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# Nora Derbal, Charity in Saudi Arabia: Civil Society under Authoritarianism

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## REFERENCES

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 350 p.

- 1 Political changes and the sociology of contemporary Saudi Arabia have received comparatively less scholarly attention since 2015 and the rise to power of King Salman and the de facto rule of his son Muhammad bin Salman than a decade before. While high quality analysis had bloomed during much of the aftermath of 2001, it gradually almost dried up, in part due to sudden interest for the 'Arab Spring' elsewhere in the Middle East, but also as a consequence of authoritarian practices in Saudi Arabia that leave less space for in-depth fieldwork than a few years back.
- 2 Carrying out her research for a doctoral dissertation at the Freie Universität Berlin and then for this book published by Cambridge University Press, Nora Derbal's challenge has been to focus on a sociological object, that of civil society and charity in Saudi Arabia, that is under threat. Yet it has interestingly been at the core of a number of communication strategies of the monarchy for at least five decades when state-sponsored (but to a certain extent autonomous due to its links with a specific religious field) charity organizations were established like the WAMY (World Assembly of Muslim Youth) or the Saudi Haramayn Islamic Welfare Association. Throughout the book, Derbal's specific focus on the field of benevolent actors in Jeddah and the attempt to explore the complex relationship between these and religious institutions, the government and the business community is of evident significance. It is all the more relevant since it develops a dynamic approach looking at trends over more than a decade of research, ending in 2021. This favors nuanced conclusions when it comes to assessing the autonomy of these actors and their internal dynamics and rationale.

- 3 Paradoxically, as issues of youth empowerment and redistribution appear to loom high on the agenda of the Saudi state since 2015, the latitude granted to grassroots initiatives that care for these issues, in particular matters linked to poverty, appears to be shrinking. The Saudi state is increasingly monopolizing such activities and repressing civil society actors, in particular as it has gained more control over religious players. The fact international charity and development organizations have not been allowed to operate in the Kingdom has only given more capacity for such a process to unfold and consequently justifies a focus on local actors.
- 4 Adopting a bottom-up approach by looking at activists that do not directly engage with the political system favors innovative reflections on the transformations of authoritarianism in the Arabian Peninsula, but also on the ways religious traditions translate into everyday activism and shape a specific field. These reflections are connected by Nora Derbal to broader debates in political sociology on civil society, triggered in particular by the works of Sheila Carapico on Yemen in the early 1990s. They are also built on an impressive bibliography, which interestingly leaves much space for works in Arabic by Saudi historians as well as interpretations by Saudi activists themselves. Nora Derbal does a fine work when it comes to giving flesh and bone to the dynamics she highlights, managing the issues of anonymization to preserve the security of the actors she studies without yet making her book too abstract. Its ethnographic dimension is precious at a time when the conditions for independent research are increasingly difficult for all. It can thus serve as a guidebook for graduate students, for instance on the role of gatekeepers on the field (p. 41) and issues of trust building over time. The book also highlights the concrete difficulties of carrying out research in Saudi Arabia, starting from visa regulations and issues of mobility for a young female researcher (which were partially resolved as women are allowed to drive cars since June 2018).
- 5 The aftermath of massive floods in Jeddah in 2009 favored the emergence of civil society organizations that are at the core of Nora Derbal's study. Acting at the very local level as they are means that these are actors which are largely unknown to sociologists or analysts of contemporary Saudi Arabia. Indeed, these have generally focused on organizations that are active at the international level and thus have often had an explicit and direct connection with the state and its diplomacy. As she analyses four case-studies, including the Women's welfare association or a secret group nicknamed the Hikers created by friends in 2010, the author delves into issues of community and identity building, co-optation by the state, but also forms of repression.
- 6 By all means, this is a refreshing approach which allows Derbal to touch upon individual trajectories as much as specific social and political dynamics like the evolving role of *zakat*, in particular as it has been constrained by the so-called 'Global war on terror'. However, such an approach does not ignore state institutions as it delves into the concrete practices of these and their interactions with categories of citizens and foreigners, be they the poor or self-declared activists. As the author states, the book uses charity as a lens to "examine state-society relations and civic activism in Saudi Arabia from the bottom up. (p. 12)"
- 7 Derbal willingly decides to leave out individual benevolent associations, often connected to businesspeople or specific members of the royal family. Such a preference for collective initiatives, probably implies that a number of major actors remain out of the picture, nevertheless it shifts the focus on dynamics of engagement, civic behavior

and shared action, including equilibriums within organizations themselves – co-operation, competition, sustainability, membership, etc.

- 8 In a similar way, the focus on Jeddah is relevant as it allows to take a step aside, away from the dominant problematics in the capital Riyadh. This preference is also of prime value due to recent urban developments in Jeddah and the destruction of many of the poor neighborhoods and the displacement of tens of thousands of inhabitants. In an indirect way, the book serves as a testimony of the way these areas functioned, in particular through the role of *arbita* (shelters) which were initially intended for pilgrims but were also later funded through *zakat* and *awqaf* supervised by the charities to foster marginalized families, including an increasing number of foreigners – an evolution that the Saudi government appears to be trying to reverse.
- 9 The book is constructed around the four successive case-studies, each charity organization allowing to focus on a specific matter: first (First Women’s Welfare Organization) the evolving debates on the meanings and forms of welfare over the last six decades in Saudi Arabia, second (Majid bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Society) the framing of poverty and the way the Saudi state and elites (re)construct it, third (Young Initiative Group) the emergence of novel forms of charity among the youth, evolving into consulting activities, fourth (The Hikers) the tension between community-based activities, some linked to leisure, personal development and to foreign communities, and fear of repression.
- 10 The diversity of the themes touched upon by Nora Derbal is truly impressive and the chapters are written with great clarity, developing a focus on the actors themselves without falling into the trap of using unnecessary jargon. Nevertheless, the construction of the book itself may at times be seen as a bit redundant or lacking clarity. Using case-studies as entry points does not always help to define a progression in the demonstration of a specific thesis. The reflection being neither chronological nor strictly thematic, analysis on the uses of Islam in charity for example are scattered throughout the book, so are matters of state control and legal status through the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. This being said, one can nevertheless only be impressed by the quality of the book and thus consider that *Charity in Saudi Arabia* is a fascinating addition to our collective knowledge and understanding of contemporary Saudi Arabia as well as, more broadly, of “civil society under authoritarianism” (p. 295).