an unofficial truce (**Reuters, June 5, 2013**). The offensive against the Islamists, combined with ongoing violence, proceeded to push fatalities in 2013 up 40% from 2012.

This period also saw the rise of other notable rebel groups in the North, including the Arab Movement of the Azawad
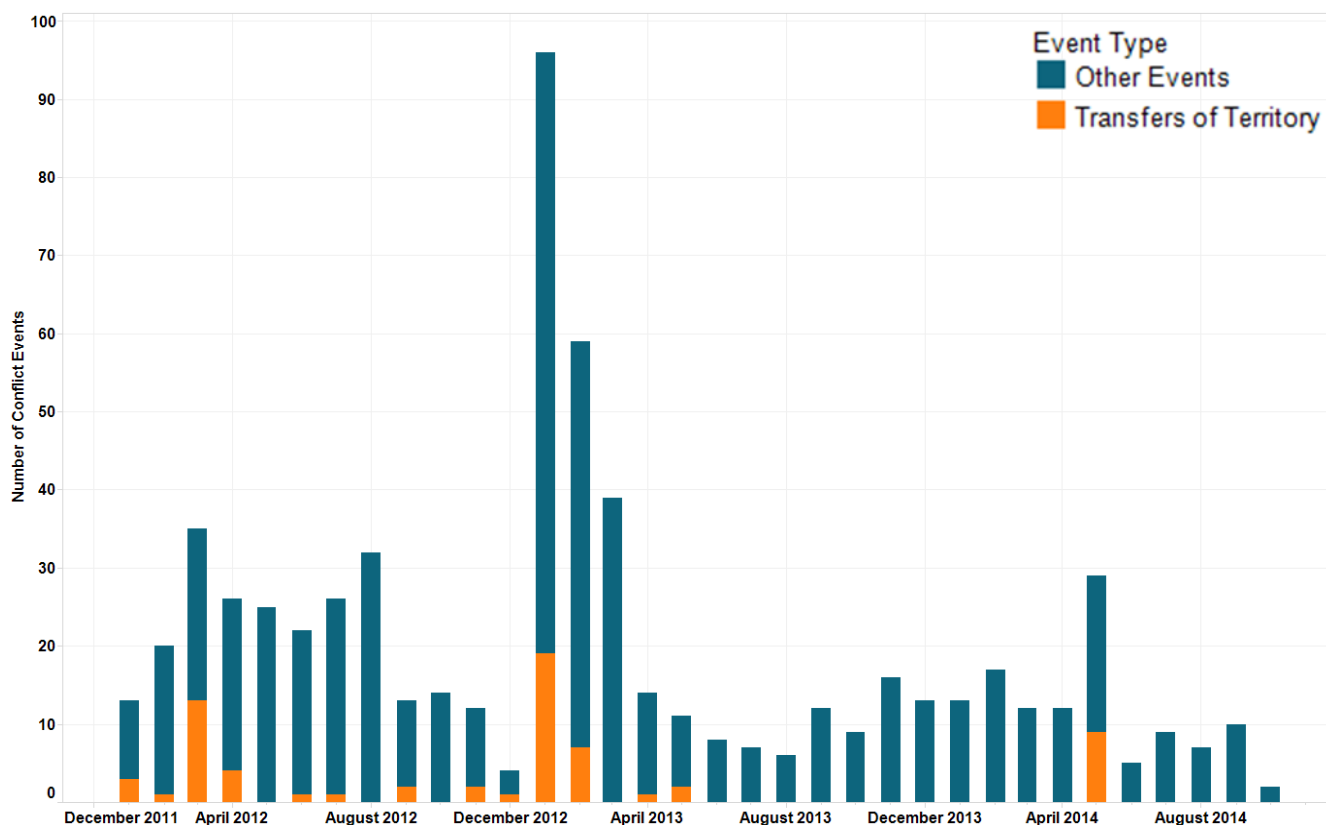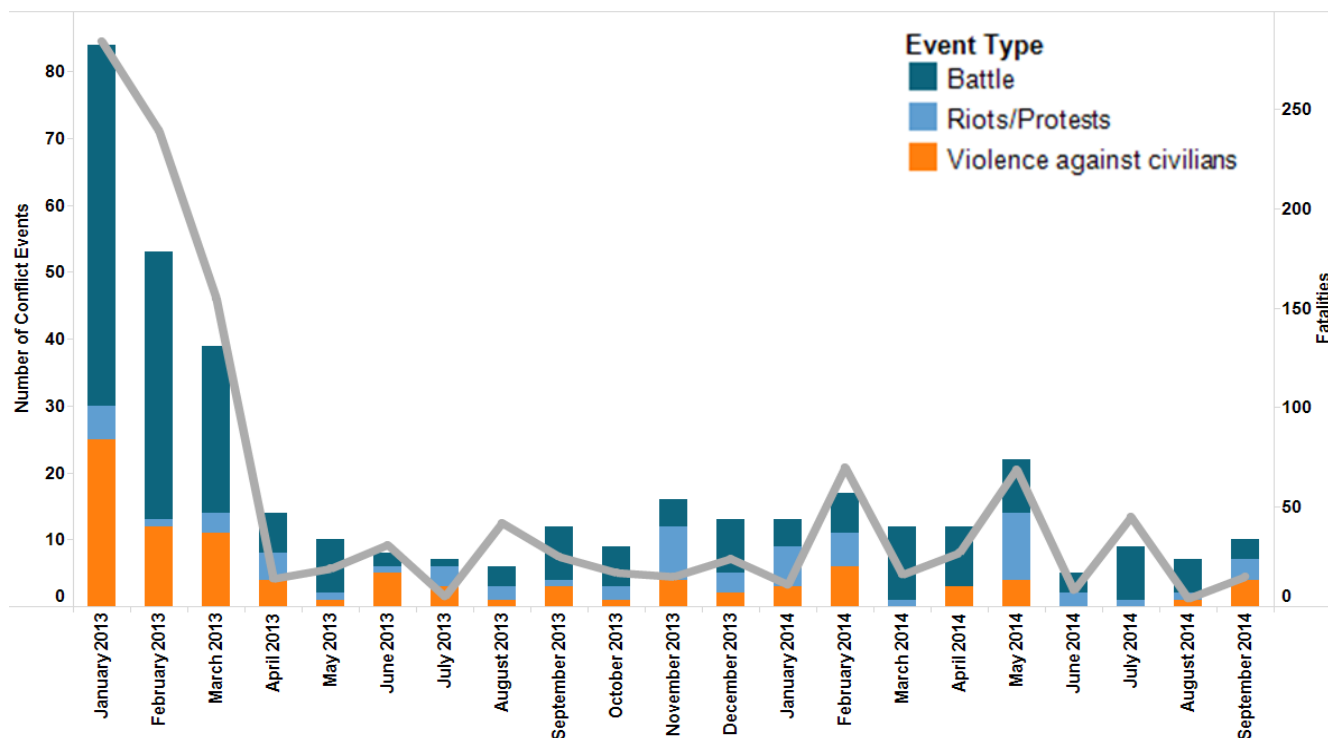

Figure 5: Number of Events Resulting in Transfers of Territory, Mali, January 2012 - September 2014.

Figure 6: Number of Conflict Events by Event Type and Reported Fatalities in Mali, January 2013 - September 2014.

(MAA) and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA). Both of these groups operated in the same area as the MNLA, but each had their own interests. The MAA is primarily concerned with the interests of the Arab population of the North and is comprised primarily of deserting Malian army officers. It has been involved in some clashes with the Tuareg rebels since its founding in December 2012. The HCUA is led by a defector from the MNLA and serves as a catch-all group made up of many smaller Tuareg movements which has often allied with the MNLA during fighting since its founding in May 2013 **(Dakono, June 19, 2013)**.

Following the successes of the French-led offensive against the Islamists and the subsequent drawdown of French forces in April 2013, an interim peace agreement was negotiated between the government and the Tuareg rebel groups operating in the North in June 2013. This agreement coincided with some of the lowest violence levels since 2010, and held for 5 months. The truce broke down in November 2013, after Malian soldiers shot and killed Tuaregs protesting against a visit by the Malian prime minister to Kidal **(Al Jazeera, November 30, 2013)**. Despite the MNLA declaring the ceasefire null and void, overall violence did not increase following this announcement and the peace process continued. During this pe-

riod, there were two major spikes in fatalities, in August 2013 and February 2014, with both involving the MNLA fighting Islamist militants.

Renewed Conflict in 2014

The most recent phase of the ongoing government's conflict with the Tuaregs began in May 2014 with the re-emergence of fighting between the Malian military and Tuareg groups centred again around Kidal. This violence was particularly intense and led to high fatality levels (more than 70 fatalities among the Malian military), numerous hostages taken, and many cities and towns falling back under Tuareg control, including Kidal, Menaka, Aguelhoc, Tessalit, N'Tilit and Anefis. After the battles of Kidal, many of these towns were taken without a fight as the military once again withdrew.

This large capture of territory was followed by a ceasefire between Malian forces and the Tuareg rebels led by the MNLA and the reinstatement of the peace process with Algeria as a mediator **(Ramzi, July 17, 2014)**, while sporadic clashes between different Tuareg groups, as well as with unidentified groups continue, albeit at a lower rate **(see Figure 6)**. Clashes with both types of group have led the MNLA to claim that the government is continuing the conflict via proxies **(RFI, September 18, 2014)**.

Islamist Violence - Locations, Dynamics, Patterns

Islamist violence is responsible for much of the international attention, and intervention in the country, as it is unlikely that global powers would feel obligated to intervene in the case of a recurring wave of secessionist violence alone. The phenomenon, like its ethno-regional counterpart, should not be viewed in historical or political isolation: rather, the rise of Islamist violence in the country is at the very least a medium-term phenomenon, with documentation of violence by Islamist militants preceding the 2012 crisis by almost a decade.

As **Figure 7** illustrates, violent Islamist groups have been recorded, primarily in Northern Mali, since late-2004. Among the earliest incidents attributed to these groups are clashes with the Malian military as AQIM's predecessor, GSPC, moved southward to escape the Algerian security forces' campaigns in the border region. Other early incidents include violent clashes between Tuareg militants and AQIM units in mid-2006, foreshadowing the tensions which were subsequently to characterise the partnership between both groups.

This period witnessed extensive attempts by AQIM to embed itself in the social and economic fabric of the region.

Socially, there is evidence that Islamist militants sought to cement relationships and alliances with local families through inter-marriage, particularly among poorer local lineages, in an attempt to bolster their image as a potentially powerful ally to local communities **(Göita, 2011; Cline, 2013)**. There is also evidence of their efforts to provide social services – in a region where they were sorely lacking – such as medical treatment and supplies, functioning in some ways 'as an Islamic charity,' **(Bøas and Torheim, 2013, 1287)**. These efforts all served to bolster their authority and legitimacy in a region which many communities perceived as drastically under-developed and marginalised nationally.

Economically, the group controlled important, lucrative trafficking routes by which drugs, cigarettes and even people were transported to North Africa. The proliferation of driving schools in the Northern region is a physical and economic testament to the centrality of this activity to the political economy of the region. While trafficking activities have clear transnational dimensions, their control, regulation and oversight by local elites and nodes should not be overlooked. In many ways, the organisation and coordination of transnational organised trafficking mirrors the organisations of these groups themselves: while they have important transnational and international networks, their
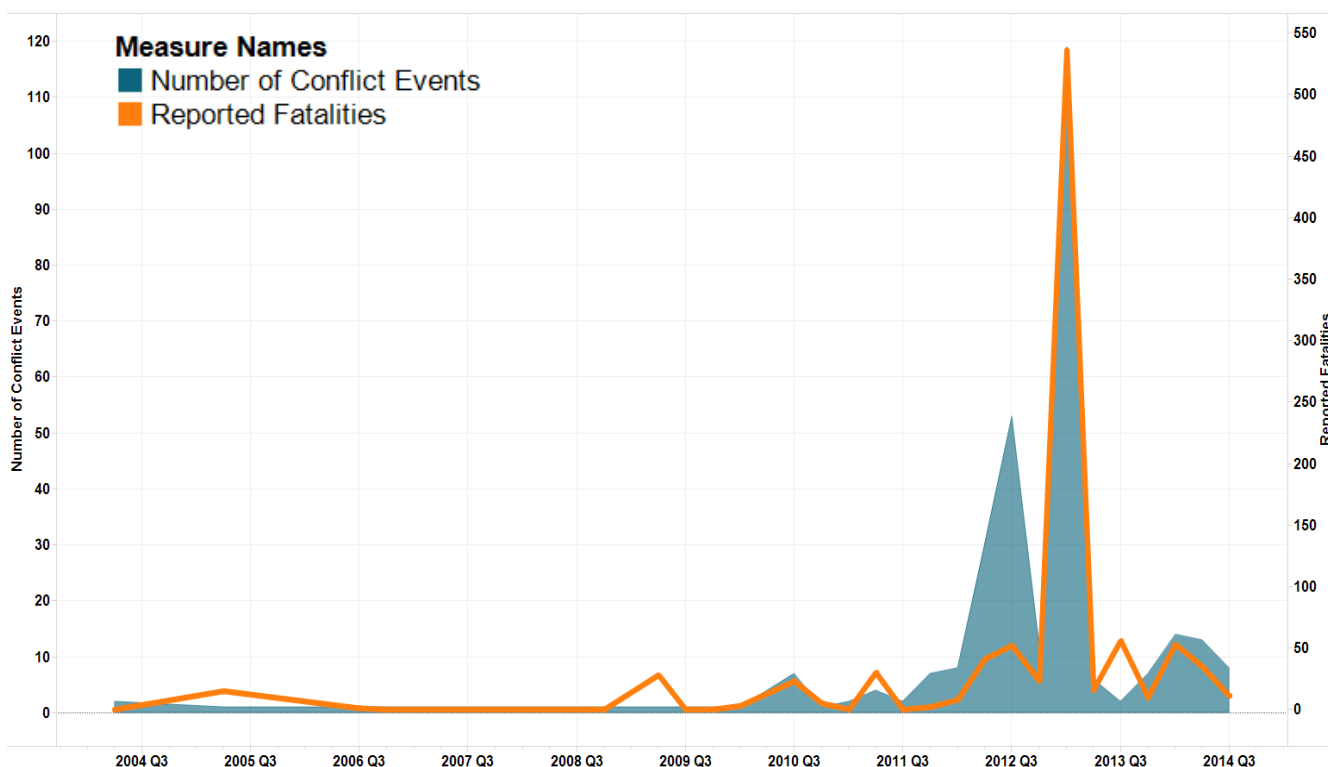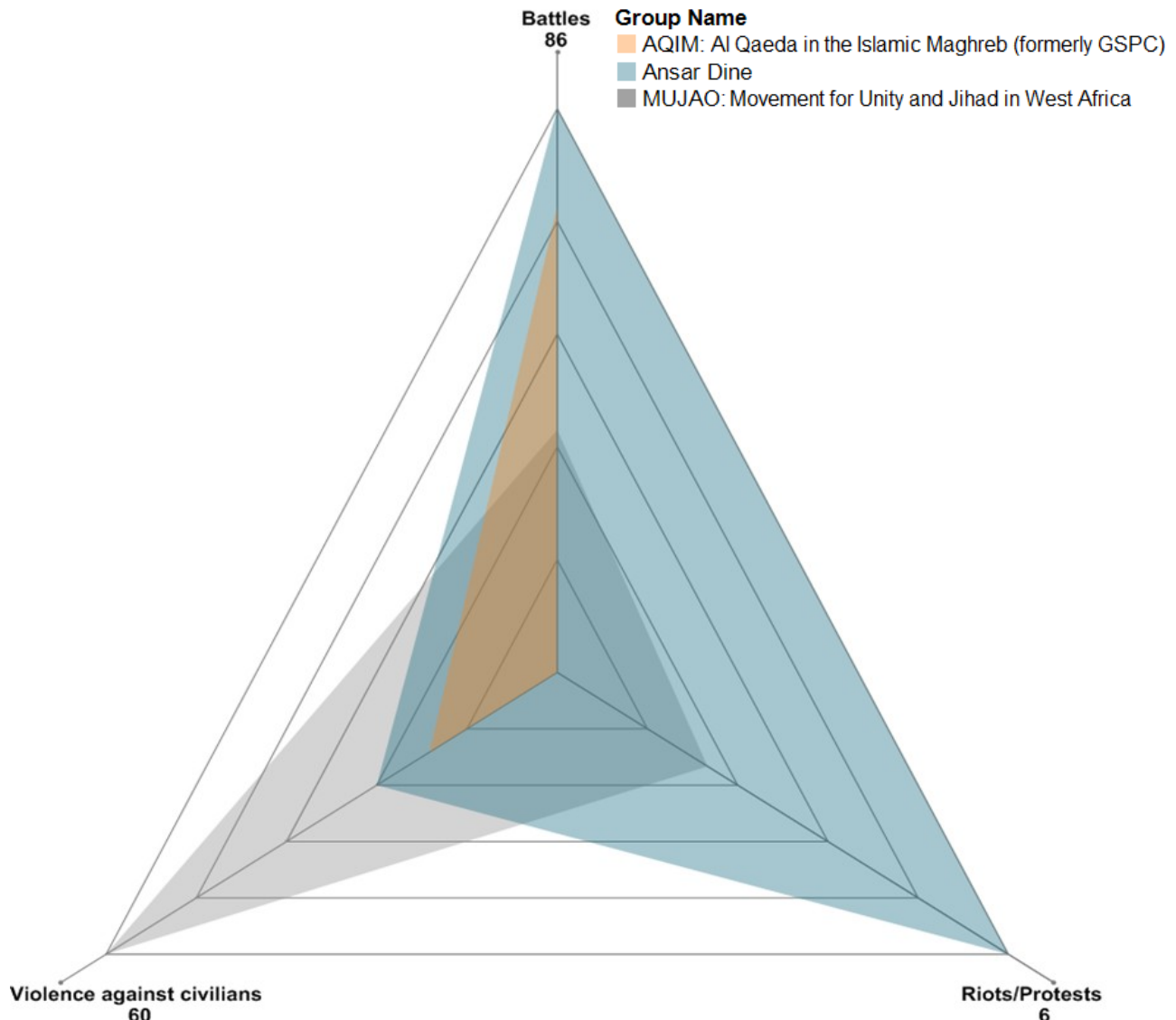

Figure 7: Violent Islamist Activity and Reported Fatalities in Mali, 2004-2014.   8

Figure 8: Violence by Type by Individual Islamist Group in Mali, January 1997 - September 2014.

activity at a local level is only possible through the regulation and coordination of locally embedded power brokers .

In addition to analysing Islamist violence in its historical context, these findings point to the significance of the wider political and economic context as a partial explanation for their successful integration into Northern Malian society. While the security vacuum created by a largely absent military has been commonly identified as a facilitating factor in the rise of AQIM and its local affiliates, the leverage these groups enjoyed in the economic and political spheres also rested on the relative marginalisation of the Northern region from the rest of the country. Violent

Islamist groups have not typically emerged in Africa in areas otherwise well-integrated and well-served by national regimes: they have exploited local perceptions of marginalisation, underdevelopment and irrelevance in a way which should re-orient analysis to those conditions as factors which sustain militant organisations. Moreover, the presence of violent Islamist groups in Northern Mali was well-known to regime officials in Bamako: the illicit activity of AQIM and affiliates in the North was at least tolerated, if not supported, by elites in the south, a fact which many link to the profitability of these lucrative activities. The traction of Islamist militants in local communities is further underscored by the emergence of local

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branches such as Ansar Dine and MUJAO: while it is commonplace to conceptualise violent Islamist groups in terms of highly mobile and transnational agents, the formation and activity of locally rooted, indigenous affiliates is a reminder of the primacy of national and even subnational contests for power in these complex contexts.

That these groups share some similar and some diverging goals and agendas is reflected in their different conflict profiles. AQIM, for instance, has predominantly focused on battles with other armed groups (mostly Malian and external military forces): these clashes make up over 80% of their recorded activity, compared to one-fifth of

> **Divergent tactics reflect discrete goals among different Islamist groups, and the strategic use of anti-civilian violence in particular, as a means of creating a greater impact relative to the size and capacity of the group.**

their activity involving civilian targeting. By contrast, MUJAO has been predominantly involved in anti-civilian violence (almost two-thirds of its total recorded activity).

These divergent tactics reflect discrete goals among the groups, and the strategic use of signalling and anti-civilian violence in particular, as a means of creating a greater impact relative to the size and capacity of the group (*see* **Figure 8** for an illustration of the prominence of different tactics by group).

Together, these features of Islamist violence in Northern Mali point to several conclusions and potential future developments, chief among which is the likelihood of sustained violence in some form or another in the region in the absence of a lasting, and popularly endorsed, peace agreement. Islamist violence is a function of a much deeper crisis of political legitimacy, economic development and inclusive governance.

Armed groups both from outside and within Mali have capitalised on these widespread grievances and reconfigured existing conflicts and violence brokers under the mantle of violent Islamist groups. Their persistent presence in spite of sustained international intervention and efforts to oust them from Northern strongholds speaks at least in part to their ability to capitalise on relationships with local populations, and to draw benefits from the underdevelopment of a territory that makes locating militants more difficult.

Conclusion:

This country profile has sought to provide an overview of the dynamics and key agents of violence in Mali. The 2012 crisis has been analysed in detail, in an attempt to situate these developments both historically in the context of longer-term unrest in the region, and nationally, in the context of the political economy of governance and subnational marginalisation. While successive waves of violent conflict have been primarily concentrated in the Northern regions of the country, this overview has sought to highlight the linkages – politically, economically and physically – between this unrest and the national political and security context.

As of the end of November 2014, the Malian government and rebel groups in the North continue negotiations in Algiers in the hopes of achieving long-term, sustainable peace in the North. However, some warning signs of potential future conflict remain, such as the increasing integration of the main rebel movements, the MNLA, HCUA, and MAA, within the umbrella Coordination of Movements of the Azawad group. The most recent example of this was the announcement that these groups would begin engaging in military coordination, including the creation of a unified command structure that would bring together senior officers from each group. This would allow these groups to more easily engage in renewed fighting to extract concessions, which could facilitate expanded violence by Islamists and a return to the instability of 2012.

In addition, a new potential threat to the peace process emerged in August 2014 with the creation of the Imghad and Tuareg Allies Vigilante Group (GATIA), a militant Tuareg group believed to be associated with the government and currently operating in Gao. It has since engage in clashes with other Tuareg groups and succeeded in taking territory from the MNLA, including the towns of N'Tilit and Tessit. The MNLA claims that GATIA is being used by the government and receives military support, but the government denies these claims. GATIA states that it is opposed to independence for Azawad and requests a seat at the negotiating table in Algiers, arguably lending credence to the MNLA's claims that the government is attempting a divide-and-rule strategy which could lead to further violence. In assessing the potential for future stability, a settlement addressing long-held grievances and demands among Northern populations is central to ensuring a lasting peace. While the 2012 crisis has been frequently analysed as a sudden rupture in the pattern of conflict in the country, it is better thought of as a reminder of the capacity of conflict to be transformed from one form to another if it is not meaningfully resolved.

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