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Julia Sittmann. "Illusions of Care: Iraqi Students between the Ba'thist State and the Stasi in Socialist East Germany, 1958-89." *Cold War History* 18:2 (2018): 187-202. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2017.1415327>.

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Review by **Joseph Sassoon**, Georgetown University

Julia Sittmann has written a fascinating article arguing that the relationship between Iraq and East Germany from the 1958 Revolution that toppled the Hashemite monarchy to the collapse of the Berlin Wall was very complex and had many paradoxes. Focusing on Iraqi students studying in East Germany, she posits that the German Democratic Republic (GDR), though reproachful of the treatment of the Communists in Iraq, did not actually support the Iraqi Communists's cause while they were tortured and slaughtered by the Ba'th regime. On the other hand, the East Germans did protect Communists living and studying in Germany from the long arm of the Iraqi security services.

Iraq was important to East Germany on many levels because of its oil, its mostly anti-western socialist regimes since 1958, and East Germany's attempt to obtain recognition by as many Third World countries as possible to defy the West German doctrine (known as The Hallstein Doctrine) which insisted that countries should not have diplomatic relations with both Germanys. Indeed, Iraq was the second state outside the Eastern bloc (after Cambodia) to recognize East Germany after the rise of the Ba'th Party to power in July 1968. Even after the recognition, Sittmann contends that while the relationship between the two countries remained superficial, the student body in East Germany dramatically changed: more students arrived since Iraq had the resources after the 1973 oil embargo to increase its education and health budgets significantly. Sittmann qualifies this statement, stating that "Ba'thist students made up only a tiny percentage of the official foreign student body in the GDR." (193). While this might have been correct in the early 1970s, a close examination of the Ba'th Party archives shows that the situation radically changed by the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s.¹ The Party insisted on 'proper' credentials of any student the state was sponsoring: detailed reports were filed on every candidate who applied for a scholarship, covering their families and attitudes toward the ruling party, and all political activities during the school years were registered in a special school registrar that

¹ Baghdad *tandhim* to Party Secretariat, "A Study of Students and Youth," 28 October 1991, Ba'th Regional Command Collection (BRCC), 005-1-2 (662-692); Secretary General of Students' Bureau to Party Secretariat, 4 June 1987, BRCC, 161-3-3 (003-044). The Ba'th Party archives are at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

was maintained and administered by the Party in conjunction with the security services. The process was even more rigorous for those pursuing graduate studies, since the state had enough data to judge the applicants' political affiliations.

Sittmann accurately portrays the relationship between the two countries in the 1980s and shows how the Stasi "had mastered the diplomatic ballet" (200) with Iraqi requests for technical help and equipment. But the author ignores the impact of the war between Iran and Iraq where East Germany, without announcing it publicly, was supporting Iran. East German leaders believed that in the long run, the GDR would benefit more from a relationship with Iran. Iraq, on the other hand, was frustrated with the GDR and its endless procrastination and excuses over every Iraqi request. Sittmann underscores the fact that the so-called special relationship between the Iraqi security agencies and the Stasi is nothing but a myth (but one that the average person in Iraq or the Arab world believed), and argues that even Western intelligence held the belief that there was strong cooperation between the German and Iraqi agencies. Her explanation is that the legend was built due to the "success of the East German and Iraq propaganda machines." (202). There was definitely cooperation on the military side, even though the Stasi was reluctant to engage with the Ba'th regime given its attitude toward Communists in Iraq and abroad, but it is not clear why even the Western intelligence agencies accepted the 'myth.'

Sittmann has undertaken extensive research using the Stasi archives and some research on the Ba'th archives, and, given her language capabilities, is adept at doing so. It is not clear, however, why the article discusses the ten-year period preceding the rise of the Ba'th given that the title itself is about the Ba'thist state. The article is mostly about Iraqi students and the relationship between the Ba'th and the Stasi, but it adds to our understanding of the multifaceted relationship between countries in the Middle East and the Eastern bloc during the Cold War period.

Joseph Sassoon is an Associate Professor at Georgetown University and holder of al-Sabah Chair in Politics and Political Economy of the Arab World. He has published extensively on Iraq and the Middle East. His latest book was *Anatomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).