

The Repressive Regime of the Vigilant State

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REVIEW OF: Lisa Blaydes, *State of Repression: Iraq under Saddam Hussein* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018). 376 pp. \$35.00 (hb). ISBN: 978-1-4008-9032-3

In 2005, the Iraqi Memory Foundation, a private organization founded by the Iraqi–British scholar Kanan Makiya, struck a deal with the US Army to ship an enormous archive of official Iraqi documents from Baghdad to the US. The American Association of Archivists, in a 2008 statement strongly protested the removal of these documents, referring to it as a possible ‘act of pillage, which is specifically forbidden by the 1907 Hague Convention’. Senior Iraqi scholars unsuccessfully called for a return of the archive, which has since been housed in the Hoover Institution at Stanford University – where Lisa Blaydes and her research assistants were able to mine it for her impressive second book *State of Repression: Iraq under Saddam Hussein*, published by Princeton University Press in 2018. It is bewildering and disturbing that Blaydes, a professor of political science at Stanford University, nowhere in her book mentions the violent and controversial origins of one of the main sources on which her book, and thus her personal success, are based.

State of Repression provides a vast amount of fascinating details about how the Saddam government managed state-society relations from the late 1980s to 2003, amid growing political and economic crisis. The book frames its rich narrative with a historical overview of Ba’athist Iraq 1973–2003, and a range of theoretical arguments about the functioning of repressive politics in Iraq and more generally. The book’s primary research is entirely historical, drawing from official Iraqi documents from before 2003 and a set of videotaped eyewitness recordings made between 2003 and 2008. The secondary literature accessed and analysed, on both Iraqi politics and state-society relations, is staggering.

The book is divided into two parts, of which the first (‘Theoretical and Empirical Foundations’) outlines the book’s conceptual frame and provides a historical overview of the Saddam period. Blaydes’s central argument is that the way a state carries out repression changes communal identities, which are thus not primordial but in fact a result of government action. The less able a state is to collect information about a population, the more likely it is to engage in collective repression of groups, rather than aptly singling out individual political opponents for punishment. Yet, collective repression fosters communal identity, which may work against state building and national cohesion. As war and sanctions weakened Iraq’s state apparatus, this, argues Blaydes, is precisely what happened in the country from the 1980s onwards. The book’s second part (‘Political Behaviour in Iraq 1979–2003’) contains the five core chapters

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with highly diverse topics: Kurdish politics, Ba'ath Party participation, the collection of rumours by domestic intelligence agencies, religion/identity and the military/militias.

Broadly, two lines of investigation run through all of these otherwise highly distinct chapters: firstly, how were different communities in Iraq affected collectively by negative and positive government measures? Secondly, how did different communities express their loyalty or their dissent towards the Saddam government? For example, in Chapter 4 ('War Burden and Political Embargo'), Blaydes uses statistical analysis to show that in Iraq's southern regions, a higher percentage of families were likely to have had three or more family members killed in the Iraq-Iran war than elsewhere. Blaydes uses this and other statistics to argue that 'Shi'i families were much more likely to have had a son, brother or father killed in either the Iran-Iraq War or the Gulf War than their Sunni or Kurdish counterparts' (p. 111). This correlates with Blaydes's finding that the majority of Shi'a areas displayed a higher propensity for anti-government activities.

In Chapter 7 ('Political Orientation and Ba'ath Party Participation'), Blaydes examines high school registers for students' political orientation, which was noted on personal forms, and then aggregates and analyses this data according to geographical region, which she categorizes as majority Shi'a, Sunni or Kurd. In the chapter on rumours (8) Blaydes disaggregates the archival information to show the relative amount of rumours collected by intelligence agencies according to majority-Sunni and majority Shi'a areas. Beyond statistical and regression analysis of archival data, Blaydes reports fascinating anecdotes and individual events from the archives and refers to video-recorded testimonials of repression victims to shore up her conclusions. Secondary literature, newspaper and NGO reports are otherwise used for triangulation.

The most interesting and important revelation of this book is that the Saddam government engaged in nuanced and calibrated government strategies to manage the Iraqi population's grievances and hardships caused by war and sanctions. The archival records show that a key task of domestic intelligence gathering was to analyse popular grievances, to which the government reacted with targeted, special welfare programmes. The book, perhaps despite itself, to me in fact showed that there were good reasons why many considered Saddam as a *caring* despot, who, despite his overwhelming brutality, delivered significant social welfare in a corrupt, but also fair manner.

It is out of the question that *State of Repression* is the product of very impressive scholarly research and analysis. The book does a huge favour to scholars working on Iraq, due to the amount of empirical information it provides on elementary aspects of social and political life under Saddam, together with a basic overview of what the Ba'ath Party archives broadly contain. The book's broad array of topics leaves a lasting and vivid impression of the many challenges that confronted Iraqi society from the late 1970s onward, drawing attention to the social dynamics and developments in statecraft that characterized the Saddam period, which is too often too easily

perceived as a time of stasis and totalitarian repression. The cruelty and heavy militarism of the Saddam decades nevertheless remains very much part of the narrative, most strikingly in the chapter on politics in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Still, the book suffers from several important methodological flaws, which weaken its theoretical contribution. Method and theory are clearly important to Blaydes, who skilfully weaves her statistics into a qualitative narrative. Yet, as mentioned above, where is her *Quellenkritik*, her critical analysis of the source material itself? It is, frankly, absurd to treat the documents left by domestic intelligence apparatuses as if they were representative data about Iraqi society. Why on earth does Blaydes not pause to reflect even on the simple possibility that the different nature of intelligence collection in Iraq's different districts would have an impact on the records left for these different regions? This lack of attention to the knowledge-production behind the archives is, in fact, a lost chance to understand better the intelligence-priorities (and institutional structures) of Iraq's domestic spies and reflect on their meaning for repressive politics.

My second major methodological quibble concerns Blaydes's deployment of the categories Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish. She treats these as the most important social identities of the Saddam years, without offering a good explanation for this choice. This is strange, because a central part of her argument is that these identities are fluid and affected by state policies. Throughout my reading, I felt that *State of Repression* retroactively elevates the three categories to a level of criticality that they might not have had in the 1980s or 90s. How can we be sure that other categories, for example regional, professional or generational affiliations, were not more salient to Iraqi intelligence officers or dissidents or high schoolers at the time? What convinces Blaydes to read the Saddam years through the sectarian lens that has primarily characterized Iraqi politics since 2003 – especially given the fact that the archival documents do not especially focus on these identities? While one of her stated aims is to disprove the idea that Iraqis are somehow naturally sectarian, her elevation of sectarian categories appears to somewhat counter that important goal.

State of Repression's diverse chapters deal with conceptual and empirical matters that could each merit an entire book. While this may leave readers with a slight feeling of incompleteness, the book's breadth is one of its greatest strengths, as Iraq's modern history and politics of repression emerge as rich sites for scholarly research and debate. Here, Blaydes's theory-centred analysis puts to rest misplaced beliefs about Middle Eastern exceptionalism, as Iraq is shown to be a modern state, government and society as complex and conflicted as many others around the world. The book sets a milestone for scholarship on Iraq, will be of interest to a very wide readership, and provide for excellent syllabus material guaranteed to raise some salient classroom discussions.

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