Max Abrahms, *Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History*

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The subject of terrorism has been the topic of presidential speeches and international initiatives by foreign leaders globally. Due to ongoing threats to society, terrorist acts consume political discourse and are sensationalized by mass media, which seems to put fuel to the fire. Due to the status of the United States in the international arena, its role as a hegemony dictates the normative framework of terrorism and prioritizes it on its terms.

Academics have been providing insight into the rise of terrorism, structures of terrorist groups, state-sponsored terrorism, and the psychological background of those attracted to terrorist movements. This insight has produced an overwhelming amount of literature on the topic of counterterrorism. This focus has marginalized the complexity of terrorism. In his book, *Rules and Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History*, Max Abrahms challenges the fundamental principles of how academics and practitioners analyze terrorism. Instead of merely reacting to the problem, he suggests to focus on the determinants that allow terrorists to be successful or on what makes them unsuccessful in their attacks and negotiations. *Rules for Rebels*, therefore, is a book about the perception of terrorism and its shortcomings in grasping a very pressing topic that impacts societies across the globe. It challenges practitioners to think beyond the status quo when researching the motivation, strategies, and outcomes of terrorist acts. This book, then provides a comprehensive historical study of terrorism and counterterrorism; it addresses how militant groups survive and fail.

There has been a disagreement in the political conversation on the social and political factors that drive militant groups. While the debate on militant groups has further defined the act of terrorism, the question of how and why these groups continue to exist has not been addressed. Abrahms provides answers by analyzing the
circumstances that allow or do not allow terrorist organizations to gain political concessions from the state in their negotiations.

In essence, by drawing on the political successes and failures of militant groups, the author developed a theoretical framework showing potential political successes based on an in-depth statistical analysis. The author argues that the success of a militant group’s political agenda is dependent on the tactical intelligence of its leaders. For a militant group to be successful in advancing its agenda, its leaders must follow the three main rules for rebels: 1) recognize that not all violence is equal, 2) restrain lower-level members from committing acts of terrorism, and 3) distance the organization from terrorist acts committed by members that target civilians. Not adhering to any of these rules will result in failure of the group’s actions even though the public as represented by the media may look at it differently.

The author’s ability to reduce the narrative of militant groups to three main rules challenges mainstream myths about strategy, engagement, and leadership of these organizations. To substantiate his challenge, Abrahms uses the militant group ISIS as an example for demonstrating the goals of militant organizations, which are rooted in establishing a new world order based on indiscriminate acts of violence toward citizens and without organizational constraint. In doing so, the book’s three main rules provide a convincing and logical argument that counters the narrative of mass media, political pundits, and analysts across the globe and demonstrates that the group has not been successful in its political motivations.

According to Abrahms, counterterrorism is pivotal for the international world order to curb the influence of militant groups. For states to be successful in constraining militant groups, the role of the leader should be considered when taking action against organizations. The author points out that militant leaders play an important role in providing experience and knowledge in acts of retaliation often without the goal of limiting civilian casualties. Abrahms also focuses on ulterior motives of individual members in militant groups that contradict the political mission of the organization. For example, a high proportion of members join militant groups because of interpersonal relationships or out of personal vengeance for acts of aggression against them. This challenges the leader’s role in disseminating the political agenda in the principle-agent model that is necessary for the group’s success.

To counter the effects of rogue members in the organization, the author proposes that leaders cultivate task cohesion in their groups to instill a common political goal. In essence, militant groups should be managed like vertically integrated companies that run the global economy. While this argumentation is not new, Abrahms stresses the importance of education and socialization in creating greater cohesion in the centralization of militant groups. This would strengthen the political message of the organization by teaching apolitical members the importance of the group’s agenda, in turn, controlling the actions of its members against its opponents.

In developing the three rules for rebels, Abrahms proposes a new way to engage with militant groups by changing the public misconception of terrorism and encouraging greater engagement with the international community to reduce the incentives for terrorism. Rules for Rebels challenges the assumptions in political and social science literature by providing a blueprint of determinants that are crucial for militant groups to gain political success. By analyzing the internal organizational determinants for the actions of militant groups, the book provides an alternative perspective on how to
successfully engage with them. Max Abrahms’s book offers important ideas on the effects of terrorism and militant groups on modern society and provides a unique contribution to the discipline of political science.