

## BOOK REVIEW

**Max Abrahams, (2018). *Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 285pp.**

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“Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History”, written by Max Abrahams intends to introduce three golden rules to the leaders of rebel groups to achieve their political aims. Although the title of the book seems vicious, the content is quite the opposite. The rules that he introduces not only try to make the world a safer place to live in, but also to lead militants to a clearer path in reaching their political aims by reducing the possibilities of harming lives.

Max Abraham indicates at the beginning, that the book, "Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History," is a research work that targets outcome goals of militant violent attacks instead of process goals like most existing works. According to the author, the outcome goals "can only be achieved (by the extremists) with the compliance of the target government", while process goals are the capability to attract media coverage, attain funding, recruit new members, and irritate the authority to overreact. In other words, the consequence of outcome goals would result in shifting policy, institution, and structure of a nation due to the insurgents' coercion, while at the same time; process goals contribute to the rise and fall of a militant group. Supported by hundreds of case studies, fieldworks, and statistical analysis of rebel activities, this book is filled with an ambition to generate golden rules for insurgents to gain victory.

To lift the curtain, Abraham raises a thought-provoking question: why do some terrorist attacks achieve their political aims, but some do not? He acknowledges the importance of leadership, while at the same time contends the weights of the leaders' wisdom for not attacking civilians, restraining their subordinates from executing terror attacks, and branding their organisations. From the rules he set for the rebels, it is clear that Abraham sees upheavals as a kind of business that could only succeed through gaining public support. The central idea of this assertion is that people matter, and humanity should be maintained. These concepts thoroughly challenge the conventional knowledge of terrorism study, which devotedly believes that petrified civilians are the sole mean to win the "war."

Terrorising civilians is doomed to failure. This is a vital concept that Abraham repeatedly mentions in the book. He explains that generally, there are two types of aggression that the rebels perform - one is assaulting commoners, and another one is attacking military bases. After analysing the cases, he discovers that states are far more reluctant to concede to the militants who assault the people than the garrison. This is undoubtedly a ground-breaking discovery, for so many of us, including

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militant leaders, tend to perceive that hurting people would let the terrorists get what they want from the government.

To clear the air, Abraham explains that the public is prone to muddle terrorism (assault civilian) with guerrilla attacks (demolish the garrison) together. The victory of the Hezbollah that forced the US, French, and Israel to withdraw their troops from Southern Lebanon was due to the Hezbollah targeting military bases instead of civilians. Another significant example that Abraham raises is the 9/11 attack. Osama bin Laden, leader of the al-Qaeda, launched the 9/11 attacks aimed at compelling the US to retreat its troops from the Persian Gulf, and to stop interfering with the affairs of the Muslim world. However, the aggression not only failed to deter the US, but further aggravated the scale of the latter's involvement. Although the 9/11 attack had profoundly influenced the US' economy and lifestyle, that was never Osama's goal. As people are inclined to claim the success of the terrorists, even the latter do not achieve its political motive; therefore, terrorism seems to gain victory each time they attack. Another reason why people generally believe terrorism always wins, according to Max Abraham, is because the public tends to remember successes than failures. ISIS earned a lot more attention when it succeeded in conquering Mosul than when the Islamist state was resolved.

Since assaulting the mass is forbidden, it is the responsibility of the leaders to restrict the low-ranking members from performing the act regardless of whether the latter understand or do not understand the consequences. Like other ordinary organisations, militant groups are similarly encountering some low-level members who do not follow the rules, intentionally or unintentionally. Abraham warns governments to carefully consider before taking out leaders of rebel groups if the latter fails to contain the members from attacking civilians. He indicates that this would normally provoke the members to escalate the scale of their indiscriminate attacks.

When Abraham proposes that rebel groups have to brand themselves as terrorism-free organisations, this infers that he believes that running a militant group is just like running an enterprise. This is because when rebel groups portray themselves as civilian friendly, they will be backed by the people. Why does getting support from civilians' matter? Abraham claims that the people in the Middle East welcomed the notorious ISIS when they first conquered the land. In fact, ISIS did not win its territory from attacking civilians, as most people perceive. The region that was occupied by ISIS was a place where the ruling government had lost control and the military had collapsed. It was when ISIS started to terrorise civilians that marked the outset of their losing the land that they seized. The image always matters.

Hence, when leaders fail to prevent their members from targeting civilians, Abraham proposes two strategies to be employed, depending on whether they are caught in the act or not. If there is no tangible proof of the groups being involved in the indiscriminate violence, the leaders should deny involvement of their organisations. Assuming that it is caught red-handed, then the tactic that the leaders should use is to deny that it was their principal intent. Whether it is the denial of organisational involvement (DOI) or denial of principal intent (DPI), both are typical public relations tactics to solve crises that would smear the image of a company.

To be frank, the title of this book - "Rules of Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History", seems quite disturbing for it seems to teach insurgents methods to wreck the structure of a society and the institution of a nation. Yet, the content of the book is quite the opposite. The central idea that runs through the whole book, in fact, is to discourage the insurgents from hurting commoners. It also encourages leaders of the groups to run the organisations rationally and in a peaceful manner. This viewpoint will save numerous lives if the leaders and members of the rebel groups come across this book (if they do read). At the same time, Abraham similarly advises the media and international community to contain themselves from exaggerating the effectiveness of terrorist attacks if the latter do not achieve its political aims. This is to prevent other rebels from following suit.

In short, this book is worth to be studied in-depth due to its sophisticated analysis and vast examples to support the author's viewpoint. This is also a book with the intention to make the world a better place to live in by advocating less indiscriminate violence. Thus, do not let the name of the book fool you.