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2018-01-23

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MC2 Patrick Dionne and Khaboshi Imbukwa | January 23, 2018



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In June of 2014, a branch of al-Qaida previously known as the “Organization of Monotheism and Jihad” proclaimed itself an Islamic State caliphate in order to establish a unified political and military state, and to rule over all Muslims worldwide.

Commonly referred to as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the movement would go on to capture large swaths of territory throughout western Iraq and Syria, containing an estimated population of six million at its peak. Through propaganda and shocking barbarism, ISIS induced fear around the world, which continues to linger today in spite of the recent defeat of their caliphate, and their inability to exercise control over meaningful territory.

At the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), four students continued to bring the U.S. and its allies closer to understanding the minute details of the world’s most infamous terrorist organization. Through their efforts in three separate theses satisfying their graduate degrees for the December 2017 class, the students tackled issues at the very root of the ISIS organization to help determine what made it so different and effective.

“All three theses cover unique aspects of the organization, and together they provide different

perspectives to help build a bigger picture of what's going on," said Dr. Craig Whiteside, Associate Professor with the Naval War College Monterey program located on the NPS campus. Whiteside served as second reader for all three theses, given his intimate knowledge of the terrorist organization.

"What makes this so impactful is that rarely do you get to see such a detailed view of the group," Whiteside continued. "Most scholars out there only know a lot about one certain aspect, and that's the only way they understand it. Because of that, they usually try to define it on those terms.

"The bottom line is that looking at a topic from three different aspects really helps us flesh out the important details that make up this complex, multinational organization that has adherents around the world," he continued.

One of the theses, authored by Jordanian Army Col. Hisham A. Al Manasir and Albanian Army Capt. Blead Vucaj, both graduating through the university's Defense Analysis (DA) program, offers an examination of the extent to which ISIS marks a new stage in the development of Salafi jihadism.

Another, authored by NPS Graduate School of Business and Public Policy graduate U.S. Marine Corps Capt. Beau Pillot, takes an in-depth look at the business practices and logistics that made the Islamic State's power possible.

And the third thesis, authored by U.S. Army Maj. Pete Wilcox, also an NPS DA student, uses game theory and social network analysis to evaluate former President Barack Obama's global coalition strategy to defeat ISIS. This is accomplished by forecasting the future state of ISIS as a caliphate and as an insurgency, using data from social media and leveraging subject matter expertise.

"Every one of these well-crafted theses had aspects of them that made them stand out," said Whiteside. "Wilcox's use of game theory was the most complicated and challenging perspective on the group. Pillot's look at the business and logistics covered a lot of valuable ground detailing how they work as an organization. And, Al Manasir and Vucaj's examination of the ideology had aspects that had never been covered before because of its use of Arabic sources that had not yet been reviewed by the Western world."

Leveraging these Arabic and other primary and secondary sources, Al Manasir and Vucaj's thesis highlights the unique approaches ISIS used to expand the Salafi jihadist ideology. First was the use of takfir and sectarianism to excommunicate and eliminate Muslims who opposed the movement. Second was ISIS' impending desire to establish a caliphate, a significant milestone in the history of Salafi-jihadism. And third, was ISIS' novel use of propaganda and social media to recruit.

"When you look deeply into the differences between ISIS and other Salafi jihadist groups, it allows you to figure out how they were able to build up this new ideology that allowed them to recruit people from all over the world, as well as gain economic assets and military power

through extreme violence,” said Al Manasir. “I have been in the Jordanian Army for 30 years, I have lived through the al-Qaida era and many other groups like them. I know very well how they dealt with enemies, near and far, and seeing both these eras first-hand significantly helped me figure out what the true differences and principles were.”

“Looking at things from different perspectives, with my partner’s perspective of an officer from Jordan being directly involved in the fight against ISIS, and my perspective as an outsider looking at it from an academic way, led to better cooperation and understanding which helped us find middle ground that I think is necessary for not only writing a thesis but for anything in life,” Vucaj added.

Vucaj continued by stating that their findings indicated that these new developments in the Salafi jihadist ideology, despite the terrible reputation gained from their brutalities, may have left their mark on future generations of Salafi jihadists, hoping to achieve similar results.



Four December 2017 graduates, U.S. Army Maj. Pete Wilcox, Jordanian Army Col. Hisham A. Al Manasir, U.S. Marine Corps Capt. Beau Pillot, and Albanian Army Capt. Bleard Vucaj, from left to right, offered unique, detailed analyses of the Islamic State through their graduate theses, providing a deeper understanding of the world’s most infamous terrorist organization.

With the loss of Mosul, the largest city ISIS controlled, in July of 2017 to the Iraqi Army, ISIS’ attempt to solidify their caliphate was defeated. Nevertheless, according to Pillot’s thesis, the Islamic State’s entrepreneurial capabilities in effectively managing money, manpower and material enabled them to develop themselves into the deadliest and most widely-recognized terrorist brand in the world, and that acumen remains.

“When I was there in 2014 on the scene and I saw what they did, I knew as a logistics officer that there had to be something behind the scenes of their barbaric acts,” said Pillot. “There is a business acumen and an entrepreneurship that they must possess to achieve what they have achieved, and I feel my research has proved that they have the business ingenuity and resiliency to remain competitive.”

“They have surpassed al-Qaida to become the supreme corporation of the terrorist market,” he continued. “I think looking at the Islamic State from the lens of not necessarily taking out the leader, like we have before, but from a multi-faceted approach including tactical, logistic and economic, may be the best approach to defeating an organization like this, because even if they no longer are holding land, that doesn’t mean we can forget about them.”

Wilcox’s predictive analysis on ISIS’ future state has proved to be relatively accurate. As a caliphate, he forecasted that ISIS would be defeated before 2018. As an insurgency, however, he largely concluded that ISIS would endure. These results were predicted in June of 2017, at a time many experts seemed to be divided on the issue. Wilcox’s forecasts were generated using game theory, or expected utility models, combined with input from ISIS experts like Whiteside.

“The inception of this project started when I was stationed with United States Army Africa (USARAF),” explained Wilcox. “Along with several information operations (IO) colleagues, we were trying to work out what a typical information environment layout looked like for the combatant commander. We quickly determined that critical to that analysis had to be capturing the beliefs, values and capabilities of stakeholders.

“The problem that came to the fore in glaring terms, however, was that there really weren’t effective existing tools to capture these complex variables,” he continued. “Traditional analytical frameworks weren’t all that effective. So, we realized we needed to explore what tools existed within the social sciences that could actually allow us to collect data, analyze it, and merge it with subject matter experts.”

Although relatively new to military analysis, the expected utility model that Wilcox’s thesis uses has been tested on over 1,200 policy issues with an accuracy rate of approximately 90 percent. According to Wilcox, this tool can help political and military strategists understand the viability of political decisions and their impact on military strategies by analyzing stakeholders’ values and interests over some policy issue.

“Expected utility models can help account for the complex information exchange between stakeholders that no one analyst can keep track of,” Wilcox said. “Further, relying solely on subject matter expertise is problematic because quantifying words and statements differ from expert to expert. However, subject matter expertise combined with expected utility models have the potential to create a logical and transparent assessment that can be replicated and evaluated.”

As a graduate university, where expertise across many disciplines shapes and supports student research, Whiteside says the three theses offer an example of the unique space in

scholarship that NPS fills.

“There are a lot of schools interested in this topic, and there are a lot of students that write on this topic, but the purpose of NPS and how it functions in regards to looking at problems and how they relate to each other really make this institution stand out,” said Whiteside.

“The combination of student authors who are all practitioners with an understanding of the importance of this group, with professors that bring an understanding of the material, creates a synergy that motivates students to learn this stuff, and that's what makes NPS so unique,” he continued. “There is a reason this happens here. The guidance and supervision the departments give their students on their work helps encourage them to further take risks and discover new ideas, and that's really what good scholarship is all about.”