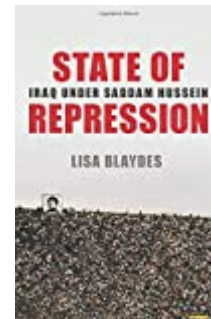


**Lisa Blaydes.** *State of Repression: Iraq under Saddam Hussein*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. xix + 354 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-18027-4.



**Reviewed by** Kathleen Hasson (Air University, Air War College)

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Iraq's border has not always signified or provided a shared sense of identity amongst its diverse population. Nor has it resulted in support for the nation's governing body or explained how Iraq's citizens will react to a new regime. While some scholars attribute tension and conflict in this region to sectarian differences, it is more clearly explained by what lies further beneath the surface. So, if it is not the differences, similarities, or set of beliefs within a culture that repels or attracts society's sectors, then what is the reason?

Lisa Blaydes argues that Saddam Hussein's harsh authoritarian regime's repressive nature, exacerbated during decreased economic prosperity, formed political identities amongst Iraq's citizens where schisms previously existed. These identities provide a causal linkage to Iraqis' decisions to support or oppose Saddam and the Ba'th Party. In *State of Repression*, Saddam's repression and implementation of collective punishment are depicted as the cause of specific sectors bonding together in a shared sense of political identity and ultimately revolting against the regime. Why, then,

does a government inflict suboptimal punishment on those it rules when it has the opposite effect desired? If there is opposition or rumors of a coup, for example, a state is likely to punish in a collective manner if the offending sector is indecipherable because the regime is unable to collect intelligence on that group. If the regime cannot collect accurate information and thus monitor a specific individual, the alternative is to punish the surrounding masses. When this occurs, it often results in unique individuals transitioning into a cohesive social unit. These political groups unite because an unfair burden was placed on them, because collective goods were not equally dispersed, or, in the case of brutal repressive tactics, to survive.

Blaydes offers a different perspective on repression, standing out from other scholarly studies on the subject because her analysis focuses on the repressive regime's targets and how this influences the affected individuals and sectors. This perspective is important to understand because, over the course of history, more people have likely died at the hands of their own repressive government

than in interstate conflicts or civil wars (p. xvi). *State of Repression* articulates how Saddam's harsh punishment of Iraqi citizens left hundreds of thousands dead and many others suffering from extreme human rights violations. Blaydes introduces the reader to her theory by providing an impressively in-depth analysis using quantitative and qualitative evidence. It is often difficult to give an account of life under a dictatorship due to the opaque nature of autocracy. However, Blaydes was able to take advantage of the millions of documents that were uncovered after the 1991 uprising and the overthrow of Saddam's Ba'thist regime in 2003. She was the first researcher to access the salvaged Iraqi Secret Police Files after they were moved to the University of Colorado Boulder (p. 2). She combines this resource with the tapes and associated transcripts of conversations between Saddam and his advisors as well as hard copy documents and video captured during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Finally, Blaydes introduces firsthand testimony of Iraqis, acquired from the Iraq Memory Foundation, to provide an especially revealing depiction of life in Iraq during this time, exposing both the causes and consequences of Saddam's repression.

As Blaydes depicts life as an Iraqi, she begins by describing the interwoven dynamic of compliance and resistance under autocracy. She explains that the regime enjoyed a more compliant population during the decade leading up to the Iran-Iraq War because oil revenues permitted unprecedented government spending that provided private and public provisions to the citizens. This allowed Saddam to quickly gain Iraqis' investment in the regime and increased dependency on the government, resulting in state- and nation-building. When a regime benefits from strong economic growth and sustainment unencumbered by war, it can also afford to monitor its people more effectively. However, when a kakistocracy falls on hard times, regardless of its own doing, there are competing interests for limited resources and increased psychological pressures that lead to

sweeping, aggressive oppression and violent reactions to political resistance or signs of noncompliance amongst the population. When the cost of monitoring becomes too great or obstacles too high to effectively penetrate an ethnosectarian group, the regime will move more toward collective punishment. Obstacles that decrease a group's "legibility" include the lack of shared language as well as geographic separation (p. 49). This is demonstrated with the collective punishment of the Shi'a because of their dense social networks and use of the Persian language. Similarly, the regime's geographical challenges with the Kurdish population inhabiting Iraq's northern, mountainous area often resulted in collective punishment. Blaydes provides multiple examples of collective punishment throughout *State of Repression*, which include the horrible atrocities to and displacement of the Iraqi Kurds during the Anfal Campaign.

While one can appreciate and conceptualize Blaydes's theory and associated empirical foundation in her opening chapters, her rich and thorough research allows the reader to also absorb the intricacies of life in Iraq as they move into the second portion of her book. She provides an in-depth understanding of what it was like to live under the repressive regime of Saddam as she details Iraq's political behavior between 1979 and 2003. She dedicates a chapter to precisely how the regime's intense and collective punishment of the Kurds led to their desire for autonomy. Blaydes then dives deeper to further articulate the political orientation of and separate but unequal ethnosectarian participation in the Ba'th Party. She goes on to discuss the impact of rumors used as a method of resistance and the influence of religion on identity, and follows this with an explanation of different Iraqi military structures and coup attempts.

*State of Repression* provides valuable insight into the relationship between Saddam and the Ba'th Party's repression and its effect on the people of Iraq. Blaydes's research is thorough and eye-opening, as she continually provides counterargu-

ments and other scholarly perspectives that increase her credibility as a subject matter expert. Other political scientists, as well as those wishing to be introduced to life as an Iraqi under the repressive rule of Saddam, should read this book. In the case of Iraq, the Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurdish peoples were separate entities long before Saddam came to power; however, his actions, exacerbated by economic shortfalls and geographic separation, increased their social cohesion and the development of new political identities. While Blaydes's argument has some broad, overarching application, it directly focuses on Iraq due to its diverse population and the complex geographic disbursement of the people coupled with the enormous fluctuation of wealth within Iraq. Blaydes's research and narrative explain why governments allocate punishment in the manner they do and the consequence that has for a diverse population's political identity. The importance of this dynamic relationship should not be understated, especially with its potential application beyond Iraq's borders.

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