

2017

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Roundtable Review
Volume XIX, No. 6 (2017)
9 October 2017

Roundtable Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse
Roundtable and Web Production Editor: George Fujii

Introduction by Thomas Maddux

Joseph Sassoon. *Anatomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9781107043190 (hardback, \$94.99); 9781107618312 (paperback, \$29.99).

URL: <http://www.tiny.cc/Roundtable-XIX-6>

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University Northridge, Emeritus

At the end of the twentieth century, authoritarian regimes predominated across the Middle East and North Africa. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak had been in office since 1981 and exhibited little inclination that he might give up his control. The eruption of the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011, however, soon surprised most observers, even American neo-conservatives in the George W. Bush administration that had hoped that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq would lead to the emergence of representative democracy across the region. Mubarak and other authoritarian leaders were pressured into resigning and if they resisted, as Muammar Gaddafi did in Libya after ruling the country for four decades, they encountered armed resistance and were overthrown. Bashar al-Assad, who replaced his long serving father as the leader of Syria in 2002, soon found himself facing an insurgency that spread to a destructive civil war and further expanded into an international conflict with the involvement of Iran, Turkey, Russia and the United States. Authoritarian regimes, however, resisted demands for political, economic and social changes and regained control in Egypt under General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and elsewhere. Tunisia was the exception; President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was ousted after twenty-eight years in power.

With *Anatomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics*, Joseph Sassoon provides an important source for understanding the resiliency of the authoritarian regimes. Faced with a lack of access to archival sources, Sassoon bolstered his research in the social science and historical literature on eight Arab countries by focusing on 130 memoirs written in Arabic, English and French. After a discussion on the nature of the memoirs and the challenges in using them, Sassoon focuses on the nature of the authoritarian regimes that emerged and their relationship with the public. He examines important institutions of the regimes, especially the role of the military and state security services, and uses the memoirs to develop the perspectives of the leaders in these services as well as those in civil society who both supported and opposed the services. Sassoon also examines the lack of focus of the rulers on social-economic development and how corruption became an increasing aspect of the regimes’ ability to maintain themselves. He further discusses the concept of the cult of personality with attention to its various forms in the different regimes. Finally, Sassoon evaluates the difficulties in moving to societies with more freedom and opportunities and uses Tunisia as an example of these challenges.

The reviewers favorably emphasize that Sassoon has provided a unique and valuable approach to understanding authoritarianism in the Arab states and its impact on the populace. As Tareq Ismael asserts, Sassoon’s book “is one of the few books that truly encompasses a comparison of Arab republics from the vantage of those who lived through the region’s historical development, and participated in its politics and political economy.” Lisa Anderson gives Sassoon credit for stimulating “two crucial conversations: what are the unifying features of authoritarian politics and how can we study them?” Furthermore, she notes that Sassoon’s “detailed description of authoritarianism in the Middle East over the last half century ... will improve the knowledge base of novices and experts alike.” In particular, Anderson praises Sassoon’s insights on the role of the security services in collecting information, which in the absence of social and economic research, “criminal investigation becomes the principal rationale and mechanism for collecting information.” Sassoon’s study is “remarkably comprehensive and systematic,” concludes Richard Nielsen, who notes the author’s “surprising finding from this side-by-side comparison ... that the authoritarians in eight countries over fifty years developed more similar institutions and authoritarian styles than perhaps we previously recognized.”

Anderson and Nielsen do raise some questions and suggest some limitations in Sassoon's analysis and reliance on memoir sources. Anderson questions the absence of Arab monarchical regimes in the study which she suggests would have strengthened the analysis by comparing the republics and the monarchies on issues such as "the availability of first-person sources, or the tolerance, however grudging, of popular political parties, which certainly cross the republic/monarchy divide, or perhaps even the region-wide trend to dynastic succession." There were "genuine dynasties next door" to the republics, "providing models of rule and, not incidentally, underwriting some of their budgets." Nielsen discusses some of the limitations in Sassoon's "lens of anatomy" with its emphasis on description over casual inference and assumption that the "purposes for which political parties, repressive apparatuses, and cults of personality were created ... had precisely their intended effects without considering unexpected political by-products of these structures." With respect to "memoirs as data," Nielsen points out that on some of Sassoon's topics the memoirs are used where they "do best [offering] visceral accounts of repression, candid assessments of personalities and, insider accounts of important political events", but on other topics, such as economics, the memoirs do not offer very much and the biases of the memoirs are a challenge.

Participants:

Joseph Sassoon is an Associate Professor at Georgetown University and holds Al-Sabah chair in Politics and Political Economy of the Arab World. Author of 4 books and many articles dealing with Middle East politics and economy. In addition to the book reviewed here, the other publications are: *Economic Policy in Iraq 1932-1950* (London: Frank Cass, 1987); *The Iraqi Refugees: The New Crisis in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); *Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Among the peer reviewed articles are: "Iraq's Political Economy post 2003: From Transition to Corruption," *International Journal for Contemporary Iraqi Studies (IJCIS)* 10:1-2 (Spring 2016); and "The East German Ministry of State Security and Iraq, 1968-1989," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16:1 (Winter 2014): 4-23.

Lisa Anderson is Senior Lecturer and Dean Emerita at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University and past-president of the American University in Cairo. She is working on a book on scholarly research and higher education in the Arab world.

Tareq Y. Ismael is Professor of Political Science at the University of Calgary, Canada; the President of the International Centre for Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies (ICCMES); the Secretary General of the International Association of Middle Eastern Studies (IAMES); and founding editor of the *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*. Author, co-author or editor of more than three-dozen books, his most recent publications include *Iraq in the Twenty-First Century: Regime Change and the Making of a Failed State* (New York: Routledge, 2015) with Jacqueline S. Ismael, *Government and Politics of the Contemporary Middle East: Continuity and Change* Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2015) with Jacqueline S. Ismael and Glenn E. Perry, and *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Richard Nielsen is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His research and teaching focus on Islam, political violence, human rights, economic development, and research design. His first book project, *Deadly Clerics* (forthcoming, Cambridge University

Press, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics series), explores why some Muslim clerics adopt the ideology of militant Jihad while most do not. His other research is published or forthcoming in *The American Journal of Political Science*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Political Analysis*, and *Sociological Methods and Research*.

Review by Lisa Anderson, Columbia University

In the spring 2017, I taught two courses: “Authoritarianism: The Politics of Policy-Making in Non-Democratic Settings” and “Everyday Politics in the Arab World.” In neither did I assign Joseph Sassoon’s *Anatomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics*.

I might have. After all, this is one of the very few books on autocracy in the Middle East that relies on primary sources. Sassoon has collected a surprisingly large assortment of autobiographies and memoirs by members of the inner circles, business associates, and occasionally opponents of these tyrants (over the course of a single life, it has not been hard to have been all three). As he points out, these documents, while hardly unbiased—indeed, like all political memoirs, they are usually quite self-serving—are often remarkably revealing about the dynamics of politics in otherwise opaque regimes. In addition, a few of the autocrats—Mu’ammarr al-Qaddafi of Libya and Saddam Hussayn of Iraq, for example—were novelists in their spare time and several others—Qaddafi again and Gamal Abd al-Nasir of Egypt—styled themselves philosophers as well. All of this literature about tyrants and their associates, both in their own words as well as from individuals who knew them well, should reveal a lot we did not know about both everyday life in the republican palaces of the Arab world and about how policy is made in these regimes.

In fact, and somewhat puzzlingly, it does neither. Sassoon adopts a useful organizational strategy, rehearsing the nature of political parties, militaries, security services (that is, police and intelligence), economics, and leadership styles across the 60 odd years and eight countries (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen) included in his purview. He provides useful timelines for each country, helpfully divides the 49 autocrats who ruled these republics into military and non-military categories, and in general provides a lot of good and interesting data. I found the discussion of the security sectors and economies particularly informative and I return to these issues below.

That said, I missed an analytical ambition that would have made the book more useful in my classes and perforce in our scholarly efforts to understand how these regimes work. In part, this is because the logic of the selection of regimes limits the comparative range of the study. Implicitly there are three axes of comparison here: Arab versus non-Arab, republic versus monarchy, and autocratic versus non-autocratic; in other words, in his case selection, Sassoon suggests that we should be asking whether there is something uniquely, or even characteristically, *Arab* about Arab autocrats, *republican* about autocratic presidents or, perhaps, something uniquely or characteristically *autocratic* about Arab regimes.

In excluding the monarchies of the Arab world, however, he gives up the opportunity to assess the first two questions—whether there is something characteristically Arab or republican about the regimes he describes—and for relatively little gain. Monarchy is an almost uniquely Arab regime type in the contemporary era; most of the kings and queens of the rest of the world reign but do not rule. Yet the monarchies are left aside here, Sassoon tells us, for three reasons, not least because “it would be too ambitious to include them all in one book” (2)—although, of course, there are many books that treat all the countries of the Arab world, and even of the Middle East as a whole, without apology. Sassoon also observes that, because the monarchies rarely tolerate political parties, “it is very problematic to compare their government structure to the republics.” But what of those monarchies that do permit parties—formally in Morocco and Jordan, informally in Kuwait? And finally, he tells us that there are few memoirs coming from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Perhaps so, but

one of the great political autobiographies of the region is King Husayn of Jordan's *Uneasy lies the Head*; Morocco's King Hassan also left memoirs.¹

In fact, even a casual look at the Arab monarchies suggests that there are two types: those with parties, which also (and probably not coincidentally) produce memoirs, and those with neither. Similarly, there are those republics in which the autocrats groomed a son to succeed—Libyan leader Mu'ammer al-Qaddafi, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Syrian President Hafez al-Asad, perhaps Iraqi President Saddam Husayn—and those where they did not, notably President Gamal Abd al-Nasser in Egypt, Tunisian Presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali but also, apparently, in most rulers in Sudan and Yemen.

Might it not have been worthwhile to categorize the regimes on those kinds of dimensions—the availability of first-person sources, or the tolerance, however grudging, of popular political parties, which certainly cross the republic/monarchy divide, or perhaps even the region-wide trend to dynastic succession? After all, Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim won unwonted notoriety (and a related prison sentence) for coining the term *gumlukiyya* (a neologism mixing *jumburiyya* [republic] and *malakiyya* [monarchy]) to describe Hosni Mubarak's autocracy.² Would the Arab republics look as dynastic as they did had there not been genuine dynasties next door, providing models of rule and, not incidentally, underwriting some of their budgets? It is hard to know but we would certainly profit from a less absolute distinction between republics and monarchies in the Arab world.

And what of the third axis: autocracy itself in comparative perspective? As Sassoon readily acknowledges, (6) taken as a group, these regimes look pretty ordinary by autocratic standards. Very little new seems to have been invented here. The security sectors mirrored the Stasi of East Germany—either as a sort of natural eavesdroppers' isomorphism or because of eastern European influence in the region, particularly in the 1960s (123). Elections are described as reminiscent of authoritarian Mexico (57); prisons are like their Soviet counterparts (137); even dynastic succession was not unique to these autocracies—see Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania or Kim Il-sung's son and grandson in North Korea (203). So although we might be thankful for the detailed information provided on these particular empirical cases, we do not learn a lot more about how to analyze the dynamics of autocratic rule; as Sassoon concludes, “delving deeper into the phenomenon if authoritarianism, its roots, mechanism, repressive apparatus, and implications for future generations needs to continue” (269).

This is certainly true, and it is why I have included *Anatomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics* in the list of “supplementary resources” for both my courses; it is a very useful reference, if not required reading.

I do not want to end my assessment there, however, because there is one area in which I think Sassoon provides more, and more novel, information than perhaps my somewhat utilitarian review has conveyed. That is in the nature of information and data gathering. Sassoon's discussion of the security sector is far more

¹ King Hussein I, *Uneasy Lies the Head: An Autobiography of H.M. King Hussein of Jordan* (London: Heinemann, 1962); Hassan II, *The Challenge: The Memoirs of King Hassan II of Morocco* (New York: Macmillan, 1978).

² This story is well-told by Mona El-Ghobashy in “Antinomies of the Saad Eddin Ibrahim Case,” *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 15 August 2002, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero081502>

detailed than most treatments of these regimes, which often collapse the military, police, and intelligence services in a single undifferentiated category of the ‘monopoly of the use of violence’ by military regimes. The obsession these autocracies exhibit with collecting information about popular opinion—wire-tapping their own officer cadres and bureaucrats, employing armies of informants, routinely using torture to extract information from political prisoners and ordinary criminal suspects—speaks to a fundamental insecurity on the part of these regimes, as Sassoon observes.

It also, however, speaks to a very interesting ambivalence about information and investigation. In many, if not all, of these countries, the quality of publically available data is deplorable: census data is routinely incomplete and often out-of-date; social science surveys and polls are all but forbidden; archival documents are treated as state secrets. The development of social statistics, which accompanied the formation of the modern state in Europe and North America and provide the evidentiary basis for everything from tax policy to family law and education and health spending, is remarkably feeble here. As Sassoon tells us of his memoirists, “it is remarkable how little attention was paid to economic affairs even by those who occupied senior positions in finance and the economy.” (157)

And where social and economic research is weak and suspect, it seems that criminal investigation becomes the principal rationale and mechanism for collecting information. Sassoon cites an Egyptian police officer who ascribed the use of physical force “to the genuine belief that torturing a suspect is the most efficient way of obtaining a confession.” (125) One is reminded of a joke that circulated in Mubarak’s Egypt: The president was accompanied by the Minister of the Interior to the airport and on the way, he asked the Minister whether a large statue by the side of the road was of Ramses I or Ramses II. The Minister told the President that he did not know but would find out for him. When the President returned from his travels, he asked the Minister about the statue and was told it was Ramses II. “Wonderful,” said Mubarak, “how did you find out?” “It was easy,” said the Minister. “He confessed.”

In the long run, a confession is an unsatisfactory proxy for the truth, just as political informants are probably less reliable sources of information about most demographic, social and economic trends than survey respondents. In the absence of robust appreciation of the value of scholarly and scientific research, however, investigations will be the preserve not of the university and the academic community but of the police and the interior ministry. And for so effectively illustrating this subtle but profoundly disquieting aspect of authoritarianism in the Arab republics, we should be grateful to Joseph Sassoon.

Review by Tareq Y. Ismael, University of Calgary

With his *Anatomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics*, Joseph Sassoon has provided an inventive and pioneering examination of the authoritarian landscape produced over the past six decades within the Arab republics. Sassoon's exploration situates the memoir as a vehicle by which to explore the lived experiences of a wide range of citizens, providing the reader with a unique vantage into momentous changes that have transpired through the lens of the personal lives impacted across the region. From the origins of the modern state apparatus and regime formation that emerged from the colonial era, to the persistent popular and elite opposition to oppression and authoritarian rule, Sassoon's method captures the period in a manner not found elsewhere. The detailing of the human experience as it was impacted by authoritarian rule provides insights into the lives of the populations ensnared in the grip of the regimes that emerged. It also provides strong insights into regime resiliency in the face of popular opposition and desires for progressive change. Sassoon's voyage alongside his memoirist sources serves as a breakthrough in the research of the region's recent political history. While other scholars have made use of political memoirs, the scope of Sassoon's effort deploys the genre through a greater diversity and depth across a comparative survey of memoirs from the subjects and citizens of eight Arab countries. All transitioned from colonial and imperial rule, through monarchies to modern republics. The backdrop of decolonization, the embrace of notions of Arab modernity, and the titanic struggles forged during the period of global bipolarity, where the Cold War reached into the social struggles and daily lives of entire populations, are well revealed to the reader.

This wide vantage proves a useful canvas on which Sassoon can call on the lived experiences of his subjects. The effect leaves the reader better informed of the pace of change as well as the impacts such events had on individual lives. The personal and the political become intertwined in a manner that better allows a contemporary reader to grasp the often anodyne and antiseptic descriptions of such events found in social science texts. While the accessible presentation of the insights uncovered by secondary literatures from across several disciplines adds greatly to the reader's knowledge, Sassoon's writing allows these concepts and insights to be contextualized within the lived experiences and the *mélange* of memories shared by the sources. Sassoon evidences wide reading of the historiography and social science literatures on all eight states covered. From works such that of Roger Owen's *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* he situates the biographies of his subjects in the national, historical and comparative settings that saw the emergence and entrenchment of authoritarian rule.¹ Entwined with the biographical, these insights into the comparative structural institutions as well as particular leaderships' impact on the political, economic, social organization of these regimes. Sassoon includes more than 130 memoirs, written in Arabic, English, and French. He also presents the reader with sources from across a wide range of social classes and other social cleavages found throughout regional societies. The clarity of writing exhibits Sassoon's mastery of his source material as the experiences he unearths from the memoirs allow the reader a lucid grasp of the phenomenon.

While the breadth of Sassoon's treatment of the memoir as source material is skillful and clearly the product of rigorous research and craftsmanship, it allows him to weave the insights of considered readings of the social science literature. In this manner he is able to focus on critical issues that more often tend to be looked at in the study of a single state or delivered as a single thematic case study. Driving the reader back to the core focus of the work - the role of authoritarianism in the modern Arab context - Sassoon examines the role of the security services, human rights abuses, cronyism and the mirroring that such social and political structures

¹ Roger Owen's *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

have on the more private domains of society away from public life. This was especially evident in his explorations of how authoritarianism impacts the social fabric through its deployment of fear. His exploration uncovers a contaminated society where a system of lies, fear and sycophancy prevail, where trust has broken down between individuals with each wanting to protect their family and survive the regime under which they find themselves. Corruption increased and unwillingness to accept responsibility became a social norm. As Sassoon underlines (237) a “blamestorming” process began after the 2011 Arab uprisings as most of the participants of the previous regimes refused to take any responsibility for what happened (237). The comparative nature of Sassoon’s work allows the reader to not lose the particularities of a given regime, while still grasping the wider regional significance. This entwines with the dislocations brought on by economic reforms and so-called democratic transitions over the final two decades explored in the book.

Remarkably, the use of political memoirs infuses a dazzling array of topics through the varied concerns and perspectives of the memoirists themselves. This repository culled from the source material by Sassoon highlights the forcefulness memoirs provide. The authorial voice in such accounts focuses the reader on one aspect of their lives (as opposed to an autobiography where the chronology of an entire life is chronicled). Such self-selection allowed Sassoon to parse his subjects around the momentous events impacting the Arab world over the course of decades. Observing the chronological timeline at the center of the narrative allows his reader to follow events in a coherent manner, while enhancing their understanding of social phenomena through the voicing and emphasis, as well as the considered insights, of the memoirists’ reflections on life over the period of study.

Sassoon’s project deepens the reader’s understanding of authoritarianism as it developed in the Arab world. He assiduously relates the coercive systems that prevailed in the confidence that such knowledge will better inform contemporary scholarly and public debates about how best to make successful transitions to more open and free societies (221-251). Sassoon’s memoirs emerge from all eight republics established in the post-colonial period following the Second World War: Syria (1945), Egypt (1952), Sudan (1956), Tunisia (1957), Iraq (1958), Algeria (1962), Yemen (1962), and Libya (1969). While emerging from nominally progressive movements decrying imperialism and traditional social mores, all eight states came to be authoritarian in practice, with political regimes that denied basic human rights as well as many liberal reforms.

Sassoon successfully corrals the memoirists’ insights not by aligning them by the republic from which they emerged, but rather by identifying themes that transpired across the Arab public sphere. *Anatomy of Authoritarianism* begins in 1952 with the Egyptian Revolution and concludes with the Arab uprisings of 2011. Sassoon appends a final chapter that more directly explores the difficulties experienced by the transition away from authoritarianism that was promised by the 2011 Arab uprisings. The toppling of regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen as well as the popular protests across the Arab republics challenge longstanding scholarly consensus on the stability and resilience of authoritarianism.² With the exception of Tunisia, many of the

² Sassoon cites: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951); Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1961); Yevgenia Albats, *State within a State: The KGB and its Hold on Russia – Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994); and the two articles of Eva Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective,” *Comparative Politics* 36:2 (January 2004): 139-157; “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring,” *Comparative Politics* 44:2 (January 2012): 127-149.

Arab republics that experienced uprisings in 2011 have failed to undergo transformation to responsible and representative governance. Sassoon added to his exploration by conducting interviews in this North African country, speaking with senior participants from the previous regime, as well as contemporary politicians, academics, and businesspeople. Sassoon's efforts provide the reader not only with insight into current issues and challenges facing the Tunisian polity, but also allows for exploration of the themes raised by the memoirists that are examined in the rest of the work.

The book begins with Sassoon's analysis of the utility of memoirs as a source of scholarly research and a means of studying the Arab world. He then moves on to a thorough account of ruling parties and governance structures as authoritarianism took root and shaped political *praxis* in the halls of power and interactions between ruler and those inhabiting the public space so valiantly cleaved from colonial powers and traditional elites. The third chapter focuses on the considerable role played by the military as an institution, as well as incubator for personal mobility and aspirations, as the modern Arab state emerged. This discussion transitions well into an examination of the state security services, giving voice through the political memoirs of both security chiefs as well as those of civil society, opposition actors, and victims of state repression. Sassoon adroitly transitions, allowing the reader to not only focus on the outsized role intelligence and state security organizations came to play in the social and political order, but also to experience the personalization of power and authority experienced across all eight states as they conjured idiosyncratic authoritarian regimes.

In crafting his findings in this way, Sassoon lays forth the patterns that emerge. They demonstrate particular differences, but he mostly found comparative similarities. This supple understanding provides the reader with differentiating features as well as commonalities found with the phenomenon of authoritarianism in the Arab republics, whether the reader is unfamiliar with—or experienced with—life under these regimes. Chapter five expounds political economy and developmental issues, which Sassoon portrays as not being high on the agendas of the region's authoritarian rulers in spite of the immense need for socio-economic development. The chapter underscores how corruption became integral to regime durability and therefore why it poses such challenges to any future transition away from authoritarian rule. The cult of personality, with its multiple expressions and formulations across the eight republics, is brought to the reader's attention in an imaginative way in chapter six. The final chapter concludes by succinctly laying out the challenges facing the potential of liberalization and the transition to more open and democratic societies. A valuable contribution to the burgeoning literature on contemporary Tunisia specifically and political transitions more broadly, Sassoon contextualizes his discussion of Tunisia within the context of the findings detailed earlier in his book.

Sassoon's is one of the few books that truly encompasses a comparison of Arab republics from the vantage of those who lived through the region's historical development, and participated in its politics and political economy, while inhabiting—or breaking free from—their authoritarian yoke. The empirical depth imparted by the memoirs provides him with considerable support to both convey as well as advance a sophisticated discussion of authoritarianism that incorporates and engages a number of social science insights and debates. The stifling of personal freedoms and deleterious impacts on social life that mark authoritarianism as a political regime are brought into stark contrast in Sassoon's exploration. Sassoon has selected his cases well, with sources from various classes and multiple social groups, regime participants, independent intellectuals and artists, as well as political opponents and regime victims. He uses specific examples from the memoirs to draw general insights, synthesizing their views to better inform the reader's comprehension of social science literatures and theoretical phenomena, all in a manner that provides a tremendous depth of insight for the reader.

Review by Richard A. Nielsen, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Anatomy by Memory: Sassoon on the Politics of Arab Authoritarianism

A*natomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics* is Joseph Sassoon's latest installment in a multi-year project to describe and explain Arab authoritarianism. It is comprehensive enough that it serves as something of a 'one stop shop' on the subject—if I had to select just one book to introduce a novice to the politics of the Arab republics over the last fifty years, *Anatomy of Authoritarianism* would be the obvious choice. It is also rich enough in surprising details about authoritarian politics to keep a well-seasoned reader turning the pages. It is a book worth reading and revisiting.

The book is organized around two themes, anatomy and memory. By describing his work as an “anatomy,” Sassoon prioritizes description over explanation, though he engages in both. Sassoon's method is to draw on over 120 memoirs from a variety of actors who shaped, or were shaped by, authoritarian government in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, Tunisia, and Algeria. This “anatomy by memory” is original, and prompts a worthwhile debate about the value of description (in contrast to the recent focus of political science on causal inference) and the ability of memoirs to serve as data for historically-oriented social scientists.

The Lens of Anatomy

Anatomy is the study of the bodily components of organisms, or by analogy, the study of the internal workings of some phenomenon. The lens of anatomy that Sassoon uses to organize his description of Arab authoritarianism means his study inherits both the strengths and weaknesses of anatomical approaches. Like any lens, the lens of anatomy intensifies focus on some elements and obscures focus on others.

The strengths of Sassoon's anatomy will be obvious to most readers. The book is remarkably comprehensive and systematic. After a chapter introducing the memoirs as sources, the book moves systematically through chapters on governance and political parties, the military, the security services, the economy, and leadership. This choice to organize the chapters topically, rather than by country, is a good one on balance because it orients the reader to see similarities across the cases. The cost is that it can as a result be difficult to maintain narrative structure in some of the chapters because the historical stream of events in each place can no longer serve as a convenient organizing principle. Sassoon does an admirable job of attempting to maintain the narrative arc even when the organization by topics might provide temptations for a disorganized laundry list.

This systematic evaluation of authoritarian structures across eight countries is remarkable. I do not know of another book that covers these topics so comprehensively for the region. The surprising finding from this side-by-side comparison is that the authoritarians in eight countries over fifty years developed more similar institutions and authoritarian styles than perhaps we previously recognized.

Anatomical approaches have limitations, and Sassoon's book inherits these as well. Comprehensive descriptions can be overwhelming and the reader can get lost in the details. There is also less signposting than I would have liked to tell readers what is new. Sassoon is generous in highlighting where his findings accord with the conclusions of scholars of authoritarianism in other contexts, but there is less attention to differentiating what is new.

A second limitation of Sassoon's anatomical lens is that it tends towards functionalist explanations for authoritarian structures, even when other styles of explanation might be more satisfying. Just as every organ in the body is presumed to have developed for a specific function, so too were the organs of the state designed to carry out particular functions. Sassoon is right to point out the purposes for which political parties, repressive apparatuses, and cults of personality were created, but too often, he reaches the conclusion that they had precisely their intended effects without considering unexpected political by-products of these structures. Sassoon's approach makes the reader feel like everything matters, and in just the way we might think it would. Even when there are clearly competing claims about the purposes of authoritarian political structures, Sassoon's inclination is to nod to both simultaneously. It is not always clear which competing arguments about authoritarianism can be adjudicated by the evidence in this book.

The third cost of taking a comprehensive, anatomical lens, is that Sassoon tries to describe and explain all structures equally well, when his data are clearly better for describing some aspects of authoritarianism than others. This anatomical exercise is a necessary step in the political science of authoritarianism. However, just as some structures in human anatomy are easier to understand than others, so are some structures in authoritarian regimes. I cannot say for sure, but I wonder if some of Sassoon's apparently common sense conclusions about, say, the functions of authoritarian parties and legislatures, might in fact be amended in the future by less comprehensive, more detailed analysis. For example, Sassoon concludes that "the function of the ruling party in Arab republics, whether in single or multiparty systems, was to ensure the durability of these authoritarian regimes" (71). This aligns with the conclusions of other scholars, such as Lisa Blaydes,¹ but the events of the Arab spring suggest that these institutions failed in this function, and perhaps they had cross-purposes that undermined their stabilizing influence. Recent work, such as that by Rory Truex,² has revised our thinking about the function of nominally representative institutions in other authoritarian settings, and I urge scholars to take Sassoon's conclusions as a starting point, rather than the final word.

I have perhaps given short shrift to the strengths of an anatomical lens, so let me conclude by applauding Sassoon for taking seriously the need to describe the political structures of authoritarian politics carefully and dispassionately. It is currently fashionable in political science to focus on estimating causal effects,³ which risks downplaying the need for careful description. I am friendly to the project of learning rigorously about causal relations in the world, but I believe careful description is an equally crucial endeavor that has lately been overshadowed. We need more anatomy in political science.

Memoirs as Data

Anatomy of Authoritarianism makes an important methodological advance in the study of clandestine politics by demonstrating how memoirs can reveal the inner workings of authoritarian systems when archives are not available. Sassoon is the perfect scholar to make this point, having worked so carefully with authoritarian

¹ Lisa Blaydes. *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

² Rory Truex. *Making Autocracy Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

³ Cyrus Samii, "Causal empiricism in quantitative research," *The Journal of Politics* 78:3 (2016): 941-955.

archives from Iraq,⁴ and he is well positioned to compare what can be learned from memoirs, what can be learned from archives, and what will require other approaches.

The primary benefit of memoirs is that they are available when other sources of data are not. For studying the politics of Arab authoritarianism across eight countries, memoirs may be the most consistently available source, but this does not mean that interpreting them is straightforward. While I certainly hope that other scholars will follow Sassoon's lead by considering the information in memoirs as potential data, I think the methodological trade-offs involved deserve more thought and defense.

Sassoon's book shines when he is writing about the topics where memoirs do best—visceral accounts of repression, candid assessments of personalities and, and insider accounts of important political events. To transport the reader from their armchair into the bowels of autocrat's feared prisons, Sassoon judiciously quotes from victim accounts of torture: "Cuffed and blindfolded, like my fellow detainees, I lay transfixed. My palms sweated and my heart raced. I felt myself shaking. Would it be my turn next?" (132).⁵ However, memoirs are not good for everything that a reasonably complete anatomy of authoritarianism needs to do. This becomes clearest in the chapter on economics, where the trail of data from memoirs grows cold. This is for the simple fact that memoirs are meant to be read, and most readers find economic details boring. Sassoon attempts to supplement the chapter with other sources, but the feeling remains that there is more about the economic policy of authoritarians that might be uncovered if the book were not methodologically focused on memoirs.

The biases of memoirs become a real problem at various points in the book, and at times, the politics of memoir writing upstage the politics of authoritarianism. For example, it is not terribly surprising that almost none of the memoirs of former military leaders acknowledge personal responsibility for the crushing military defeats that the Arab republics have experienced (111-112). Sassoon is content to note this as a finding about how military men write their memoirs (256-257). I would have preferred that the focus stay on the politics of authoritarianism and that this clear bias against taking responsibility were acknowledged as a potential blind spot or source of measurement error.

Sassoon acknowledges the potential biases of memoirists in the chapter introducing the memoirs and again explores the issue in the conclusion (12-15, 259). However, it is not clear how to deal with these biases when evaluating particular pieces of evidence. Sassoon sometimes points to the difficulties, by noting that certain claims are suspect, but he does not do so systematically enough for my taste. What should we do with these dubious assertions? Should we accept them if they agree with our prior understanding of authoritarianism or with the bulk of the evidence? If so, is it possible to learn anything truly surprising from a memoir?

A related weakness is that Sassoon occasionally is overly credulous about the assessments of memoirists about what caused what. Memoirists may be accurate at describing what they see, but they suffer the same biases

⁴ Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁵ Sassoon is quoting from Robert Tait. "28 Hours in the Dark Heart of Egypt's Torture Machine," *The Guardian*, 9 February 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/09/egypt-torture-machine-mubarak-security>.

when making causal inferences as the rest of us, and proximity to events is unlikely to help. Humans are not good at making accurate causal inferences in many settings, even when attempting to assess the causes of their own behavior.⁶ Relying on their assessments of the effects of various authoritarian structures is risky.

I agree that memoirs can be data, and that the information they contain has been underutilized for understanding politics. However, scholars seeking to follow Sassoon's lead might benefit from engaging memoirs in a more systematic manner. Treating memoirs 'as data' requires answering the questions: what might we get right from using them, where might they lead us astray, and how would we know? Answering these questions might include explicit accounting for several types of selection bias: which facts end up in memoirs, and how should an analyst select among these facts to present a coherent picture of politics?

Sassoon introduces his choice to use memoirs by comparing them to archives. "I would ideally have to examine the archives of other authoritarian Arab regimes. Unfortunately, they are inaccessible to any researcher. Consequently, I turned to memoirs written by those who were embedded in the system" (1). One useful exercise might be to conduct research on the same topics in a setting where both archives and memoirs are available. This would provide a better sense of where the findings from archival and memoir sources might converge or diverge, and lend more specific guidance about how to account for the biases in memoirs. This is not to say that archives are unbiased, but their biases are different and better known to historically-oriented scholars.

How were memoirs located and selected? How were passages within them selected? I also would have appreciated a table noting all of the memoirs and which sections of them Sassoon read most carefully. Perhaps this would have been too lengthy for print, and could have been placed online, but it is difficult to gather a list of the memoirs piecemeal from the footnotes and impossible to tell what was included and what was left out.

Numerical summaries of the general content of memoirs might also have been helpful. In some of my own work, I have used automated text analysis methods called topic models to systematically summarize large collections of text,⁷ and I can envision how this approach might help scholars to systematically describe the contents of a large collection of memoirs.

Conclusion

In *Anatomy of Authoritarianism*, Joseph Sassoon has provoked at least two crucial conversations: what are the unifying features of authoritarian politics and how can we study them? His book provides a detailed description of authoritarianism in the Middle East over the last half century that will improve the knowledge base of novices and experts alike. The systematic march through various aspects of authoritarianism highlights the benefits of doing an anatomy of authoritarianism with comparative cases, and readers will certainly come away from the book with an excellent picture of the commonalities across Arab authoritarian regimes. The

⁶ Richard Nisbett and Timothy DeCamp Wilson. "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes." *Psychological Review* 84:3 (1977): 231-260.

⁷ Christopher Lucas, Richard Nielsen, Margaret Roberts, Brandon Stewart, Alex Storer, and Dustin Tingley, "Computer Assisted Text Analysis for Comparative Politics," *Political Analysis* 23:3 (215): 254-277.

method of mining memoirs for their historical content advances the frontier of knowledge about clandestine politics—a common feature of authoritarian regimes—and suggests intriguing new methodological possibilities. I encourage researchers of authoritarianism in the Middle East to pick up where Sassoon left off.

Author's Response by Joseph Sassoon, Georgetown University

First of all, let me thank the three reviewers profusely for their valuable comments. They raise interesting points and criticism of certain aspects of the book.

The idea of the book stemmed from my noticing that researchers of authoritarian regimes outside the Arab world have begun to use memoirs, even though they have access to archives, in order to complete the analysis of these systems.¹ For researchers of the Arab world, with the exception of Iraq, we have no access to any modern archives, and hence I felt the need to explore a new source that for some reason has been ignored by historians and political scientists. Interestingly, scholars of literature and anthropology have made very good use of memoirs in the Arab world.² Most of the work on the politics of the region have been based on secondary sources, and in a few instances on field work, but not from within the system. I aimed to show that memoirs can partly, albeit not fully, fill this gap, given their shortcomings which I explore in a chapter devoted to the different types of memoirs. I taught a graduate seminar class on Political Memoirs in the Arab World last semester and the students were surprised by the amount of information they gleaned from reading different memoirs. Furthermore, their own papers clearly highlighted the potential of this resource that has been ignored for a long time.

The points discussed by the reviewers about the book are mostly valid: I was cognizant that covering eight countries and trying to find common denominators over a period of half a century would raise complications and sometimes muddle the overall picture. This was exacerbated by the fact that for countries such as Egypt there are a vast selection of memoirs, while for a country such as Sudan I only found a small number. I fully understand Lisa Anderson's desire for including the monarchies, and in fact when I began the project, that was my intention. However, it became clear that impediments such as the lack of a political party in Saudi Arabia and the existence of a large group of princes and princesses that protect the monarchy would only add more complications. Taking just two countries such as Morocco and Jordan (where memoirs exist) would not have been, in my opinion, a good way to analyze the system.

Indeed, as Richard Nielsen points out, some areas, such as the Security Services and the discussion of violence and torture are more vivid than, say, an analysis of economic policy. But that is also part of the effort to show what issues those who were the decision makers and insiders of these systems emphasized. With regard to the technical point that Professor Nielsen raises, I referenced in the footnotes and the bibliography only the memoirs that I utilized and the bibliography is comprehensive.

As Tareq Ismael writes, my hope is that the book provides a useful canvas about the lives of people in these countries. What these memoirs clearly show is that these regimes are deeply rooted, and the events since the Arab uprisings underline this fact: with the exception of Tunisia, toppling the regimes either led to a civil war

¹ See for example: Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

² See: Mary Ann Fay, ed., *Auto/Biography and the Construction of Identity and Community in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Dwight F. Reynolds, ed., *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

or the replacement one authoritarian regime by another (as in Egypt). It is hard to turn a page given the systemic violence within these systems for so many decades.