
The Ba’th party ruled Iraq for 35 years, from 1968 to the American invasion of 2003, of which 24 years were under the presidency of Saddam Hussein. Saddam emerged from the ranks of the Ba’th Party and would probably have remained anonymous without the party’s aid. This long period of Ba’th Party rule has left a protracted legacy on post-2003 Iraq, from which the country has desperately tried to emerge during a process called Deba‘thification. To many in Iraq, it seems that this long period under a totalitarian dictatorship has cast an overwhelming and paralyzing shadow on the entire modern history of the state, which has forced the architects of a “New Iraq” to return to “ground zero” in order to build something from the ruins.

It is therefore surprising that so little scholarly attention has been devoted to the Ba’th Party of Iraq. There has not been a single scholarly book focusing on the party published in English or Arabic, with the exception of the memoirs of Iraqi dissidents. The excuse prior to 2003 was not having official documents and, indeed, most of the information on the party had been classified. After 2003, this excuse is no longer valid: several party archives were confiscated and transported to the U.S., where they are currently accessible to scholars. Millions of files are awaiting scholarly eyes to paint a new picture of the daily operations of the Ba’th dictatorship. However, until recently, this unexplored treasure had still been waiting for discovery.

Therefore, Joseph Sassoon’s book is a significant contribution to the sparse academic literature on this important subject. Sassoon, who authored a book on Iraqi economy under the monarchy and another on the Iraqi refugees, takes the first plunge into the bureaucratic world of the Ba’th party and other organs of the Iraqi regime. He is the first scholar to make extensive use of all the available archives of the Ba’th and the regime: the records of the Ba’th party, the Iraqi leadership, and some other organizations found in the Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC) in Washington D.C., as well as the archives from a party branch in the Kurdish North from the North Iraq Dataset, the Ba’th Regional Command Collection, at the Hoover Institute, at Stanford University, and audio-tapes of the Iraqi leadership, which are held at the National Defense University in Washington D.C. Sassoon relies heavily on these sources and at times supplements them with interviews with Iraqi exiles and the available secondary sources.

---

Sometimes he compares the Ba’th to similar regimes in the Middle east (Syria) and Eastern Europe, although these comparisons are not consistent or systematic.

Sassoon’s book offers a rare glance on the working of the Ba’th party apparatus. Secrecy was an important aspect of the Ba’th party “cult” and this book unravels it. Sassoon exposes the recruitment of party members and the elaborate forms they had to fill, the period of candidacy for “full membership” in the party, the swearing of the oath when a candidate was made “member”, promotions, and other stages in the life of a party member, which had been shrouded in secrecy. However, reading Sassoon’s book one feels that whatever was shrouded in secrecy was no more than a series of dull ceremonies. Another pillar of party work was “organization” (tandhim). The Iraqi branch of the Ba’th was proud of being more organized than its Syrian counterpart. Sassoon unravels the working of the Ba’th organization, including the relationship between the various levels in the pyramid, and this is a unique contribution that could only be explained after reading the archival sources. However, I disagree with Sassoon’s explanation for the increase in the number of party units in the 1990s: Sassoon claims that this was a response to the increase in membership and I argue that this was done to achieve better control of the population. Also interesting is the focus on a single party section (pp. 90–95) and a single (midranking) member (pp. 57–61), although these examples are somehow detached from a wider context.

One of the inevitable challenges in writing such a book is doing justice to the relationship between Saddam Hussein and the Ba’th party. This is because both sides deserve a book, but are inseparable: Saddam was also the chairman of the Regional Command of the party and rose from the party ranks. He conducted and directed party activity. The party was essential for his cult of personality. However, Saddam also functioned in a totally different orbit composed of his relatives and tribesmen, and, from the mid-1980s (or perhaps even earlier), he eclipsed the party, which was downgraded to being a mere tool for the preservation of Saddam’s regime. Relying on protocols of meetings of the Iraqi leadership and official documents, as Sassoon does, would not illustrate this aspect of Saddam’s rule which was unofficial and more discreet. In addition, in the 1970s Saddam had serious rivals within the party ranks. They were done away with in purges instigated by Saddam as part of his rise to power. Yet, while from 1979 forward the party generally succumbed to Saddam’s will, there were still occasional dissident voices, even in the party leadership. This dynamic is also missing in the book and the absence of relevant archival sources could have been compensated for by using existing and available literature.

Some of the book’s weaknesses are in the theoretical, methodological, and historical frameworks. In the introduction, Sassoon argues that

... Although terms such as authoritarian, tyrannical, and dictatorship are applicable to Iraq, totalitarian is not. (p. 5)