

*Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond* by Abdulkader H. Sinno.  
Cornell University Press, 2008, 336 pp., \$39.95.

This is an interesting and challenging book. A revised and updated version of the author's 2002 doctoral dissertation at the University of California at Los Angeles, it presents a sophisticated theoretical construct that explains how different modes of organization affect the course and outcome of conflicts among organized groups in societies at war. The author applies this construct to the conflicts that have afflicted Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion of 1979. Now assistant professor of political science and Middle Eastern studies at Indiana University in Bloomington, Sinno benefitted from studying his subject up close; he worked for relief organizations in Pakistan and Afghanistan and interviewed field commanders while there.

In *Organizations at War*, Sinno justifies the selection of organizations as his key independent variable by arguing that "ethnic groups, social classes, civilizations, religions, and nations do not engage in conflict or strategic interaction," but organizations do. In other words, amorphous organizations cannot perform a number of essential processes present in any conflict, such as formulating and implementing strategy, coordinating activities, mobilizing resources, maintaining control and discipline, remaining resilient in a hostile environment, attracting foreign aid, balancing intraorganizational cohesion and competition, and generating and preserving knowledge. An organization with the ability to perform these processes better than its rivals will have a higher chance of survival in conflicts. This ability, however, is heavily dependent on the structure an organization adopts (centralized, noncentralized, or fragmented) and whether it can perform these processes without interference; that is, from a safe haven. An organization's overall performance would thus lead to one of three outcomes: the elimination of rivals, its own elimination, or a durable compromise settlement.

Sinno's application of his theory of group conflict shows that centralized organizations generally perform better than noncentralized ones when in control of a safe haven. This control allows an organization to take decisive strategic action against rivals and to defeat them. A centralized organization without a safe haven is generally more vulnerable than a noncentralized one because rivals can more easily disturb its ability to perform vital processes, especially coordination. There must therefore be a fit between structure and the availability of a safe haven. According to Sinno, it is the presence or absence of this fit that explains the outcome of Afghan conflicts since 1979 and of most conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa since 1945.

With respect to the current situation in Afghanistan, Sinno suggests that the Taliban is the only organization with the potential to mobilize the Pushtun successfully, a key factor for any organization aiming to predominate in that country. The organization led by President Karzai is unlikely to succeed at performing vital processes absent a foreign military presence. To its credit, the Taliban has learned to adapt from a very centralized structure in 2001 to a very complex and resilient

structure in 2008. This latter structure is operationally decentralized to take advantage of field opportunities, but strategically centralized with respect to major operations, mobilization and training, resource management, and broad strategic decision making. While the Taliban is not in a position to win an all-out war with US and NATO forces, the current structure allows it to survive and be resilient in the face of setbacks. Taking the strategic initiative would thus not serve the Taliban well. Its odds of succeeding reside in its ability to “weaken the resolve or ability of its stronger opponent.”

Taking an organizational approach to the study of conflicts has merit. Organizational structures and how they perform vital processes in conflicts do indeed matter. But while Sinno demonstrates that this is indeed the case with respect to Afghanistan, he is not on the same solid ground in extending the application of his theory to the entire Middle East and North Africa since 1945 in a single chapter at the very end of the book. This deserves a wider and separate treatment. Instead, it would have been more valuable to contrast the application of his theory to Afghanistan to another specific conflict, as a well-done comparison would have revealed where his theory needs refinement and adjustment. This is especially the case with several of Sinno’s hypotheses that appear in this last chapter. These hypotheses (e.g., the larger the population, the more likely an insurgent organization is to survive; organizations that dwell in rough terrain are more likely to survive) are interesting but need to be tested fully.

While Sinno may be trying to do too much, his book is a valuable contribution to organizational theory, strategic analysis, and strategic planning. It offers a coherent approach to assess the impact on conflicts of particular organizational structures. It should be read by students of strategy and built upon by experts. Sinno’s understanding of past Afghan conflicts is first rate, and his explanations of the outcomes of past Afghan conflicts will be of equal interest to regional experts.

**Stéphane Lefebvre**

*Defence R&D Centre for Operational Research and Analysis, Canada*