

Charity in Saudi Arabia: Civil Society under Authoritarianism

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In *Charity in Saudi Arabia*, Nora Derbal challenges the existing literature on Saudi Arabia's civil society, giving space and voice to some of its more underappreciated actors. The book includes a mix of personal experiences, ethnographic observation, and detailed descriptions of four civil society organizations (CSOs) and their evolution from 2009 to 2020. In the aftermath of the 2009 flood in Jeddah, the author observed how individuals, organizations, and other civil society actors managed the response to a natural disaster beyond the state's interventions, focusing on how religious values and charity are intertwined with everyday piety in an authoritarian state. Jeddah offers a particularly interesting case due to its multicultural nature and its link with pilgrimage for Muslims at large.

Derbal illustrates the everyday rhythms of CSOs in Saudi Arabia and their charitable activities beyond Islam, authoritarianism, and the nation-state—even if the latter continue to influence CSOs' activities and behaviors. She wrote, "Whereas the Saudi nation-state frames welfare as a privilege of citizenship, many charities continue to assist Saudi Arabia's poor and needy in disregard of their nationality" (p. 21). Since the welfare system is based on citizenship, and 41.6% is made up of non-Saudis, it becomes evident that a large part of the population is excluded from government assistance (GMI Blogger, 2023). Furthermore, a contradiction appears between the concepts of nation-state welfare and Islamic solidarity. Islamic solidarity, the author claims, is a universal concept with transnational elements that go beyond the concept of nation, sovereignty, and citizenship. Vision 2030 does not solve this problem but emphasizes it. Saudi Vision 2030, launched in 2016, represents the attempt to reform the country around three main objectives: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, n.d.). In this socioeconomic strategy, human development is stressed as an individual responsibility, removing the role of the state from structural interventions on behalf of the poor. Therefore, charity becomes an "act of citizenship" (p. 298) and a needed form of compensation to avoid marginalization for the population's most vulnerable.

Derbal's ethnographic participant observation in Saudi Arabia from 2009 to 2020 gives the reader the opportunity to understand the evolution of society across a timespan that included important events within and outside the Kingdom, such as the Arab Spring, Vision 2030, and the new NGO law in 2015—the latter changing the status of the 734 welfare associations and charities into NGOs.

The book is divided into six chapters, four of which focus on different case studies. In the first chapter, the author explains how such a bottom-up observation of

CSOs challenges predominant academic views that frame rentierism, Islamism, and tribalism as the main dominant forces shaping the social paradigm in Saudi Arabia. The second chapter is dedicated to the First Women's Welfare Association in Jeddah launched in the name of "cultural progress" in the early 1960s. The religious norms within the organization became a way to attract donors and religious donations (*zakat* and *awqaf*), while a female organization allows women to be more active in social activities. In the third chapter, the author describes the Society of Majid bin 'Abd al-'Aziz for Development and Social Services, situating the organization's mission in terms of development instead of charity.

The concept of development in the Islamic view is concerned with growth toward perfection through the purification of attitudes and relationships (Ahmad, 1994). Therefore, the Islamic approach to development could be said to be comprehensive, including moral, spiritual, and material dimensions. According to Kusuma (2010), it is possible to describe the characteristics of Islamic development as follows: (a) Islamic development includes moral norms, values, spiritual, and material aspects; (b) Islamic development is a value-oriented activity and has the aim to empower the role of the human being in all dimensions of life to reach *falah* both in this world and in the hereafter; and (c) the focus of Islamic development is human development. The intent is to shift the attention from the physical context and structures to the individual who is considered the vicegerent of God and who has several duties to conduct from an economic development perspective. The idea of development elaborated by the Majid Society parallels the Islamic concept as outlined above, but places more stress on contribution to national growth, according to Derbal. Development, as described by the organization, is a "mindset that enables people to achieve a life of dignity and contributes to the flourishing of the nation" (p. 141). For this reason, this organization opposes the concept of charity and dependency culture perpetrated by welfare organizations and the State itself, which legitimizes poverty as a natural condition. Derbal's discussion and empirical evidence on the structural origins of poverty in Saudi Arabia are useful for understanding the entire framework in the country.

The Youth Initiative Group (YIG) described in chapter four illustrates the evolution and changes of volunteer organizations before and after 2015. In contrast to the other two organizations, the YIG is an example of informal civil society in Saudi Arabia. When King Salman ascended the throne in 2015, his government decided to recognize youth as the core of his political agenda. However, this recognition implied a loss of freedom by youth volunteering organizations, with an increase in regulation and surveillance. Despite its popularity and international recognition, in 2016 the YIG closed due to external, unidentified criticism and the interventions of authorities against the group activities. The most interesting aspect of the YIG case is how it challenges Saudi Arabia's welfare concept. As explained by Derbal, the concept of welfare in the Kingdom has been related to citizenship since the introduction of the state-sponsored welfare programs in 2016 available only for Saudi nationals. In this chapter, the author highlights an understudied Saudi reality. Undocumented migrants in Saudi Arabia are normally excluded from social services, protection, and the health system. However, the YIG included them as beneficiaries in the "YIG family." The YIG practices were rooted in Islamic

charitable values, and for this reason, the inclusion of non-citizens in its programs was legitimized by the concept of social justice and redistribution of wealth to the poor and the needy, regardless of their nationality.

With the last case study, the author explores the concept of fun as an aspect of a civil society organization in Saudi Arabia as well as the link between the “exercise of freedom” and charity. “The Hikers” promote outdoor activities to inspire individuals toward active citizenship. Thus, as Derbal argues, it represents a challenge to preexisting Saudi sociopolitical norms and the rigid Islamic morality adopted by clerics. However, Vision 2030 and the new image of Saudi Arabia promoted by the government have “normalized” the organization’s activities.

This last aspect is related to Derbal’s most significant contribution in this book, principally, the deep contradiction created by the government’s vision for a “new Saudi Arabia.” Derbal writes: “The government has justified the oppression and the disrespect of basic civil rights by arguing that it is safeguarding new freedoms granted by the government-driven sociopolitical reform course” (p. 291). Therefore, the question arises, do the more things change, the more they remain the same? This bottom-up analysis of Saudi CSOs and charitable practices under authoritarianism demonstrates that these organizations have, despite YIG’s closure, shown resilience in the face of different political transformations in Saudi Arabia over the last 15 years. They continue to fill gaps left by the Saudi state, which is not still able to include all segments of its population and that promotes economic empowerment while marginalizing rural communities and non-nationals from its welfare provisions.

For those researching Gulf States’ transformations, and professors teaching philanthropy-related subjects and sociopolitical transformations in the MENA region, Derbal’s work marks a significant contribution to dealing with two—apparently—conflicting concepts: civil society and authoritarianism, from a bottom-up perspective. The book leads the way to further studies on charitable practices in Saudi Arabia from a bottom-up and top-down perspective. One of the topics that could be better explored regards the management of zakat by the state and charitable organizations in the country. Zakat is today handled in different ways and for different purposes, all in line with the religious scope of the alms. However, how zakat is managed by state and non-state actors can influence the effectiveness and impact of these funds on poverty alleviation in the medium and long term. The relationship between the Saudi government and civil society organizations, described in this book, defines the space that CSOs have in managing religious funds and, consequently, their power of action in the country.

References

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