

# How politically effective is terrorism?

September 16 2013, by Jason Kornwitz

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Why do some militant groups continue to use terrorism when it's politically ineffective, even counterproductive? The answer lies in their leadership deficits, according to Max Abrahms, a terrorism theorist and newly appointed assistant professor of political science whose research over the last decade has thoroughly examined the question.

"Foot soldiers are generally not as smart as their leaders and have fewer incentives against harming civilians," he explained. "When they gain tactical autonomy within the organization, they become more likely to commit the strategic folly of targeting civilians."

Abrahms' findings are rooted in preexisting economic, sociological, and psychological theories, all of which he applies to his study of [militant groups](#) that operate in the Middle East and North Africa.

He started studying terrorism as a graduate student of international relations at Oxford University in 2000, a year before the 9/11 attacks. "It seemed odd that I would study terrorism at that time because it was the height of the dotcom era, with a lot of great jobs to be had in America cities, on Wall Street, and in Northern California," Abrahms explained. "But I thought it was an interesting topic even if it wasn't currently a pivot around which the U.S. would come to understand its security interests."

After leaving Oxford, he did a fellowship at a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, but grew disenchanted with the policy world when the Iraq war went south. So, he returned to academia, earning a doctorate in

political science from UCLA, and worked as a [postdoctoral fellow](#) in the department of political science at Johns Hopkins University prior to joining the Northeastern faculty.

His research has been featured in dozens of [media outlets](#) around the world, ranging from the *The Boston Globe* and *The Los Angeles Times* to the *Jerusalem Post* and *Al-Jazeera*. In April, *Foreign Policy* ran a couple of his essays on the Boston Marathon bombing suspects.

This case will be discussed in his fall courses on terrorism. Next fall, the Department of Political Science will offer a master of science in security and resiliency studies, a program for which Abrahms will serve as a core faculty member.

Abrahms, who also serves as a term member at the Council on Foreign Relations, a nonprofit membership organization, publisher, and think tank specializing in U.S. foreign policy, noted that he was attracted to Northeastern not only for its growing research reputation, but its engagement with the world. "Faculty are encouraged to make practical contributions to the world, whether by advising governments or doing interviews with the media on policy relevant issues," he said. "Although I am a [theorist](#), I wouldn't be testing my theories if I didn't think they had any real-world applications."

Provided by Northeastern University

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