

Sa'udi Charity To Hadhramaut As A Bone of Contention: The Hijaz Fund Episode, 1949-50

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In 1949-50, several merchants in the province of Hijaz (Sa'udi Arabia) set up a charity fund aiming to provide poor relief in Hadhramaut (today in Yemen, then part of the Aden Protectorate and under British suzerainty). Several of these merchants were themselves Hadhramis by origin but had migrated to Hijaz. The donations collected by the fund quickly became a bone of contention as the British colonial administrators, officials of the Qu'ayti Sultanate (one of the indigenous states in Hadhramaut) and local merchants all came up with their own ideas on how the money should be spent. In particular, the merchants' proposal to use the fund for establishing a private company whose profits would be devoted to charitable purposes was staunchly opposed by the British.

In terms of the accountability issue, these events can be interpreted as a case of benevolent colonial bureaucrats trying to reign in rapacious and corrupt private interests and thus to ensure that a charitable donations would be spent on their true purpose. Alternatively, one could see it as instance of an innovative 'Third Sector' project foiled by a colonial state mindful of not losing its grip over civil society.

Either way, the saga of the Hijaz fund also reflects two crucial watershed changes Hadhramaut during the 1940s. The first was the shift of Hadhramaut's economic links – mainly labour migration - away from Southeast Asia to the emerging oil economies of the Middle East. The second was a much larger degree of intervention on part of the colonial state into economic and social matters and the decline of 'transnational' non-state actors. Both these changes were, in turn, embedded into the structural transformation of the larger Indian Ocean rim, during which colonial empires and patrimonial polities were replaced by modern nation-states.