

Abdulkader H. Sinno. *Organizations at War: In Afghanistan and Beyond*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. 336 pages; price not stated.

The history of Afghanistan, since the 1979 Soviet invasion, is best understood as the success of organizations properly structured for their environments, and failure of organizations whose structures were ill-suited for the same. This is the central argument of Sinno's meticulously-researched and cogently argued political history. In telling this history, the book presents an organization-centric theory of conflict outcomes and offers different answers to many of the intellectual puzzles of Afghanistan's modern history. Ultimately it is in this second task that the book really shines.

The first four chapters of the publication present a theory of group conflict that focuses on the interaction between organizational structure and politico-military environment as the key to predict conflict outcomes. Drawing explicitly from management studies, the theory considers five or six potential organizational structures (depending on how you count) alongside four potential organizational strategies and eight core organizational processes. The thrust of the argument, however, focuses on just two key dichotomies: whether or not a group is centralized or decentralized, and whether or not it controls a geographic "safe haven".

Sinno summarizes the central dynamic in the following way:

Centralized organizations are generally more effective than non-centralized ones but are more vulnerable to the attempts of rivals to disturb their operations because of their dependence on coordination among their different specialized branches. An organization (such as the state, an occupier, or a strong insurgent group) that controls a safe haven that protects it from the easy disturbance of its operations by rivals must therefore adopt a highly centralized and specialized structure. Organizations that do not have such a space must adopt a non-centralized structure to increase their odds of outlasting their rivals. To have a safe haven is not essential to win the conflict, but it is essential for the organization to organize properly based on whether it has such a haven. (pp. 89-90).

The foregoing argument works well as a general analytic framework. Over the course of the next five chapters, each focusing on a discrete period of Afghanistan's history, Sinno is able to show how winners and losers are determined by the interaction of these key variables. The Soviets, he contends, ultimately lost because they were not sufficiently centralized despite maintaining control over strategically important areas of the country. The mujahideen, lacking a safe haven, were successful because their decentralized patron-client structure made them resilient to Soviet attack. These same decentralized structures did not serve the groups well, however, after the Soviet withdrawal and the fall of Mohammad Najibullah's communist regime several years later. With several armed groups now in control of safe havens, their inability to fully centralize made them incapable of stopping the advance of the Taliban in the mid-1990s.

The theoretical chapters are well supported by numerous illustrations and examples drawn from post-WWII conflicts around the world. But although the theory also helps organize and frame the analysis of the subsequent chapters, the reader is also left with the

niggling feeling that the theoretical argument is a bit *too* stylized to fully capture all of the important features of these conflicts. For example, chapter 2 addresses the range of possible outcomes to conflict, but in practice the theory boils outcomes down to merely success or failure – ignoring thorny questions about how one measures either one, as well as the range of other less definitive possible results of conflict. The discussion of complex organizations is similarly unsatisfactory, sidestepping rather than addressing the myriad empirical cases in which organizations do not fit into the basic categories put forward in the theory. The overly abstract rational choice model he presents also deflects attention from theoretical nuance that might have strengthened the book's framework. The central mechanism of the theory is rooted in organizational ecology, yet Hanaan and Freeman's seminal work in this area is unmentioned. Nor does the work incorporate insights on organizational structure, strategy, and political context from scholars like Elisabeth Clemens or Marshall Ganz.

This last point is perhaps unfair, given the deep disciplinary boundaries that divide political scientists and sociologists who study organizations. Yet perhaps the strongest critique of the book's initial chapters comes from within the book itself, in the later chapters on the history of Afghanistan. Here the reader is given a careful, systematic, and detailed tour of the many conflicts in the country since the Soviet invasion. Sinno's knowledge of his material is encyclopedic, and his descriptions of the many different organized groups in Afghanistan is rich in historic detail and political nuance. He is sensitive to a dizzying array of political, social, historical, cultural, and economic factors that have been in play in the country's troubled history of the last three decades. His chapter 5 discussion of the role of tribal bonds in mitigating free rider problems is an example of where his knowledge of the conflict and its dynamics outstrip the theoretical resources at his disposal within the rational choice paradigm. This happens again when he takes up the period between the Soviet withdrawal and the rise of the Taliban. Although Sinno presents a cogent and sophisticated read of the political and military stalemate that developed during this time, his theoretical tools are not sufficiently fine-grained to fully differentiate the trajectories of the several centralized organizations that survived the Soviet occupation.

Some of the book's finest analyses emerge from his debunking of the voluminous conventional wisdom about the history of Afghanistan, including Soviet rationales for abandoning the country, conventional explanations for the relative durability of the communist regime in Kabul after the withdrawal, and the meteoric rise of the Taliban beginning in 1994. Here is where his abstract analytic framework does some real heavy lifting, helping to point out the weaknesses of the standard accounts as well as resolve some of the outstanding puzzles, such as why the mujahideen continued to attack Soviet interests even as they withdrew, or why a collapsing Soviet Union continued to pump billions of dollars into Afghanistan in the early 1990s, or why Afghanistan experienced a few years of relative stability after the 2001 American invasion.

The book's central point is that the relationship between centralization and the existence of a safe haven can teach us much about the outcomes of military conflict. It is a useful point both in its analytic parsimony and demonstrated power to make sense of Afghanistan's complicated post-1979 political history. Here is a sustained argument that organizational structure – and the context in which that structure operates – matters far more than ideology (or charismatic leaders, or political opportunities, and so forth) in determining outcomes. Although the case for the larger theoretical framework of the book might be

overstated, the detailed and carefully-argued chapters on Afghanistan itself more than make up for this, thus making it an excellent resource for area specialists, political scientists, and students of organizational behavior alike.

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