

ISIL 3-24: Do They Do Counter-Insurgency?

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



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Given the group's brutal, nihilistic approach to territories it has seized, any anti-ISIL uprisings that are well planned and externally supported will eventually succeed.

What happens when poacher must become gamekeeper? That's what the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) must be asking itself at the present time. Once it was the insurgent force skulking in the shadows, ambushing and bombing, then fading away. Now ISIL believes itself to be a state and it knows that a range of powerful enemies are planning to spark local insurgencies against it in Iraq and Syria. ISIL needs a game plan to face the looming threat. So if ISIL had an equivalent of FM 3-24, the U.S. government's guide on counterinsurgency, what would it look like?

The first point to make is that revolutionary movements like ISIL often struggle at counterinsurgency. As Scott McMichael noted in *Stumbling Bear*, a book about the Soviets in Afghanistan, one of the biggest challenges for the Red Army was coming to terms with the fact that the people were against them, not with them. Marxist-Leninist doctrine dictated that the international proletariat would welcome the Red Army as liberators wherever it was sent to fight.

ISIL has no such illusions. The movement's previous incarnations -- al Qaeda in Iraq, then the Islamic State in Iraq -- were almost wiped out by popular uprisings in their heartlands in 2005-2008. When the movement rebooted under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's leadership in 2010 it sought to learn lessons from its brush with extinction and rebuilt as an Iraqi-led movement focused on the grievances of Sunni Arabs in Iraq. It was even mindful to tone down its policing of Iraqi lifestyles -- at least until it became the master of Sunni villages once again this summer.

ISIL's current vision of counterinsurgency seems to be built on the extraordinarily dark premise that the citizens of its self-declared caliphate will undoubtedly revolt unless they are actively prevented from doing so. From the very

outset, ISIL has viewed its own purported citizens as the greatest threat to its regime security. In fact, they're no doubt correct in this analysis: only indigenous forces can unseat ISIL in the Sunni Arab hinterlands of north-central Iraq and Syria. Relying primarily on Shiite, Allawi, Kurdish or foreign forces will only stir greater popular resistance.

ISIL has an approach to counterinsurgency that combines the brilliant with the blundering. It has in-depth social and cultural intelligence on the communities it controls, having stalked these areas, recruited from them and undertaken structured tribal engagement inside them for years. ISIL has also extensively shaped local environments during the last three years, killing off as many potential adversaries as possible within local hierarchies before it took over.

ISIL has a formula when it seizes new territory. It achieves early psychological dominance with its rapid vehicle-based raids -- a traditional camel charge updated with Toyota Hiluxes. Then ISIL reassures its new subjects, appearing content to leave traditional power structures unmolested and distributing booty in rough-and-ready social-welfare drives, albeit efforts that only scratch the surface of local needs.

During this period what they are actually doing is identifying and disarming networks of potential resisters. Non-Sunni and non-Arab minorities are driven out. Sunni Arabs who act independently and refuse to pledge allegiance are subject to incarceration as hostages or are killed. ISIL appeals to the basest instincts of local people: to take their neighbor's car, cattle, crops and houses. Through guilt-by-association, traditional clan structures are disintegrated.

Where small communities have rebelled, ISIL has spared no effort to quickly and publicly make an example of them. In the small Iraqi town of Zawiya, for instance, ISIL punished tribal resistance by leveling the village, dynamiting all 200 homes in the manner of ancient Rome's leveling of Carthage.

By now you're probably sensing that this is not the warm and fuzzy counterinsurgency approach recommended in the U.S. government manual, with General David Petraeus's focus on clearing, holding and building in liberated areas to win the active support of the population. ISIL doesn't build anything -- in fact all across north-central Iraq they are demolishing as many administrative buildings and bridges as they can, whilst liberally seeding the towns they hold with explosive booby-traps. They seem to know that they will be forced out eventually and are preparing for that day, once again demonstrating breathtaking nihilism.

ISIL's approach to counterinsurgency is practically all sticks, no carrots. Being occupied by ISIL is an economic disaster: as soon as they arrive, government salaries stop being paid, trade dwindles, gasoline and generator fuel becomes scarce. In the civil war environment of Syria this is less noticeable, but in the context of Iraq the economic distress of ISIL-dominated areas sticks out like a sore thumb.

All this suggests that ISIL is remarkably vulnerable to a well-planned set of uprisings against it in both Iraq and Syria. ISIL's approach to counterinsurgency is brutal and archaic -- more Belgians in the Congo than Petraeus in the Surge. The uprisings that are threatened against ISIL would represent a formidable threat for even the strongest regime with the best counterinsurgency strategy. Anti-ISIL rebels in Iraq and Syria boast sanctuaries in safe areas of Iraq and Syria plus a range of neighboring states.

Anti-ISIL rebels can now draw upon the support of the most powerful nations in the international community, including those who operate the world's most sophisticated airpower and intelligence collection capabilities. If anti-ISIL uprisings are planned and supported with even a modicum of skill and determination, they'll eventually succeed. The ultimate nihilism of ISIL is not only that they are doomed but that they seem to know it, and that the only variable is how many lives they can ruin on their way out.

Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute. He has worked in all of Iraq's provinces and most of its hundred districts. ❖

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