Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond
Abdulkader H. Sinno. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,
2008. £20.50/$39.95. 352 pp.

In *Organizations at War*, Abdulkader Sinno observes that 'ethnic groups, social classes, civilizations, religions, and nations do not engage in conflict or strategy interaction – organizations do' (p. 3). He argues that because engaging in conflict requires 'coordination, mobilization, and manipulation of information', detailed studies of organisations are necessary to understand 'how conflicts begin, evolve, and conclude' (p. 4). He draws on organisational theory to develop an understanding of how structure affects the character and outcome of armed conflicts.

Sinno argues that centralised organisations are more capable of seizing the strategic initiative than decentralised ones because they can 'implement complex multistep strategies that require careful coordination, strict discipline and concentrated decision making'. In contrast, non-centralised organisations are unable to seize the strategic initiative except in areas that weak rivals abandon. In the first chapter, entitled 'Organizing to Win', the author offers a cogent summary of organisational thought among revolutionary, insurgent and terrorist organisations. Sinno argues that the one contingency that determines whether an insurgent group adopts a centralised or decentralised organisation is whether it controls a safe haven.

In chapters two through four, Sinno discusses organisational theory and defines the key components of his argument. Those who doubt the authoritativeness of social-science theory as applied to the study of war may be encouraged by the author's precise use of terminology and his observation that 'the words "organization" and "social structure" are at worst empty metaphors and at best simplified parsimonious models of sets of relations that generally function far less coherently and convincingly than the metaphor would imply' (p. 25). Sinno goes on to analyse the relative advantages and disadvantages of centralised and decentralised insurgent organisations in the following areas: strategy; coordination; mobilisation; control and discipline; resilience; intra-organisational cohesion and competition; and generation, distribution and preservation of knowledge and information. Chapter four is a primer on the organisational theory of group conflict. The author observes that organisational structure, especially in connection with the degree of centralisation, must be consistent with the availability of personnel, resources and a safe haven.

In chapters five through nine, Sinno uses organisational theory to analyse Afghan conflicts from 1979 to the present. He argues that the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was inevitable because the Soviets could no longer justify

their losses. The organisational structure of the mujahadeen gave it the resilience needed to continue inflicting losses on the Soviets while limiting the effects of Soviet strategic advantages. Ultimately, the resilient structure of the mujahadeen convinced the Soviets that they could not achieve their objectives in Afghanistan at an acceptable cost. During the period between the Soviet withdrawal and the rise of the Taliban (1989–94), Sinno identifies the mujahadeen's inability to adapt to new conditions that demanded a more centralised organisation than their patronage-based structures allowed as the principal reason why the regime of Soviet proxy Mohammed Najib survived for nearly three years. He goes on to argue that the main reasons for the Taliban's rise were its ability to use its centralised organisation to mobilise the Pushtu and the fragmented and therefore vulnerable organisations of its rivals.

In his assessment of the current situation, Sinno describes the NATO-based coalition as 'highly fragmented' and asserts that the coalition is 'incapable of meeting the challenges of sophisticated insurgency' (pp. 275, 276). He argues that the Taliban, due to an effective centralised organisation in combination with a safe haven in Pakistan, is able to prosecute a sophisticated insurgency that aims to exhaust coalition and Afghan government forces, undermine governmental development, intimidate the population and prevent improvements in services. He suggests that, if the Taliban reach a 'tipping point' in Pushtu areas, an ethnic conflict would ensue that would further complicate the security situation and the international effort to stabilise the country.

In the final chapter, the author argues that 'organizational theory explains organizational survival and outcomes of territorially based politicized group conflicts well beyond Afghanistan' (p. 19). He bases his argument on data from 41 conflicts and 133 participant organisations in the post-Second World War era. He concludes that non-centralised structures are superior to centralised structures for weak organisations, while centralised organisations are better able to co-opt resources and mobilise support to achieve policy goals. Moreover, he argues that organisational theory applies to the global confrontation 'between the United States and its transnational challengers' and suggests that the proper US response is to centralise rather than decentralise organisations engaged in countering them. Sinno believes that understanding today's 'grand global insurgency' as a struggle against a 'miniscule organization' rather than against an ideology or religion would not only clarify the nature of the conflict, but also undermine al-Qaeda's ability to mobilise support.

Sinno has produced an insightful book. His emphasis on organisational theory will arm those who study conflict with a valuable perspective. However,

Sinno's analytical method, as with other theoretical frameworks, may be best applied to war as part of a broad interdisciplinary approach that remains sensitive to the unique conditions and interactions that shape the nature of conflicts and their outcomes.

Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the 21st Century
Rod Thornton. Cambridge: Polity, 2006. £17.99/$26.95. 256 pp.

In *Asymmetric Warfare*, Rod Thornton, a lecturer at King's College London and the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College, sets out to 'describe today's threats posed by the weak against the strong and answer the question, "what does asymmetric warfare look like today?"' He argues that Western states and their militaries must develop new responses to the threat from 'weak adversaries who make up for such weakness in their skill, dexterity, nimbleness, intelligence, and, above all, in their zeal, their will to win' (p. vii).

The term 'asymmetric warfare' often clouds rather than advances understanding. Indeed, there has been a great deal of debate over how to classify recent and ongoing conflicts between states, non-state actors and other armed groups. A recent US Department of Defense memorandum, for example, described 'irregular warfare' as 'a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will.' Thornton has produced a valuable book because he defines the 'asymmetric threat' with clarity and thereby provides a foundation for thinking about contemporary security challenges.

In his first chapter, Thornton answers the question 'what is asymmetric warfare?' by first examining Western vulnerabilities and constraints on which adversaries prey. These include the need to sustain popular support, a heavy reliance on technology, increasing dependence on information, aversion to casualties, susceptibility to enemy propaganda, and adherence to the law of armed conflict. He then describes the types of operations that typify asymmetric warfare, including attacks on infrastructure, deception, electronic warfare and psychological operations. In his second chapter he examines in detail the threat to international security from transnational terrorist organisations, which he describes as the 'archetypal asymmetric adversaries'. He argues that the contemporary threat from terrorists is particularly serious because of 'their increased fervour, their increased ability to implement attacks, and their increased ability to cause mass casualties' (p. 27). He advocates an inter-