



Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond
by Abdulkader H. Sinno

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008
336 pp. \$39.95
ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-4618-4

Reviewed by
KEITH D. DICKSON

Abdulkader Sinno, an Assistant Professor of Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies at Indiana University, provides an approach to understanding conflict through an analysis of organizations. His analysis is based on five structures that are able to distribute power within and among organizations. These structures, characterized as *centralized, decentralized, patron-client, multiple, and fragmented* (p. 11), allow members of the organization to execute vital processes, such as how decisions are made, resources are used, cohesion is maintained, and knowledge is shared. The structure selected and the processes employed in turn will determine if the organization is successful and survives or is eliminated.

Sinno applies this organizational model to make comparisons among the conflicts in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion, and he assesses the various organizational structures that were and have been engaged in violent conflict in North Africa and the Middle East from 1945 to 2001 (and arguably still are), examining revolutionary, resistance,

separatist, civil, and ethnic conflicts.

Sinno does a remarkably thorough job of analyzing the Afghan insurgency and tribal interactions from 1978 through the present. This section is insightful, thoughtful, and exceptionally valuable; he reveals a deep knowledge of Afghan politics and rivalries, personalities, and agendas. Sinno's organizational theory approach to explaining success and failure of rival groups during this period is persuasive. His tables and analysis are clear and direct and provide an excellent starting point for anyone wanting to understand the complexities of events in Afghanistan from the end of the Soviet occupation through the collapse of the Najib regime and the rise of the Taliban. It is doubtful that there is an analysis of events in Afghanistan that is better, more complete, and more useful to a military commander, diplomat, or Provincial Reconstruction Team chief than what can be found in chapters 6 through 8 of this book. This analysis should open some eyes and minds to reassessing the purpose and direction of the current operational activities in Afghanistan—not so much because of Sinno's organizational theory approach, but simply because he has provided information essential to the development of a comprehensive operational design to address the insurgency and the stabilization of the Karzai government.

Sinno's analysis of the current coalition strategy in Afghanistan shows that ignorance of the dynamics of Afghan organizations between 1994 and 2001 has led to a flawed ethnic-based strategy of "divide and conquer" to defeat the insurgency that directly counters the concurrent efforts to build a civic nationalist base

of support for the Karzai government. The Taliban has adopted a centralized structure while employing a safe haven in Pakistan. The U.S.-led coalition, on the other hand, suffers from a collection of military, United Nations, and nongovernmental entities that often work at cross-purposes with little involvement of the Afghan government. The United States has created a patron-client organization with tribal leaders who initially depend on the United States for resources in exchange for loyalty but can quickly shift loyalties once they believe they can become self-sufficient.

While his analysis of the current situation in Afghanistan is excellent, Sinno falls short in offering little more than a simple generalization for addressing the problem. To be successful, he states, the coalition must adopt a centralized structure immediately "and develop a set of coherent strategies that actually helps the Afghan population while fending off challengers" (p. 276). The author has no recommendations for this centralized structure, and his strategic goals are obvious to any student of counterinsurgency.

In presenting his theory, Sinno sometimes belabors his points, restating his relatively simple conclusions after a wordy analysis and explanation of theories, models, and tables. The reader must make an effort to follow this exposition and is sometimes frustrated to find only a modest amount of substance at the end. The chapter on the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan is an example. Sinno makes an elaborate case of explaining all the commonly accepted reasons for the Soviet decision to withdraw. The reader is anticipating that this conventional wisdom will

be countermanded with an explanation of organizational structure, yet the author concludes with the relatively obvious point that the Soviets withdrew because they "were faced with a steadfast resistance that benefitted from opportunities that emerged on the international scene during the protracted conflict that prevented them from enjoying the strategic benefits they had hoped to gain" (pp. 117–118).

In addition, military professionals may find some of Sinno's conclusions dauntingly obvious. For example, he observes that "an organization that survives beyond the ability of all its rivals to challenge it practically wins the conflict" (p. 293). He asserts that the proper organizational structure combined with a safe haven is most likely to succeed in conflict. His analysis leads to a general assessment that organizations that have a safe haven can adopt a centralized structure; without a safe haven, organizations must be more decentralized, flexible, and self-sufficient (pp. 44–45). This is not necessarily revealing to those who have current operational experience.

Despite its flaws, Sinno has something here. He has presented an exceptionally valuable analysis of organizations in conflict in Afghanistan, but he is unable to provide the strategic-operational context necessary to move this forward into practical application. It is now up to the joint planning professionals to make use of his insights.

Keith D. Dickson is a retired Special Forces officer and a Professor of Military Studies at the Joint Forces Staff College.