

Max Abrahms, Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 285 pp., US \$ 50.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-0-1-988-11558.

Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

This is a ambitious book as the subtitle already indicates. Its title echoes Saul Alinsky's book *Rules for Radicals* which was published in 1971. This is also a very erudite and well-argued volume, based, on the study of hundreds of militant groups and on field research, case studies, regression analysis, and experiments. Almost every second sentence of its chapters is referenced by an endnote – more than 1,200 altogether. The bibliography alone takes 45 pages and the very detailed index another 16 pages. Max Abrahms' volume is the result of a long series of examinations, starting with his 2006 study "Why Terrorism Does Not Work" - a theme he has explored tenaciously ever since.

One of the paradoxes of terrorism is that practitioners of the philosophy of the bomb have an unrealistic and exaggerated expectation of their chances to achieve their objectives, partly based on false analogies with some guerrilla-led decolonisation struggles. The latest example of this hubris has been the Islamic State which in the end faced a coalition of more than sixty state and non-state actors to deprive it of a fixed territorial presence in its shrinking caliphate straddling the Syrian-Iraqi border. Max Abrahms opening chapter to 'Rules for Rebels' is titled 'The Stupid Terrorist' and notes that "The history of militant groups is thus a story about failure. But not always (...) Triumph is possible"(p.1). The author then explores the secrets of success and claims that there is 'a science to victory in militant history', derived from 'three simple rules of successful militant leaders' (p.1): 1.They recognize that not all violence is equal for achieving their stated political goals (...) Compared to more selective violence against military and other government targets, indiscriminate violence against civilian targets lowers the likelihood of political success (...) 2. The second rule is to actively restrain lower-level members from committing it.(...) 3. And the third rule for rebels is to distance the organization from terrorism whenever subordinates flout their targeting guidelines by attacking civilians"(...) These three rules for rebels – learning, restraining and branding to win – are the secrets for victory" (pp.8-12). The book's following 13 chapters and the statistical appendix flesh out these bold claims in great detail, based on a wealth of historical materials.

In the concluding chapter 'The Future of Terrorism', Max Abrahms postulates that "Terrorism will continue as long as leaders believe that it works"(p.198). Unfortunately, their beliefs are nurtured by the way most media report on them. The author blames them for "...constantly talking up terrorists as masterminds. Whatever happens to be the consequence [of an attack, APS] is allegedly what the terrorists want" (p.200). Abrahms is even harsher on some academic pundits and opinion makers explaining to the public what great things the Islamic State was up to even as its caliphate crumbled before their eyes: "By repeating their [the terrorists', APS] talking points, pundits thus exaggerate public perceptions of terrorist skill and accomplishment. Opinion-makers weaponize the prospect of terrorist success to advance their policy preferences" (p.204). True and sad enough. One of the book's final and more hopeful conclusions is that "Indiscriminate violence is counterproductive for state and non-state actors alike" (p.207).

While one may disagree with some of the author's conclusions, Abrahms' book is refreshingly unconventional and hopefully forces others – including rebel leaders tempted to use terrorism – to rethink their position. It deserves to be studied seriously as it goes against much that is taken for granted in terrorism research. Max Abrahms is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

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