

# H-Diplo | ISSF

**Forum 27** (2021) on **Max Abrahms**. *Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-0198811558 (hardcover, \$50.00).

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Production Editor: George Fujii

Published on 28 May 2021  
<https://issforum.org/to/Forum27>

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## Introduction by James J. Wirtz, Naval Postgraduate School

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As Max Abrahms tells the tale, terrorism, which is the use of violence against civilian targets to achieve positive political objectives, is doomed to failure. He supports this observation with quantitative and qualitative analysis, which draws heavily on contemporary history and the literature on terrorism and political psychology, to explain how and why terrorism fails as a strategy. The work is sophisticated. It incorporates explanations of phenomena occurring at various levels of analysis to explain why terrorism is a losing proposition. Abrahms is careful not to suggest that attacking government or military targets is a recipe for success or to assess if only an occasional attack against civilians will doom some rebel enterprise. Nevertheless, he is unequivocal in his assessment that killing innocents is simply a recipe for political failure.

Abrahms begins his analysis by narrowing the scope of his theoretical claims in two ways. First, he makes a distinction between ‘process’ goals, which involve securing the immediate life-cycle needs of clandestine organizations, and ‘outcome’ goals tied to political demands. Second, he separates terrorists, who attack civilians, from guerrilla movements, which have the instruments of government power in their sights. These distinctions, which ‘split’ these behaviors apart instead of ‘lumping’ them together under the rubric of terrorism, allow his research to focus on violence directed against civilians. For Abrahms, lumping together different kinds of goals and different types of actors can explain why some analysts draw the mistaken conclusion that terrorism does in fact pay. It can also explain why terrorists make a similar mistake: al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden, for instance, referenced the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan (a counter-military guerrilla operation) as evidence for why he thought a terrorist operation against civilians would yield similar results, thereby prompting an American withdrawal from the Middle East.

Abrahms offers several reasons for the failure of terrorism. Killing innocent civilians carries audience costs – it tends to alienate more people than it attracts. The shock and violence of terrorism also drowns out the political message championed by terrorists, who are often dismissed following some atrocity as fanatics or lunatics unworthy of a hearing. In fact, because of common attribution errors, audiences tend to infer intentions from effects. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 are a case in point. Even today, one would be hard pressed to find a government official anywhere who is willing to attribute positive political goals to al-Qaeda, which was dismissed out of hand as a sadistic band of blood-thirsty maniacs. While not especially realistic, the objectives championed by the Bin Laden gang were not entirely fanciful: (1) withdraw U.S. forces from the Persian Gulf; (2) stop supporting worldwide activities that killed Muslims; (3) stop supporting pro-Western governments who oppressed their Muslim citizens; and (4) end the “Zionist-Crusader” alliance, i.e. end U.S. support for Israel. In any event, after the World Trade Center collapsed, only a small group of analysts cared what Bin Laden was after and they only cared because they hoped that this information would help in what was euphemistically referred to as bringing him to justice.

The remainder of *Rules for Rebels* explores how organizational dynamics and ineffective public relations can sabotage the quest to obtain political objectives. More specifically, leaders need to moderate the behavior of low-level operatives and to stand ready to deny responsibility for the terrorist atrocities that can occur when foot soldiers fail to understand that terrorism is counterproductive or when accidents occur with explosives. Clearly, there is a nagging principle-agent problem here, especially if one considers the rather sketchy backgrounds, psychological state, and behavior of those attracted to violence. As Jake Shapiro recently noted, however, efforts to control the rank-and-file can create communication links that authorities can use to identify those at the top and there is little terrorists can do to overcome this dilemma between exercising control and bolstering security.<sup>1</sup> After all, U.S. intelligence first identified the courier; then they found Bin Laden.

Although much of what Abrahms has to say about the pronounced failure of terrorism as an instrument of constructive political change is both reasoned and reasonable, the argument is nestled in some academic marketing that can be a bit

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

distracting. As Audrey Kurth Cronin notes in her review, Abrahms bemoans a lack of interest in the issue of terrorist success despite the fact that the subject has attracted the attention of many scholars for close to twenty years. This is a common tactic intended to appeal to acquisition editors; nevertheless, as Cronin notes, it does appear a bit disingenuous, especially when Abrahms references scores of authors from different theoretical perspectives to illuminate various facets of the terrorist success issue. Similarly, Abrahms makes the important observation that many pundits tend to infer intentions from effects, leading hyper-rational and quite spurious explanations of the latest terrorist atrocity. By coining a new term “Correspondence of Means and Ends bias” (57), to capture this phenomenon, however, he seems to ignore well-known cognitive biases that reflect the notion of availability and the fact that people tend to infer intent from effects, especially in the absence of more definitive information.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the “Means and Ends bias” really is just a new term for one of the starting points in the field of political psychology.

Another theme that pervades Abrahms’s work is that terrorists *ipso facto* are stupid. Stupidity actually is an important explanatory variable in Abrahms’s account of the failure of terrorism to advance positive political goals because it accounts for why people who might know better adopt and persevere in operations that quickly prove damaging to their cause. Admittedly, stupidity is an under-utilized concept in the social sciences, despite the work of the economist Carlo Cipolla.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as Cronin explains, Abrahms uses a variety of terms – dunces, imbeciles, idiots, to name a few – to describe this lack of intellectual dexterity exhibited by terrorists, which seems to trivialize the more important observations he offers. Martha Crenshaw in her review of *Rules for Rebels* also highlights how it is difficult to discern whether stupidity is actually a variable or a constant in Abrahms explanatory scheme. For instance, she notes that leaders equipped with superior intellects are unlikely to overcome the dilemma created by the need for organizational control and security, while “smart” terrorists by definition should not even exist. Crenshaw also notes that the focus on stupidity as a causal explanation downplays reasonable alternative explanations for attacks against civilians – ideology, a lack of resources, or even the use of “best practices” and technical support provided by allied groups. Crenshaw also notes that Abrahms fails to explain why stupid people seem to find themselves at the helm of terrorist organizations, while Cronin wonders if such stupidity actually merits serious scholarly attention.

Abrahms’s work also creates an opportunity to explore more fully the relationship between terrorists and the governments and polities that they terrorize. While the terrorists who populate the pages of his narrative are varied and idiosyncratic in terms of the way they kill innocent people and their attitudes about the political utility of mayhem, the targets of attack for the most part are treated in a uniform manner. *Rules for Rebels* offers some good theoretical reasons why certain effects, for example, the audience costs of terrorism, are universal, but there is still reason to explore how strategic culture, history, political stability, and capability effect the response to terrorism. As Cronin also notes, Abrahms’s qualitative analysis largely focuses on contemporary jihadist terrorism. She notes that political violence involving other actors at other times might have had different effects.

As his critics admit, Abrahms has written a provocative book. For non-experts, it offers some important observations, especially about the way too much credit is granted to the masterminds of terrorism and the care that must be given in thinking about how non-state actors use different types of violence to seek constructive political objectives.

### Participants:

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Richard K. Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge & Power in American National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and T.K. Das and Bing-Sheng Teng, “Cognitive Biases and Strategic Decision Processes: An Integrative Perspective,” *Journal of Management Studies* 36:6, (November 1999): 757-778; and Steve Chan, “The Intelligence of Stupidity: Understanding Failures in Strategic Warning,” *American Political Science Review* 73:1 (March 1979): 171-180.

<sup>3</sup> Carlo M. Cipolla, *Le leggi fondamentali della stupidità umana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1976).

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**Audrey Kurth Cronin** is Distinguished Professor of International Security at American University in Washington, DC. She is widely published on strategy and nonstate actors. Her best-known book is *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton University Press, 2009), recently translated into Chinese. In 2017, *The New Yorker* called it a “landmark study.” Her latest book, *Power to the People: How Open Technological Innovation is Arming Tomorrow’s Terrorists* (Oxford University Press, 2020), analyzes the risks and opportunities of new or emerging technologies, including drones (UAVs), robotics, the Internet of Things, autonomy, and artificial intelligence, especially their use by terrorists, insurgents and other private actors. She regularly advises at senior levels of the U.S. government and has led or co-led field studies in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, India, Pakistan, Mexico, and Colombia. She has also been Chairman of the World Economic Forum’s Global Agenda Council on Terrorism and is a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

## Review by Martha Crenshaw, Stanford University

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In *Rules for Rebels* Max Abrahms presents his argument with characteristic confidence and verve. He does not shy from controversy or from advancing bold claims. The style of the book is lively, the language colorful, the approach direct, and the result eminently readable. The book is provocatively framed as a guide to action for rebel leaders, asserting that “smart” leaders refrain from terrorism, whereas “stupid” leaders fall into the trap of using terrorism and fail to achieve their goals as a consequence.

The book thus questions the effectiveness of terrorism as a political strategy for rebels and argues that quality of leadership is the key determinant of long-term success or failure. Terrorism, by which he means indiscriminate attacks on civilians, does not assist rebels in seizing power or redressing the grievances rebels claim to represent. Indeed, terrorist tactics are likely to be disastrously counterproductive. Militant groups would do better to restrict themselves to military targets.

Other researchers have also argued that terrorism does not work. A prominent example is Virginia Page Fortna’s extensive survey of civil wars in which groups use or do not use terrorism.<sup>1</sup> She concludes that groups that employ terrorism (which she also defines as attacks on civilians) usually do not win. She does a good job of controlling for other explanatory variables. She also finds, however, that conflicts featuring terrorism last longer and that such groups are more long-lived. Richard English takes a more nuanced historical view in his book *Does Terrorism Work?* but he also concludes that in general it does not.<sup>2</sup>

So why would rebel or militant groups resort to terrorism? According to Abrahms, leaders are critical to the choice to use terrorism and thus to the effectiveness of rebel strategy. He contends that if leaders are to be successful in achieving collective goals they must first and foremost be sensitive to the costs of targeting civilians. Then they must control their organizations. Strong and smart leaders are required to discipline subordinate behavior. Evidence of concern at the top is that leaders of militant organizations typically deny responsibility when civilians are attacked, and their propaganda tends to downplay civilian victims. According to his argument, the centrality of leaders to organizational discipline is demonstrated by the finding that when leaders are lost to ‘decapitation’ by military strike the proportion of attacks against civilians goes up.

The call for recognition of the importance of leadership in rebel organizations is a point well taken. It adds to a body of literature that stresses the agency of militant non-state actors and the role of internal organizational factors in determining their strategies as well as the outcomes of the conflicts in which they are engaged. Different actors in similar conditions and circumstances may behave quite differently, and the individual identity of leaders is definitely a part of this dynamic. On the policy side, the American government certainly assumes that removing top leaders is important to effective counterterrorism, and targeted killings have attracted abundant scholarly and media attention.

Abrahms links his propositions directly to principal-agent theory, which has been most thoroughly developed as it applies to terrorism by Jacob Shapiro.<sup>3</sup> If I interpret Shapiro’s theory correctly, however, while it

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Page Fortna, “Do Terrorists Win? Rebels’ Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes,” *International Organization* 69 (2015): 519-556.

<sup>2</sup> Richard English, *Does Terrorism Work? A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist’s Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

explains how hard it is for leaders to control followers without jeopardizing security, it does not make the claim that talented individual leaders can overcome the internal problem of balancing the trade-offs between security, secrecy, and control while other less clever ones cannot. Instead, Shapiro's argument is that all organizations face significant structural constraints and challenges regardless of who is in charge.

Abrahms tends to avoid serious consideration of alternative explanations for an organization's reliance on indiscriminate terrorism. One such alternative, derived from the classic 'weapon of the weak' argument, holds that precise terrorist attacks, such as assassination of government officials or assaults on hardened targets, require extensive resources that a small group simply does not have, even though it might prefer to take this route. If a group becomes stronger, it moves to more precise targeting of violence.<sup>4</sup> Thus a group's strategy is likely to change over time if it gains strength, regardless of leadership. Strategic choices are not static. Groups and leaders can and do adapt. If a group never expects to overcome weakness, it might reasonably persist in a strategy of terrorism in order to maintain the organization's relevance. Terrorism can also be a strategy of provocation, and a group might think that over the long run the resulting repression will bring its constituency over to the rebel side. That is, groups could consider terrorism a potential source of strength in the long run.

A second possibility for an alternative explanation for indiscriminate terrorism is ideology. Other studies find that violent groups with exclusionary sectarian ideologies, such as jihadists, are prone to indiscriminate terrorism. Groups with more inclusive ideologies, which is typical of most center-seeking rebels aiming to win over broadly based constituencies, are more selective in the use of violence.<sup>5</sup> This argument is supported by other research on the impact of transnational terrorist groups on local conflicts. For example, the entrance into the conflict of jihadist networks shaped the trajectory of local Chechen insurgents and contributed to the adoption of the tactic of suicide bombings, which cause high numbers of casualties.<sup>6</sup>

There are also some perplexing contradictions in Abrahms's argument about the centrality of leadership and the distinction between 'smart' and 'stupid' leaders. On the one hand, the book asserts that resorting to terrorism causes disarray within organizations because such indiscriminate violence is abhorrent to many followers and potential recruits. Terrorism dampens support and loyalty. Decades ago, Jeffrey Ian Ross and Ted Robert Gurr referred to this twin phenomenon as backlash and burn-out, which they cited as key factors leading to the demise of organizations using terrorism.<sup>7</sup> Thus terrorism ultimately undermines the goal of organizational survival. But, at the same time, *Rules for Rebels* argues that the initiative for attacking civilians comes from lower-level operatives who must be restrained by smart leaders. According to Abrahms, this presumed tendency toward indiscriminate violence on the part of rebel cadres, who often act out of a short-sighted desire for revenge, explains why tight centralized control from a strong and smart leader is necessary to rein in stupid followers. But how can followers and potential recruits be simultaneously hesitant about excessive violence and bloodthirsty? I do not see that this contradiction is recognized or resolved.

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<sup>4</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas. "The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War," *The Journal of Ethics* 8 (2004): 97-138; Sara MT Polo and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Twisting arms and sending messages: Terrorist tactics in civil war," *Journal of Peace Research* 53:6 (2016): 815-829. On the other hand Fortna does not find that weakness matters.

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Stanton, "Terrorism in the Context of Civil War," *The Journal of Politics* 75 (2013): 1009-1022; Polo and Gleditsch.

<sup>6</sup> Kristin M. Bakke, "Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies," *International Security* 38.4 (2014): 150-187.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Ian Ross and Ted Robert Gurr, "Why Terrorism Subsides: A Comparative Study of Canada and the United States," *Comparative Politics* 21:4 (July 1989): 405-426.

Another problematic issue for the book's argument is that the underlying question of why some rebel leaders are 'smart' and others 'stupid' is neither addressed nor answered. Nor does the analysis explain why some leaders are strong while others are weak. Smart leaders might want to control the organization but lack the resources and capabilities to do so, in which case weakness also matters. Others are just stupid, and the outcome is the same whether they are strong or weak leaders. Presumably they do not try to control their followers, and it would not matter if they did since they would not follow Abrahms's advice to avoid killing large numbers of civilians. For example, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) may be an exception to the rule in exhibiting extreme ruthlessness and bragging about their atrocities in propaganda videos, but why are all their leaders apparently so stupid? Is it that smart leaders use terrorism but are clever enough not to feature it in publicity? Under what conditions do stupid or smart leaders come to the fore in some organizations at some times? In fact, how are 'smartness' and 'stupidity' defined other than in terms of whether or not an organization uses terrorism? It seems that if a group uses terrorism, observers can assume that the leader is either stupid or smart, and if smart then too weak to control the organization. How are observers to distinguish smart but weak leaders from stupid ones? Such conundrums are not resolved, but the book can serve as a starting point for thinking about them.

## Review by Audrey Kurth Cronin, American University

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The argument behind this book is creative and deserves serious attention; but the author undermines its strengths with hyperbole. According to the introduction, the origins of this study began in Max Abrahms's graduate school years, when "[t]o my surprise, I quickly discovered there was almost no empirical research on whether terrorism actually helps groups to achieve their demands" (18-19). That motivated his desire to write a doctorate on the topic, which he completed in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on the subject of terrorism's effectiveness was a great idea, and Abrahms produced some excellent work even as a graduate student, notably his first article on the topic, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work" (2006), which was pathbreaking.<sup>2</sup>

But suggesting there is still a gap on this topic is an odd way to begin a 2018 book, as Abrahms has been in the thick of a burgeoning discussion about terrorism's effectiveness ever since.<sup>3</sup> There is a well-established debate between political scientists who rely on bargaining theory, rational actor models, and coercion theory to argue that terrorism is usually an effective strategic choice, on the one hand,<sup>4</sup> and those who point to popular backlash, group implosion, and prodigious state response to argue that terrorism is usually counterproductive, on the other.<sup>5</sup> The author belongs in the second group and spends a good deal of the book attacking the arguments of the first.

Yet the lines between the two camps are not actually that sharp, and research on terrorism's effectiveness should get beyond polarized positions.<sup>6</sup> Fundamental questions remain on both sides about what "effective" means, for example, or which data sets are the most appropriate to measure it.<sup>7</sup> Terrorist attacks are not just

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<sup>1</sup> Max Abrahms, "The Causes of Terrorism: A Reappraisal of the Conventional Wisdom," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2010; at <https://www.worldcat.org/title/causes-of-terrorism-a-reappraisal-of-the-conventional-wisdom/oclc/664029219>.

<sup>2</sup> Max Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," *International Security* 31:2 (Fall 2006): 42-78.

<sup>3</sup> Some of that debate has occurred in H-Diplo. See, for example, Max Abrahms, Response to Peter Krause, "The Political Effectiveness of Non-State Violence: A Two-Level Framework to Transform a Deceptive Debate." *Security Studies* 22:2 (2013): 259-294, H-Diplo/ISSF, 29 June 2013; and Author's Response to H-Diplo/ISSF Response by Max Abrahms to Peter Krause, "The Political Effectiveness of non-State Violence: A Two-Level Framework to Transform a Deceptive Debate." *Security Studies* 22:2 (2013): 259-294, H-Diplo/ISSF, 5 July 2013. Peter Krause's *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017) is absent from the Bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Alan Dershowitz, Peter Krause, Andrew Kydd, David Lake, Robert Pape, Ehud Sprinzak, and Barbara Walter.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Max Abrahms, Erica Chenoweth, Audrey Kurth Cronin, Page Fortna, Seth Jones, Martin Libicki, and Maria Stephan.

<sup>6</sup> A great step in that direction is Diego Muro, ed., *When Does Terrorism Work?* (London: Routledge, 2018), in which Abrahms and Krause each have a chapter.

<sup>7</sup> For example, relying on the U.S. government's Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list for data about global terrorist groups (as in chapter 2,) is a fraught enterprise. Under the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, the FTO list designates organizations that are subject to U.S. financial and immigration sanctions. The Secretary of State designates an organization an FTO if it meets three conditions: 1) it is foreign; 2) it engages in terrorist activities; and 3) it threatens the security of



(or even usually) targeted at state governments: analysts on both sides rarely determine exactly which audience a particular group is trying to affect with its violence--supporters? recruits? group members? potential victims, etc. The term 'civilian' is too vague: al-Qaeda founding leader Osama bin Laden worried about targeting Muslim civilians, for example, but he was very happy to kill non-Muslim civilians, especially Westerners.

Both sides also put too much weight on Middle Eastern and North African groups (for example, al-Qaeda, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Palestinian groups), limiting their relevance for Latin American, Asian, or Sub-Saharan African contests. Most importantly, much of this research fails to seriously address historical context—i.e., what 'worked' for terrorism in the 1880s did not work in the 1910s, the 1930s, the 1970s or the 2000s. Terrorism, like other forms of violence, evolves within a changing global, political, and technological context.

Instead of even-handedly engaging these complexities and nuances, this book takes a disparaging tone that overplays its arguments and dismisses (or sometimes omits) the work of other analysts. That's a shame, because it otherwise provides such a promising approach to engaging the question of when and how terrorism 'works.'

This ambitious study presents three simple "rules for rebels" that boil down to: 1) Avoid targeting civilians; 2) Centralize control of the organization under a smart leader; 3) When rogue operatives do kill civilians, protect the group's image by denying involvement or apologizing for the error. These insights are drawn from a wide range of academic disciplines including "communication, criminology, economics, history, management, marketing, political science, psychology, sociology" (9). The author argues that by following these three guidelines, rebels can maximize their likelihood of success. "These three rules for rebels—learning, restraining, and branding to win—are the secrets for victory," he asserts (12).

The book is divided into three parts, each providing empirical support for one of the rules using case study analysis, process tracing, quantitative analysis, or 2004 field research on the West Bank. Many of the arguments here are familiar from Abrahms's numerous shorter publications, especially his academic journal articles,<sup>8</sup> whose conclusions he offers here in a more accessible, integrated format that is designed to appeal to a broader audience. The book is well-written, informal, and easy to read.

The title, *Rules for Rebels*, and the opening pages of this book make it difficult to know exactly what type of violence the study will focus on, however. Not all terrorists are rebels and not all rebels are terrorists: Osama bin Laden was a terrorist but not a rebel; Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi was a rebel but not a

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the U.S. or its citizens. There are many terrorist groups that fail to meet these criteria, including U.S. domestic groups and groups that do not directly threaten the United States. See Audrey Kurth Cronin, "The 'FTO List' and Congress: Sanctioning Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations," CRS Report for Congress #RL32120, 21 October 2003. At other places the author uses the Global Terrorism Database, a more comprehensive dataset. <https://www.start.umd.edu/events/global-terrorism-database-gtd-2020-update>.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," these valuable offerings include Abrahms, "Why Democracies Make Superior Counterterrorists," *Security Studies* 16:2 (2007): 223-253; Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy," *International Security* 32:4 (2008): 78-105; Abrahms, "The Credibility Paradox: Violence as a Double-Edged Sword in International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 57:4 (2013): 660-671, and Abrahms and Philip B.K. Potter, "Explaining Terrorism: Leadership Deficits and Militant Group Tactics," *International Organization* 69:2 (2015): 311-342.

terrorist. And many types of violence kill civilians. The introduction is titled “The Stupid Terrorist,” yet the terms ‘rebel,’ ‘militant leader,’ ‘revolutionary,’ ‘insurgent,’ and ‘terrorist’ are used interchangeably throughout.

How to define terrorism is a tiresome topic. but authors do need to explain the scope of analysis, especially since a central argument of the book depends on distinctions between different types of violence. The author distinguishes campaigns as “terrorist” or “guerrilla” in Chapter 1 (28-29), and he engages the definition of terrorism directly in Chapter 3: “I’ve introduced the distinction between what I call terrorism splitters versus terrorism lumpers” (43),<sup>9</sup> putting his own work among the splitters. The book’s key argument is that terrorism is ineffective because, unlike other types of violence, it targets civilians:

“In sum, the main historical examples offered up by the researchers that terrorism pays—the withdrawal of Western and Israeli forces from Lebanon, the departure of Britain from Palestine, and the ending of Apartheid in South Africa—are arguably not examples of terrorist campaigns at all.... Lumping these tactics together with terrorism leaves the false impression that civilian targeting paid off” (46).

This is a great point. The upshot of these three examples (Hezbollah, the Irgun, the African National Congress) is that to be effective, organizations should gain enough strength to transition out of terrorism to a stronger, more legitimate type of violence, such as insurgency, guerrilla warfare or even civil resistance.<sup>10</sup> But this makes the lax use of key terms elsewhere in this book—not to mention the title of the book itself—perplexing.

No book is perfect; everyone leaves things out and makes mistakes. But more credit might have been given to predecessors. For example, Abrahms writes that “my focus has been on what I have dubbed as the outcome goals of militants rather than their process goals” (19). The concept of process and outcome goals belongs to economist Herbert Simon, and that should be mentioned.<sup>11</sup> In one footnote (#88, 14), Abrahms cites nine of his own publications. The book has an extensive bibliography, including twenty-seven of the author’s own writings, with ten individually-listed Tweets. (President George W. Bush ranks second-most, with eight entries.)

*Rules for Rebels* also uses emotional and pejorative terms to refer to leaders and followers, calling them “stupid” (1, 108, 121, 152, 164), “dunces” (101, 177) “clueless” (89, 112), “ignoramus” (117) “schmuck[s]” (149), or “idiotic” (88). Describing ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Abrahms writes, “The bad apple didn’t fall far from the stupid tree” (89). If most are so stupid, why study them?

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of lumpers and splitters originated with Charles Darwin, who introduced the concept in an 1857 letter that discussed how to classify varieties of species. Darwin Correspondence Project, letter to J.D. Hooker, 1 August 1857; at <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-2130.xml>

<sup>10</sup> Or use nonviolent civil resistance instead. See Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). On reorientation to other forms of violence, see Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Organizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 146-166.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert A. Simon, “From Substantive to Procedural Rationality,” in Spiro J. Latsis, ed., *Method and Appraisal in Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 129-148. See also Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 77-82.

The author writes at the outset, “This is the first book to identify a cohesive set of actions to enable militant leaders to win” (1). The book claims to provide scientific evidence of what works and what does not work. But there are dozens of such ‘rule books’ for militant leaders, many of them highly influential. Some are mentioned briefly in Chapter 6 (90-91) and Chapter 7 (106-7;118); but leaders are typically quoted selectively or out of context, their ideas and actions never fully engaged. Recognizing the legacy of earlier instruction manuals and explaining in depth exactly how *Rules for Rebels* agrees with or diverges from its predecessors would have been helpful.

For example, Mao Zedong’s *On Protracted War* explains the three-phase People’s War that defeated the Kuomintang.<sup>12</sup> It involved coopting rural peasants first, building a base of operations, and finally, when the correlation of forces had shifted and the group was strong enough, changing from guerrilla warfare (including terrorist attacks against enemy-supporting civilians) to traditional conventional operations. Others who then followed Maoist “rules” included the North Vietnamese, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge, India’s Naxalites, and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), and all of them killed thousands of civilians (on the other side).

Captured al-Qaeda documents show detailed study of Maoist principles, along with those of Argentine Marxist revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara and North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap.<sup>13</sup> Guevara, the mastermind behind Cuba’s successful revolution, wrote *Guerrilla Warfare*, which emphasized using small, highly trained groups of guerrillas (*foco* theory) to gain legitimacy and mobilize the peasant population.<sup>14</sup> One of the reasons the Bolivian military (with CIA help) tracked him down and killed him was that he was an effective, charismatic leader who was very good at public relations ‘spin.’ How does this comport with rules two and three? Other books written by militants, insurgents, terrorists, or revolutionaries (“rebels”?) include Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*,<sup>15</sup> T.E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*,<sup>16</sup> Carlos Marighella, *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*,<sup>17</sup> and H.K. Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga*,<sup>18</sup> among many others.

Books intended to be instruction manuals or guidelines for terrorism, rebellion, or insurgency have a long and rich history, and most of them emphasize the role of the leader—often because leaders write them. Some are

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<sup>12</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, *On Protracted War*, May 1938, in *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Michael W. S. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda’s Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); David Spencer, “Red Teaming Strategic Communication and Political Warfare,” in J. Michael Waller, ed., *Strategic Influence: Public Diplomacy, Counterpropaganda and Political Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: Crossbow Press, 2009): 312-318; Vo Nguyen Giap, *People’s War, People’s Army: The Viet Cong Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries* (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2015), first published in 1962.

<sup>14</sup> Ernesto “Che” Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (BN Publishing, 2012 [1961]).

<sup>15</sup> Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois Press, 1991), first published in 1927.

<sup>16</sup> T. E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Penguin Books, 2000), first published in 1926.

<sup>17</sup> Carlos Marighella, *Minimanual do Guerrilheiro Urbano (The Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla)* (Creative Space Publications, 2011), first published in 1969.

<sup>18</sup> H. K. Wachanga, *The Swords of Kirinyaga: The Fight for Land and Freedom* (Kenya Literary Bureau, 1978).

briefly mentioned here but only when they support the author's arguments. *Rules for Rebels* concludes: "Research on militant groups neglects the role of leaders... My book is the first to show how militant leaders affect the caliber of decisions and hence the prospects of victory" (198).