

NOTES AND COMMENTS

A RESPONSE TO JOSEPH SASSOON'S REVIEW OF *THE BA'ATHIFICATION OF IRAQ: SADDAM HUSSEIN'S TOTALITARIANISM* (AUSTIN, TEX.: UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS, 2015)

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In his review of my book, *The Ba'athification of Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Totalitarianism*, in the February 2017 edition of *IJMES*, Joseph Sassoon mischaracterizes my arguments, makes inaccurate and ancillary claims to try to discredit my theses, and ignores information when it does not square with the findings from his own book about the Ba'athist archives.

The thesis of my book is that Saddam Husayn used a totalitarian strategy called “Ba'athification” (*tab'īth*; the Ba'th's word, not mine) to inculcate loyalty to his regime in the Iraqi populace. Ba'athification combined methods of control common to other states that employed similar strategies with the manipulation of Iraqi cultural elements, such as honor codes, religious and ethnic sensibilities, and familial obligations. This Iraqi version of totalitarianism arose out of the country's violent and coup-prone history, the Ba'th Party's ideology and historical experience (especially its failed coup in 1963), and Husayn's ruthless character. Ba'athification manifested itself in a set of policies and tactics designed to coerce and elicit support for Husayn's regime and eliminate alternatives to it. These policies fell into four general categories: *ideological indoctrination*—the attempt to make Iraqis into true believers in the regime's ruling philosophy, which encompassed absolute loyalty to Husayn's person, the Ba'th Party, and the Iraqi Nation; *organization*—the attempt to order society in a way that reinforced Husayni Ba'athist ideology; *terror*—the use of violence to eliminate and deter people and groups that Husayn believed represented a challenge to his authority; and *enticements*—rewards and benefits for loyalty. As my book shows, Husayn and the Ba'th never succeeded in regulating every detail of each Iraqi's life. In fact, many Iraqis fled the country or rebelled. A critical mass, however, succumbed to the combined weight of these four types of control that Husayn and the Ba'th placed on their thoughts and behaviors. Even so, many found that if they played by the regime's rules, they could prosper or gain limited freedom of action.

Sassoon explains none of this in his review. Instead, he gets hung up on the word “totalitarianism” without mentioning the Iraq-specific elements of my thesis. As a result, he gives the impression that my book is a rehash of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Kanan Makiya's *Republic of Fear*, which applies an Arendtian framework to analyze Ba'athist Iraq. I explicitly reject this framework in my book. My definition of “totalitarianism” conforms to that most recently employed by contemporary scholars of Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, Maoist China, and some Cold War-era Eastern European countries (e.g., East Germany), who deploy the concept to explain

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the common *strategy of rule* that the leaders of these countries used. None of them ever achieved total control, but their aspiration to ruthlessly apply a utopian, exclusivist, populist ideology led them to employ similar methods of control. Those methods sought not only submission, as in authoritarianism, but also to transform Iraqis into true believing Ba'athists.

Instead of this definition of totalitarianism, Sassoon assesses my claims against one that has no basis in scholarship. Specifically, he criticizes my book for not focusing on the economy, because 1 million Iraqis emigrated from Iraq from the end of the Iran–Iraq War until 2003, and because, he argues, “religion under Stalin did not function in the same manner as it did in Iraq.” Except for Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski’s *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), no totalitarian theorist that I am aware of lists the economy as a critical element of totalitarianism. That is because totalitarian dictators have pursued similar ruling strategies with different types of economies. The Soviet Union had a centrally directed economy, for example, while Hitler had no discernible economic philosophy, defining “socialism” as vaguely as Husayn did. To say that my book only contains one sentence about the economy, moreover, requires one to accept an excessively narrow definition of the term. On the contrary, I explain why oil revenues were critical to Husayn’s rise to power and ability to pursue a totalitarian strategy, and why that ability dipped from the late 1980s until the mid-1990s because of the country’s poor economic conditions after years of war and UN sanctions. I discuss how salaries, promotions, jobs, perks, and a person’s individual and familial well-being linked to that person’s loyalty. I discuss the commissars present in all state run and private companies. I address corruption. I show how the Ba’th’s official labor unions—the Professional and Mass Organizations—helped the regime control entire professional classes, in addition to civil society. In other words, I address economic factors related to my thesis. I do not include an economic section for its own sake.

The fact that Iraqis emigrated en masse, or that religion under Husayn differed from that under Stalin’s regime, moreover, does not detract from my thesis. On the contrary, it shows how many Iraqis could not bear to live under Husayni Ba’thism and took advantage of the country’s porous borders, even though fleeing could endanger family members who remained behind. These family members often rushed to denounce their relatives who left, or even pretended they did not exist, to save themselves. Women without a man to vouch for them frequently could not obtain the necessary papers to leave the country. The fact, moreover, that Husayn’s Iraq did not operate exactly like Stalin’s Russia does not mean that both regimes, in their own ways, did not control and manipulate religion for similar ends.

Sassoon cherry-picks quotations to find “general statements” and “contradictions” in my arguments where none exist. He asks how “the leader of a country” could be “against capability and efficiency” and survive for thirty-five years. This misses the point. The Ba’thist bureaucracy was corrupt and often inefficient, largely because the regime prized political loyalty over personal initiative. Many of the world’s government bureaucracies are politicized, inefficient, and corrupt, yet still function. Another noncontradiction lies in my contention that the Ba’thist State’s coercive power over society started to dip at the end of the 1980s before recovering a decade later (largely due to economic conditions!). I present considerable evidence for this (see pp. 83–86), including statistics showing that

the Ba‘th Party’s total membership dropped between 1986 and 1997 before expanding considerably by 2003. Sassoon argues in his book that “the documents do not indicate a fundamental change in the party’s role or that it was weakened” (*Saddam Hussein’s Ba‘th Party* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 4). While we agree on the former point—the Ba‘th Party never lost its importance as Husayn’s instrument of metacontrol and did not decline *relative* to other parts of the state—we disagree on the latter. This is probably because Sassoon did not find the 1997 statistics, leading him to mistakenly conclude that the party cadre only increased from 1986 onward.

Sassoon makes other erroneous claims. For example, he says that “Faust gives the reader the impression that the regime’s basic characteristics fundamentally changed only after 1979.” To the contrary, I state that “the party and state bureaucracies functioned according to the same general system in both eras [pre- and post-1979], and the Ba‘th’s underlying ruling strategy—Ba‘thification—did not change” (p. 18). Sassoon agrees that the process of Ba‘thification accelerated under Husayn but uses the army as an example. In fact, the Ba‘thification of the army was largely complete by 1979. Finally, Sassoon’s statement that “Faust time and again wonders why the regime lasted so long and why people supported the system” seems misplaced about a book that spends 192 pages plus a preface and two appendices answering that exact question based on tens of thousands of internal Ba‘thist documents. I encourage *IJMES* readers to consult my book instead of Sassoon to understand how Husayn’s Ba‘th Party ruled Iraq and what life was like for its ordinary citizens.