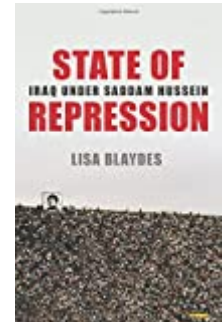




Lisa Blaydes. *State of Repression: Iraq under Saddam Hussein.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. xix + 354 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-18027-4.



Reviewed by Amir Taha (University of Amsterdam)

Published on H-Genocide (November, 2020)

Commissioned by Ugur Ümit Üngör (NIOD: Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies)

Lisa Blaydes's *State of Repression* is the latest addition in the examinations of the recently opened Iraqi Baath Party archives. The book innovates through its specific focus on how and why punitive repression and financial/social rewards consolidated or prevented politically mobilizable collective ethno-sectarian identities. Through a "state-centric" argument, the book aspires to both a top-down (state) and a bottom-up (citizens) perspective in its analysis. The main argument of the book is that due to the lack of intelligibility the "Sunni Arab" government elite had of Kurds and Shia, the state was imprecise when these latter groups were punished. According to Blaydes, this lack of intelligibility exists because of a cultural distance between the Sunni Arab ruling class and Kurdish and Shia communities. Especially during periods of fiscal constraint, like the 1980s Iran-Iraq War and the 1990s sanctions, precise implementation of rewards and punishments failed. Consequently, these collective punishing shaped a new, socially cohesive Kurdish nationalist identity and Shia communalist identity that was not salient in

pre-1980 Iraq. While the text covers the whole Baath era (1968-2003), five out of the eight chapters on the case study itself focus mostly on the 1990s. Nearly all of the examined archival sources are from the 1990s as well. The author covers the other three chapters with secondary literature and recorded oral history interviews from the Iraqi Memory Foundation.

The chapters on the 1990s are the strongest. For example, Blaydes successfully demonstrates how the ration card during the sanctions formed an opportunity to both collect politically relevant information on individuals and increase Iraqi citizens' dependence on the government in exchange for basic provisions. In another chapter, she argues convincingly how Sadiq al-Sadr (Muqtada's father) could expand his political network until he threatened the government, which assassinated Sadr in 1999. The chapter more importantly fills the four-year void between the death of Sadiq al-Sadr and the rise of Muqtada al-Sadr. This ties into Blaydes's cogent examination of the Fedayeen Saddam paramilitary group and the Jerusalem

brigade, an important missing piece that illuminates the organizational capabilities of the armed resistance against the United States after 2003. The excellent chapter about how rumors were a political field wherein Iraqis, debated, critiqued, and coordinated resistance to the state aptly determines the relevance and weight of rumors in Iraqi society. Rumors about protests, assassinations, and rebellions proliferated when the state fell into crisis. This confirms that ordinary citizens can successfully recognize political opportunities with limited access to information.

The book's weaker parts are those that fall short in clearly explaining the "beliefs and behaviors" of Iraqi citizens during the 1970s and 1980s. The reasons for this are partly methodological. The further back one looks in time, the more imprecise the archival material gets, which affects the precision in the chapters on the 1980s and 1970s. Second, Blaydes neither scrutinizes the pro-state bias in the archives, nor the unethical and selective archiving of these documents by the US government. Third, she extracts information that deals with citizens' perspectives from biased government sources and secondary literature or one collection of oral history interviews.

According to Blaydes, the 1970s elicited little dissent or sectarian or ethnic resistance, and thereby little collective punishment from the state. Iraqis, while aware of living under a dictatorship, seem to remember the 1970s as one of the better decades compared to later decades. The book reduces the explanation of the "better" 1970s to effective intelligence collection by the state and extensive welfare programs. This argument remains somewhat indifferent to the role and impact of political legitimacy related to the plurality *within* the Baath Party and the influence of the Communist Party in the government. The slow extermination of internal political rivals and movements within the government after 1975 and the accompanying increased resistance to it are not linked by the author. Instead, Kurdish and Shiite resistance in the

1970s is quickly dismissed as marginal by the author (pp. 74, 134-147). This lack of recognition and explanation as to why people resisted the state returns when Blaydes suggests that the Iraqi Shia on the one hand loyally and patriotically fought against Iran in the war, but concurrently in 1991 "spontaneously" mobilized against the state. The book glosses over this apparent paradox without explaining this radical shift in beliefs and behavior from loyalty to rebellion (pp. 85-87).

The book's inconsistency about the salience of sectarian and ethnic identities distorts the clarity of its main argument. According to the author, based on the language in the archives, the Baath Party functioned from a nonsectarian understanding of its own population. Yet, references as to how the "Sunni" state targeted "Shia" or "Kurds" for repression and cooptation based on cultural differences prevail (pp. 72, 83, 101). It remains unclear as to whether the author assumes the presence of essentialized sectarian identities or not. For example, regarding the Baath Party's support base, she claims that it consisted of "Sunni Arabs, Chaldean Christians, and educated secular, Iraqi Shia," which seems to suggest the presence of "non-secular Shia" without mentioning similar classifications for Sunnis (p. 168). This gives the impression of essentialist understandings of non-secular Shia, with secular exceptions, and inherently secular Sunnis. While Blaydes is obviously aware of inter-ethnic dynamics, she does sometimes rely on essentialist ethnic categories to explain political relations based on the idea of cultural distance between Sunni Arabs and non-Sunni Arabs and the former's inability to obtain precise intelligence on the latter.

For a book about political repression, it lacks explicit discussions of social, cultural, and (inter)institutional power relations and differences in Iraq. While it is fair to assume the state's dominance, the influence of local networks, elites, and nonstate institutions on the empowerment of citizens to subvert and limit the state should not be

underestimated. All in all, *State of Repression* is a very strong contribution to the literature on Saddam's Iraq, especially during the 1990s, but its main argument is hampered by excessive prioritization on the state's perspective, its imprecise usage of ethno-sectarian categories, and its wide periodization.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-genocide>

Citation: Amir Taha. Review of Blaydes, Lisa. *State of Repression: Iraq under Saddam Hussein*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. November, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55977>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.