



Afghanistan: A War Zone Revisited

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Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond. By Abdulkader H. Sinno. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008. 336 pp., \$35.00 hardcover (ISBN-13: 978-0801446184).

Sinno's excellent book is sobering. It is, in essence, an account of both the failure of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and of the likely future failure of the current US/NATO adventure in the same turbulent corner of the world. No foreign intervention, according to Sinno's analysis, is likely to succeed in Afghanistan.

The basis for this gloomy prognosis is that no interloper—be they Soviet, American, or the British before them—is capable of acting as a sufficiently skilful administrator when dealing with Afghanistan's myriad loci of power. An inability to adjust with the necessary flexibility to the country's tribal and ethnic dynamics has always undermined efforts to bring about "pacification." To the "Western" mind such pacification always has the idea of centralisation at its core; if Kabul and the main cities are made to sing from the same hymn-sheet then the rest of the country will follow suit. But Afghanistan has never been a country where the centre has held sway. It is actually in the peripheries where the Afghan balance of power has traditionally been shaped.

It is this balance of power that Sinno describes so well. Using the tenets of organization theory as his analytical basis, he examines the make-up of the various structures that formed armed resistance to, most specifically, the Soviet forces in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. A complex picture is painted. Sinno is able to tease out the crucial aspects of the manner in which local resistance groups were brought together and the ways in which alliances were both formed and dissolved. As well as the interactions between the indigenous tribal and ethnic groupings, there is in Afghanistan much cross-border activity based on linkages of religion, ethnos and tribe. The rich tapestry of foes that the Soviets faced was a crucial factor in the inability of Moscow's forces to generate any schematic for a divide-and-rule policy. Even absent the "godless communism" that the Soviets "offered" they were never able to put themselves forward as an agency which could unite the country. Moreover, as Sinno notes, Soviet failure was never down to a lack of investment. The Soviets pumped in vast amounts of development aid that did them little good. Indeed, the financial investment made by Moscow in many ways dwarfs that being made by the international community today in Afghanistan.

Sinno also undertakes a comparative, and not altogether flattering, analysis of the situation during the Soviet occupation with the apparent occupation of today, in terms of the presence of US and NATO forces. The West's efforts to contain the situation in Afghanistan and to make long-lasting improvements are negatively critiqued by Sinno. It appears to be the same old story of an arrogant assumption by powerful outsiders that Afghanistan can be "tamed."

It is in describing the ethnic and tribal dynamics of Afghanistan that Sinno's book is at its strongest. Those sections devoted to the study of organizations and how organization theory should be employed as an analytical tool are, in many

senses, peripheral to the core message of the book. Their inclusion in the early chapters gives the work the feel of a Ph.D. thesis. By far, the more appealing and informative sections are those devoted to what Sinno is clearly an expert on: i.e., the tribal and ethnic interactions that underpin Afghan society. The chief point he makes is that the armed resistance groups that form, coalesce and break up in Afghanistan do not fit into a convenient organizational mold that we in the West would recognize. These groups are acephalous; they do not depend on leaders and their members are not driven to take up arms by the rhetorical or leadership skills of any one individual. The urge to resist is merely a cultural norm that leaders make use of rather than direct. Therefore, tactics of “decapitation” employed against such groups are unlikely to bear fruit in terms of destroying their ability and will to fight. These groups, moreover, are autonomous; they do not depend on outside support. They will always find ways of obtaining arms, of finding recruits and of generating resistance. And the common counter-insurgency tactic that all foreign forces in Afghanistan have used—that of buying the loyalty of various tribes or ethnic groups—is also unlikely to prove successful. As Sinno points out, these groups cannot be bought; or, at least, they *can* be bought but only for a limited time. Loyalty among and between Afghanistan’s kaleidoscope of groups, movements, tribes, peoples and nations is fleeting and never fixed.

This book is insightful and has a compelling “know-your-enemy” message. As well as being a useful source for postgraduate study, *Organizations at War* should also be made compulsory reading for any military officer, diplomat or NGO official heading for Afghanistan. It does, though, have a stark message. The reader is left with the incontrovertible sense that no war waged in Afghanistan by foreign forces can ever be “won.” All that can be hoped for is that such forces are one day able to leave with some vestige of their dignity intact.