Blaydes culls through much of the same archival material as previous scholars but uses the data in a novel way. Much (although by no means all) of the previous scholarship aimed to reconstruct elite decision-making and bureaucratic processes, particularly by focusing on orders from Saddam himself. Blaydes, however, follows Khoury in using the data mostly to delve into the everyday experience of Iraqis under the Ba‘th Party. Blaydes is unique, however, in using this data for explicit theory development purposes.

*State of Repression* offers a kind of master class on the uses of subnational and within-case comparison and multimethod research. The book is at its finest when it explores geographic variations in popular experiences of repression. For example, in chapter 4 Blaydes shows statistically how the largely Shi‘i provinces of the south and lower Euphrates suffered larger numbers of casualties per capita during the Iran–Iraq War. The regime tried to funnel political and especially economic benefits to war widows and veterans to maintain public support for the war. Still, this experience of suffering in the 1980s cast a long shadow. The very districts that had suffered the most significant losses of young men during the 1980s were the first to see mass defections during the uprising in March 1991. These districts, in turn, suffered the most severe government repression and flagrant violence. Blaydes thus contributes to a general theory of the impact of regime violence on political stability.

Blaydes uses a similar subnational variation approach to explore the cohesion of Iraq’s Sunni community. Saddam’s regime is conventionally portrayed as an institution of Sunni supremacy (despite repeated admonitions from scholars of Iraq against following such a reductionist view). Yet, as previous scholarship has shown, Saddam and the Ba‘thist inner circle maintained a general taboo against discussion of Sunni–Shi‘i rifts, deeming themselves to be the standard-bearers of a general and ecumenical nationalism. By using regime data to measure political behavior, Blaydes takes up the question of whether Iraqi Sunnis saw themselves as a collectivity and unique interest group within the state. She argues that Sunni solidarity with the regime fluctuated and varied temporally and geographically. Some Sunni areas in the north and west were relatively neglected by the Ba‘th during the harsh sanctions period, as discussed in chapter 3. Instead of creating a cohesive sense of Sunni identity, the regime funneled economic benefits from smuggling and black marketeering to areas around Tikrit, the hometown of Saddam and his closest kin. Buttressing this point further, in chapter 7, Blaydes diligently collects school registries from 1987, 1991–92, 1995, and 2001 to measure the number of students who self-identified as political “independents.” Overtly rejecting the Ba‘th party was politically risky, and the regime made sure that jobs and other coveted appointments were reserved for party members or supporters.

Many Iraqis would go along with the regime’s rituals of obedience to assure social progress and protection for themselves and their families, even if they secretly harbored doubts about the regime.

Yet, as Blaydes points out, there were always pockets of refusal. Unsurprisingly, most were concentrated in the Shi‘i south and Kurdish north. More interesting, however, is that some predominantly Sunni areas, such as Mosul, also saw relatively high levels of political independents in the 1990s. The farther a Sunni lived from Tikrit, the more likely he or she was to declare political independence. Conversely, these same areas were also less likely to send their sons to serve in Saddam’s militias in 2001 and 2002. Ultimately, Blaydes confirms a point that the estimable Hanna Batatu made more than four decades ago: Tikritis tended to rule Iraq through the Ba‘th party, rather than the Ba‘th party ruling through Tikritis. More generally, Blaydes illustrates the tensions between the autocrat’s instinct to rely exclusively on closed networks of supports and kin and the imperative of building broader social coalitions to maintain power.

That said, there are points, like the discussion of rebellion and collaboration in Kurdistan, where theoretical ambitions outrun the empirical evidence. Such weaknesses should not detract from the profound value of this multi-faceted book, however. It is unquestionably important for researchers of Iraq and the wider Middle East. It needs also to be on the reading list of those interested in authoritarianism and political identity.


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Despite its relative neglect in the field of political science, family law presents a number of fruitful opportunities for exploring the ways in which history, institutional origin and design, path dependence, ideology, regime type, bureaucracy, social activism, language, and political performance matter for the study of law, legal institutions, and legal change. This comparative study of family law reform in Morocco and Jordan undertakes to clarify the impact of these factors, with a particular focus on institutional history; it is based on fieldwork in both countries, textual and archival sources, and interviews. Through the application of comparative case methods, textual and legal analysis, and state-in-society approaches at the domestic and international level, Dörthe Engelcke provides a rich methodological and analytic model for political and social scientists working at the intersection of law, politics, and religion.
Engelcke begins with the argument that an analysis of contemporary legal change requires an understanding of structural foundations laid during the French (in Morocco) and British (in Jordan) colonial periods, as well as institutional arrangements and political compacts made at the moment of independence and thereafter. Family law, in this historical analysis, was part of a larger project of state power, underwritten less by logics of tradition and religion than by questions of the type and degree of autonomy apportioned to judicial fields. A discussion of both national legal systems, in terms of legal reform and cultural capital, is followed by their contextualization within an increasingly loaded international legal climate. Here, Engelcke considers the impact of the Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on domestic laws in Jordan and Morocco, as well as divergent political responses to CEDAW. The book then goes into rich detail on the fate of law reform efforts in each case, paying attention not simply to codes but also to the work of legal and social actors, to state efforts at implementation and enforcement, to mobilization by NGOs, and back to engagements with the international.

Engelcke presents a remarkably rich, detailed, and context-laden account of continuity and change in both legal systems, made more admirable by its clarity of structure and narrative. In addition to its empirical matter, which is impressive, its particular analytic contribution is modeling an approach to the study of law that takes seriously its complexity. In this treatment of law, the text is neither the start nor the end of the analysis, but one component of a dynamic system with a range of actors, institutions, logics, languages, and effects, both domestic and international. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “field,” Engelcke posits that interactions between the field of (executive) power and the juridical field explain the timing and nature of legal change. Thus, legal reform should be understood not simply as progress in a normative direction, but as change based on reconfigurations within and between fields. Engagement with CEDAW might also be read in terms of reconfigurations of cultural and political capital that did not routinely lead to the increased legal provision of gender equality.

In addition, Engelcke points out that the inclusion of a greater diversity of voices in the debate on law reform, beyond those of Islamic religious elites, similarly did not translate into policy impact in either case. In both cases, family law reforms achieved a greater degree of state control and intervention in social and family life, and both the process and texts of recent reform processes consolidated—and extended—the normative reach of Islamic terms and hierarchies, reaffirming the identification of family not merely as state law but also as Islamic law. Drawing on Talal Asad (Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, 2003), Engelcke observes that the same process might be seen with regard to other religious communities, resulting in the equation of family law with religious law. For Engelcke, this has consequences not only for the content of the law and its institutional instantiations but also for cultural capital. “Multi-religious societies with family law systems that are institutionalized along communal lines are not more socially conservative by default…these systems have become bastions of conservatism because they link communal privileges to a specific type of family law system” (p. 227).

Yet the legislative and textual picture is complicated by what happens when laws hit the ground, revealing the limitations of authoritarian states and normative hierarchies in light of competition between agencies of the state, multiple interpretations of the law text, and contestations by different women’s groups and social movements. “The state is not a unified actor that simply contests norms within society that are at odds with the state’s statutory law. Instead, different state agencies emphasize different aspects of the law” (p. 223). The same is true for different nonstate actors and groups.

The overall narrative raises important questions about the expansionism of the state into the field of Islamic law and the limits of that expansion, but here, a reader might have wished to see more of Engelcke’s rich material to further illuminate the ways in which the ambiguity of law and its complex social and political dynamics might facilitate or forestall efforts to achieve better outcomes for women. Perhaps a closer engagement with growing debates on the ability of legal change coded as “liberal” or “progressive” might have provided more insight into the practical and normative ambiguities of legal reform and of conservatism. This in turn might have allowed for more exploration of the critical questions that Engelcke raises in her concluding chapter about the complex links between the normative content of law, political and economic concerns at the national level, authoritarian negotiation, desires for stability, and interconnections with the international.

Engelcke concludes by making the case for further comparison beyond the MENA region, arguing against the prevailing exceptionalization of Islam and the Middle East in the study of family law. This study, by providing a clear methodological model that also delivers theoretically, makes clear the payoff for such work and raises a range of important questions to investigate.


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How does China’s private sector manage to thrive under incomplete property rights? This puzzle is of great importance to deciphering China’s growth formula, in which the