

Interview - Max Abrahms

Written by E-International Relations

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Max Abrahms is currently an assistant professor of political science at Northeastern University where he focuses on the study of terrorism. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Center for Cyber and Homeland Security at George Washington University, the Human Security Centre in London, the Center for the Study of Terrorism in Rome, and he sits on the editorial board of *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Previously, he has been awarded fellowships and financial backing from the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, the Empirical Studies of Conflict project at Princeton University and Stanford University, the Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Military Academy, the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, the Department of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University, and the Belfer Center at Harvard University. He can be followed on twitter @MaxAbrahms

Your research has, and is currently, focused on the consequences of terrorism, its motives, and the implications for counterterrorism strategy. How did you arrive at your current line of thinking on terrorism and who or what sparked your intellectual interest in terrorism?

During the Second Intifada, I lived in Jerusalem and would travel by day to the West Bank to see first-hand the construction of the security wall. The purpose of the trip was to better understand the wall from both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives. The Israelis explained to me that they were not proud of the wall – it was an admission of failure that the Oslo peace process had failed to provide security. Many Israelis told me how they lost faith in the Palestinians as a viable partner for peace because of their terrorist attacks. And that in the absence of a real peace process, Israel felt compelled to take security into its own hands by physically preventing suicide bombers from crossing into Israel. Naturally, the Palestinians I spoke to had a very different perspective. They explained to me how disastrous the wall was for them. I completely agreed with them that the wall was humiliating, economically harmful, and would likely shrink the borders of a future Palestinian state.

One day, from the back of a cab, I read an academic article on terrorism I had printed out the night before – Robert Pape's "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," which would soon become the most cited terrorism study ever written. His basic argument is that people turn to terrorism – especially suicide terrorism – because of its effectiveness in softening up governments into making major political concessions. As evidence, Pape hailed the Palestinians as the most illustrative case that terrorism pays politically. I was immediately struck by the disconnect between what this leading thinker in international relations was saying about terrorism and the reality on the ground. According to the Israelis, the wall would not have been created without the terrorism. And according to the Palestinians, their political future would be brighter without the wall. I began to wonder, if the Palestinians are the political success story then how have other groups fared that use terrorism? And if terrorism does not pay politically, why do groups use it?

Over the past decade, I have published numerous large-n studies confirming my suspicion that terrorism is actually a losing tactic for inducing government concessions. These studies analyze the tactical choices and political plights of hundreds of militant groups from around the world going back many decades. What I find is that all else equal, groups are far more likely to induce government compliance when they refrain from terrorism by not attacking civilians. Striking military targets in the form of guerrilla attacks, by contrast, is a far more effective method for groups to obtain their political demands. To be sure, there are a handful of cases in which nonstate attacks on civilians have

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led to terrorist appeasement. But this fact does not mean that terrorism pays politically any more than the 100-year old smoker shows that cigarettes add years to one's life. This original finding of mine that terrorism is generally politically counterproductive raises what I call the Puzzle of Terrorism. The puzzle is why groups use this tactic when it tends to lower the chances of achieving their political demands.

Marc Sageman recently claimed, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, that terrorism research has stagnated. Do you agree with Sageman's pessimism and are there any debates happening at the moment in terrorism research that you find particularly interesting?

The state of terrorism research has never been stronger. In 2000, I began the M.Phil. in International Relations at Oxford University. I wanted to do my thesis on terrorism, but was told that terrorism is not really studied in international relations and that I would struggle to find a suitable advisor. Fast forward to today and almost every international relations program has faculty working, at least to an extent, on conflict. At Northeastern University, I get e-mails every week from students all over the world interested in coming to study terrorism. Not only are there many more terrorism scholars than ever before, but the quality of scholarship has improved dramatically. Terrorism scholarship is like phones, making important leaps over a relatively small period. This is a natural development as the pool of scholars has increased with superior methodological training. Of course, many important questions remain unresolved beyond the puzzle of terrorism. For instance, there are active debates over the utility of leadership decapitation, the role of religion, the importance of terrorist social media, and the threat posed by lone wolves. An exciting aspect of studying terrorism is that our work is never done.

Your research has challenged what could be described as the “strategic paradigm of terrorism”, which suggests that actors turn to terrorist violence because it is an effective way for them to achieve their political goals. Why do you believe that terrorism doesn't work?

When people look at terrorism, they immediately notice that it causes damage, attracts media attention, and instills fear throughout the population. Many people therefore conclude that terrorism is an effective tactic. Of course, if those are the measures of success then terrorism, by its very definition, has a 100 percent success rate. Political scientists also often assume that terrorism is effective in terms of its political outcome. The leading theory on terrorism is what I call the Strategic Model. Exponents of this model like Robert Pape, David Lake, Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter claim that groups use terrorism because of its success in pressuring government concessions. This theory, though intuitively attractive, rests on a shaky empirical basis. To be sure, some terrorist attacks have coerced governments into making important political concessions, like the 2004 Madrid train attacks. But my research has established that of the many groups throughout modern history, very few have managed to achieve their political demands. In fact, attacking the population with terrorism actually impedes them. In the face of terrorism, target countries almost never respond by inviting the perpetrators out for dinner to resolve their outstanding political issues. Quite the opposite, electorates tend to move to the political right, empowering hardliners most inclined to dig in their political heels and crush the perpetrators militarily. If anyone needs an example, just think back to how the U.S. responded to 9/11. Or consider how every single country has responded to recent attacks by Islamic State and related actors.

- Last year, Islamic State said the purpose of beheading the American journalist James Foley was to persuade the United States into calling off military operations in Iraq. But the terrorist act had the opposite political effect. In the immediate aftermath of the beheading, President Obama declared that the U.S. would consequently ramp up its air campaign in Iraq and extend it into Syria for the first time.
- The Paris attacks had a similar effect on France. The French were the opposite of intimidated. Instead, they were defiant. The French public lurched to the political right, endowing the government unprecedented leeway to fight the terrorists. The Islamophobic far-right Front National picked up numerous supporters. Of course, France dramatically increased its participation in the anti-ISIS military coalition, reflected best in its deployment of the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier to the Gulf. And while Islamic State detests the Assad regime, the French public suddenly warmed to him.
- Canada, too, did the political opposite of what the Strategic Model would predict. After a couple terrorist attacks on Canadian soil, the public gave its spy agency unprecedented powers to disrupt terrorism at

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home, while suddenly favoring an expanded role in the coalition against Islamic State. Indeed, Canada is now arguably even more hawkishly anti-terrorism than its southern neighbor.

- Jordan was a real question mark. The Jordanian public had been highly ambivalent about fighting Islamic State before its citizen was torched to death in a cage. Would Jordan withdraw from the counterterrorism coalition like the anomalous case of Spain after the 2004 Madrid attacks? Just the opposite — in response to the torching, Jordan began bombing the lights out of Islamic State, even ordering additional fighter planes to help get the job done.
- The beheading of 21 Coptics in Libya had the same counterproductive effect on Egypt. Although not formally a member of the anti-ISIS coalition, Cairo quickly volunteered to lead a pan-Arab military force against Islamic State.
- Even Japan became more bellicose after its citizens were slaughtered. Since 1947, Article 9 of the Constitution has banned Japan from possessing war-making capabilities. But thanks to the terrorist attacks, the Japanese rallied around the flag, pushing for the repeal of Article 9 to better respond to threats like Islamic State.

So, if terrorism does not work, why do certain groups practice it?

In a recent study in *International Organization*, Phil Potter and I propose and test a new theory that can accurately predict why certain groups use terrorism, while others do not. It turns out that only some groups tend to engage in terrorism by attacking civilians – groups suffering from leadership deficits in which lower level members are calling the shots. Leadership deficits promote terrorism by empowering lower level members of the organization, who have stronger incentives to harm civilians.

For many reasons, there is an inverse relationship between the position of members within the organizational hierarchy and their incentives for harming civilians. For starters, lower level members may try to rise up within the group by committing atrocities against civilians. Such organizational ladder-climbing is well documented in gangs, but is also quite common in militant groups – just ask Jihadi John. Furthermore, lower level members have less access to organizational resources than the leadership, incentivizing them to strike softer targets. And leaders tend to have more experience in asymmetric conflict, so they are more apt than their subordinates to understand the political risks of indiscriminate violence in the first place.

In accordance with this new theory for terrorism, our study reveals that decapitation strikes with drones make militant groups more likely to attack civilians by weakening the leadership. Decentralized groups are also prone to civilian targeting because the leadership must delegate tactical decision-making to lower level members. Similarly, we demonstrate that as operatives travel further away from the leadership, they gain a measure of autonomy and are consequently more inclined to attack the population. Unlike the Strategic Model, our organizational theory does not rest on the dubious assumption that terrorism helps induce government concessions. But more importantly, it can help to predict which groups will attack civilians, when, and why.

Arguably, it can be difficult for researchers to assess accurately the goals of a terrorist group. For example, the stated goals of a group may be different from what could be described as ‘long term goals’. A group’s behaviour may show little commitment to their stated goals. There is also the possibility that a group’s goals may change over time and compromise. In your research, how did you go about establishing the goals of a terrorist group?

I always assume that terrorist members are essentially rational actors. The fact that terrorism is generally politically counterproductive in no way implies that its practitioners are irrational. People participate in terrorist groups for all sorts of reasons. Take Islamic State. Some join to serve their personal goals of raping Yazidi women or beheading captives or setting them on fire. These behaviors may seem insane, but they offer utility to a narrow slice of horrible people in the world. It is useful to keep in mind that terrorist groups are heterogeneous social units, where the people at the top may have a different utility function than those at the bottom. Of course, there is variation in motives not just within terrorist groups, but also between them. I like to say that terrorism is like cancer. Cancer is hard to eradicate because there are so many ways of getting it. Similarly, terrorism is hard to combat because there are so many

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different causal pathways to it. Closing off any one avenue is thus unlikely to resolve the problem across the board, which is why I favour a multifaceted counterterrorism response. Unfortunately, terrorism is almost impossible to deter precisely because it offers its practitioners so many different sources of utility regardless of how governments respond.

For scholars of terrorism, there have been debates on what effective research methodologies to employ when investigating terrorist activity. Recently, in an interview on this site, Jessica Stern claimed that she was sceptical of large-n studies and argued for the importance of interviewing terrorists as a way understanding motivations. Obviously there is no such thing as a perfect method, but are there any method(s) you favour over others and, if so, why?

Like golf clubs, different methods have different benefits and drawbacks. By combining methods, their individual shortcomings can be overcome. For this reason, the best methodological approach is always hybrid. I begin my analyses by closely observing a few cases and then testing out my insights on the largest number of terrorist groups possible. This way, I am able to scrutinize causal processes up-close and establish whether they are generalizable across many cases. Of course, the problem with relying on a small sample is it may not be representative. In the study of terrorism, large-n studies are particularly useful because there have been so many different terrorist incidents in the world. You want to be sure you are engaging in science, not just cherry-picked, anecdotal storytelling.

One of the most interesting suggestions on counter terrorism—whilst of course not ignoring the importance of intelligence gathering—you've called for is the need to address the social appeal of terrorism. This has highlighted the importance of more moral pluralism and tolerance in liberal democracies, which allows minorities to assimilate into their societies. In the case of addressing Islamic terrorists, you've argued that this could involve more mosques and religious freedom. Are there any governments which you feel have addressed this importance of pluralism in their counter terrorism efforts?

Terrorists, by definition, express political or ideological aims. Without them, the perpetrators would not be deemed terrorists. Yet the stated aims of terrorists may not accurately reflect their intentions. In fact, my research suggests that terrorist group members are generally motivated less by their stated ideology than the social solidarity of participating in a tight-knit group. Many pundits act as if Islamic State members are ideological purists motivated by Islam or at least their radical interpretation of it. But like other kinds of terrorists, Islamic State members derive much of their utility through the social bonds. That is why some secular schools, for instance, produce a disproportionate number of jihadis. This is also why so many behaviours by Islamic State do not make ideological sense, such as its tendency to exploit power vacuums in all corners of the globe regardless of their historic connection to the Caliphate. If terrorist members are often motivated by the social solidarity, then governments must promote tolerance to limit their sense of isolation. In general, the U.S. is better on assimilation than European countries. It is not incidental that the U.S. also supplies a smaller portion of jihadis to Islamic State, especially after taking into account population size and its leading role in the military coalition. My recommendation to all Western governments is to make the Muslim community feel at home because discrimination only promotes radicalization.

There have been many arguments made that an effective way to combat Islamic terrorism is for Islam to be reformed and for appeals to be made to moderate Islam. Do you think that this is an effective way to tackle terrorism?

In general, the connection between religion and terrorism is exaggerated. That said, I am fully aware that some terrorist members especially of Islamic State are in fact attracted to the group out of religious conviction. Given this slice of terrorist members, it can be useful to point out how Islamic State's interpretation of Islam departs from the modal Muslim opinion. Islamic State must be exposed as extreme in terms of both its tactics and ideological preferences. Most Muslims are already keenly aware, so Islamic State propaganda disproportionately targets recent converts and other religious dilettantes.

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The Islamic State has been dominating headlines for some considerable time now and there has much discussion about how to effectively deal with this group. You've been critical of the U.S. counter terrorism strategy against ISIS. Do you think that ISIS can be stopped and, if so, how?

I have been very frustrated by the U.S. failure to develop an intelligent strategy against Islamic State. Barack Obama won the nomination and then the presidential election largely because of his opposition to U.S. troops in Iraq. From John Kerry to Chuck Hagel, the president then surrounded himself with individuals opposed to ground troops. In his May 2015 Memorial Day address, Obama said he was most proud of the fact that U.S. ground troops were not engaged in combat anywhere in the world. For this commander-in-chief, the non-deployment of U.S. troops is a victory in itself, shaped by his predecessor's post-9/11 difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet counterinsurgency success requires boots on the ground. So, the question for Obama has always been where to find those boots against Islamic State. Obama has not buck-passed effectively. In Syria, U.S. strategy was intent on using the Free Syrian Army as combat forces against Islamic State. But the FSA was always a weak group with strong ties to al-Qaeda types. The recently declassified Defence Intelligence Agency's August 5, 2012 report spells out why the FSA was never a real candidate to confront Islamic State. Because the so-called "rebels" were never a serious option, I have been a long-time advocate of Washington teaming up with Damascus. Assad is a bad man, but he has never threatened the U.S. homeland unlike his arch enemy, Islamic State. Working with Assad would have unleashed his military, the U.S. military, and the Russian military against the group in Syria. But Obama dithered, backing the FSA albeit mildly, while hoping for Islamic State to just disappear from a tepid batch of airstrikes. Consequently, the Syrian military is now greatly depleted, as Islamist terrorists threaten to take over the entire country. In Iraq, U.S. strategy has also been inept in using the local ground force options. The best boots in Iraq especially in the greater Baghdad area are the Shia militia. They were indispensable for retaking Tikrit from Islamic State, but were then sidelined from helping out in Anbar due to the fear of Iranian empowerment. Without Shia militia support, the Iraqi military was instantly overwhelmed in Ramadi. I have been a big advocate of using the Shia militia more extensively in Iraq. They are not angels, but they have always been the best boots for confronting Islamic State given our constraints. Not only are the Shia militia the most militarily capable ground force there, but they have no designs on hanging their flag on the White House, unlike Islamic State. Counterinsurgency strategy means acting like adults by making tough choices based on the available options. U.S. strategy has failed to choose the right ones against Islamic State.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars who are starting their careers and want to focus their research on terrorism and political violence?

My advice is two-fold. First, follow terrorism news. Twitter is a great way to stay informed. Read everything possible about the terrorism landscape as it unfolds in real-time. You will find that theories on terrorism often fail to comport with reality. My second piece of advice is to build up your methodological skills, so you can effectively test out your ideas and then sell them.

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This interview was conducted by Al McKay. Al is an Editor-at-large of E-IR.