



*State of Repression: Iraq under Saddam Hussein* by Lisa Blaydes.

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Totalitarian states dedicate significant resources to policing their populations and protecting and preserving their regimes. This often requires a large security service focused on domestic threats, targeting and dismantling would-be subversive elements, real or perceived. George Orwell's *Big Brother* and his regime are emblematic of this type of state. Constant observation and suspicion create a suffocating atmosphere that forestalls threats to the regime. However, nonfictional states lack the perfect knowledge needed to take effective action. Real regimes rely on rewards, not just punishments, to gain the loyalty they need. Determining who best responds to rewards or punishments requires intelligence about the various sub-groups within the state. Without such intelligence, totalitarian leaders risk failure.

In *State of Repression*, political scientist Lisa Blaydes (Stanford Univ.) chronicles the limitations and contradictions of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. The first of the book's two sections outlines her theoretical argument concerning the Saddam regime's use of rewards and punishments to stay in power. The second explores how actions of the state either pleased or alienated key factions within Iraq. Blaydes contends that Ba'athist leaders under Saddam worked to gain as much intelligence as possible in order to most effectively employ rewards or punishments and keep control of the Iraqi people. This was easier when the regime had plentiful resources with which to buy the loyalty or at least acquiescence of Iraqis during the 1970s. But the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and Iraq's defeat in Operation Desert Storm left it with fewer assets to buy good will. Consequently, Saddam and his regime turned to harsher methods; but even then a lack of reliable intelligence about Kurds or Shia Iraqis thwarted their efforts and led them to resort to broad-based communal punishments. But these only fostered a sense of shared identity, as separatist and revolutionary ideas gained currency, creating more internal security problems for the Iraqi regime.

Blaydes identifies three main constraints that Saddam's government faced: inadequate knowledge about specific sectors of the Iraqi population; an inability to cope with economic shocks caused by foreign policy crises; and a failure to anticipate the reaction of the international community to Iraqi foreign policy decisions.

The author is especially enlightening in her discerning analysis of the complexities of Sunni-Shia relations within Iraq and with respect to Iranian intentions.

The regime increasingly embraced Shia symbols and iconography with the goal of cultivating the nationalist feelings of Iraqi Shia ... which the regime sought to enhance ... by celebrating the largely Shia-led 1920 anti-British tribal uprisings, paying for gold leaf to decorate Shia shrines, paying respect to Shia holidays, and maintaining a strictly non-sectarian discourse about religion.

Many Iraqi Shia—co-religionists with Iranian Shia—feared cultural and political subjugation at the hands of Iran. When the Iran-Iraq conflict was initiated, Iraqi Shia occupied both high and low positions within the Iraqi regime and, in general, were themselves worried about the rise of Khomeini. Large segments of the Iraqi Shia population “feared that an Iranian invasion would result in

a violent disruption of their lives that had also improved materially since the war began.” Even Iraqi Shia who disapproved of the Ba’athist regime generally felt unsupportive of creating a Shia theocracy. (85)

Nonetheless, Blaydes maintains, this state of affairs belies the conventional American conception of irreconcilable social and religious divisions between the Shia and Sunni after the 2003 US invasion.

In the book’s second section, Blaydes clarifies how Kurds and Shias operated within Ba’athist-dominated Iraq, concluding that both segments identified with the broader Iraqi society, because, for most of Saddam’s rule, his Ba’athist state was deliberately nonsectarian and secular. Indeed, it actively sought ways to further integrate Kurds and Shias into Iraqi society, whether through carrots or sticks. For instance, the government mandated the use of Arabic in Shia religious instruction and offered free housing to Kurds in northern Iraq.

As an example of the erosion of this national identity, Blaydes discusses the situation of the Kurds during the Iran-Iraq war. Saddam’s regime lacked the precise intelligence needed to target individuals or small groups collaborating with the Iranians and so resorted to large-scale punishments instead. This had the unintended consequence of fostering a sense of shared fate within members of the Kurdish community, who felt the state was punishing them simply for being Kurds. Hence, not surprisingly, a more unified and resistant sense of Kurdish nationality began to supplant any feelings of Iraqi national identity.

The author’s preoccupation with political aspects of her subject may disappoint readers seeking a more purely narrative approach to understanding the Ba’ath party under Saddam.<sup>1</sup> That said, Blaydes’s nuanced thesis that the sectarian divides that marked Iraq after the US-led invasion were not typical of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime prior to 2003 sheds new light on the supposed long-term divisions in Iraqi society. Also, her salutary theoretical discussion of the constraints on authoritarian states and internal intelligence gathering is highly instructive and provides a useful framework for understanding such regimes and the people they seek to control.

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1. For which, see, e.g., Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2011).