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Charity in Saudi Arabia

Civil Society under Authoritarianism

Nora Derbal

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

In this innovative study of everyday charity practices in Jeddah, Nora Derbal employs a 'bottom-up' approach to challenge dominant narratives about state-society relations in Saudi Arabia. Exploring charity organizations in Jeddah, this book both offers a rich ethnography of associational life and counters Riyadh-centric studies which focus on oil, the royal family, and the religious establishment. It closely follows those who work on the ground to provide charity to the local poor and needy, documenting their achievements, struggles and daily negotiations. The lens of charity offers rare insights into the religiosity of ordinary Saudis, showing that Islam offers Saudi activists a language, a moral frame, and a worldly guide to confronting inequality. With a view to the many forms of local community activism in Saudi Arabia, this book examines perspectives that are too often ignored or neglected, opening new theoretical debates about civil society and civic activism in the Gulf.

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'Nora Derbal presents a fascinating study of civil society in the authoritarian context of Saudi Arabia - a topic that is very much under-researched. It's highly original, impressively written and meticulously detailed. This is truly a piece of social science at its absolute best.'

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