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In the Footsteps of Martin Luther King: Will We Witness a Revolution Against Racial Discrimination in the Middle East?

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Jalal Dhiab, founder of the Free Iraqis Movement (Ansar al-Hurriya) to fight discriminatory policies against Afro-Iraqis.



Since Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 US presidential election until George Floyd's death in May 2020, there seems to be a growing awareness of the rights of Black people in the Middle East and North Africa. There is widespread recognition of the racial discrimination they endured in several Arab and Muslim countries.

While Floyd's death and the demonstrations that followed in the USA has sparked wide-ranging debates in the Middle East about the discrimination and inequality that Afro-Americans still suffer, anti-Americanism groups used these protests to demonstrate the US failure as a role model for a democratic transformation in the region. On the other hand, there has been a revived scrutiny of the xenophobia, discrimination, and inequality practised against dark-skinned people in Arab countries. In this article, I will shed some light on this topic in the Iraqi context, bearing in mind a similar icon to George Floyd: the civil activist Jalal Dhiab, who was assassinated in Basra in 2013.

It is worth mentioning that Jalal Dhiab founded the Free Iraqis Movement (Ansar al-Hurriya) to fight discriminatory policies against Afro-Iraqis. It is estimated that there are roughly 400,000 Afro-Iraqis across the country, though they are predominately concentrated demographically in the city of Basra, southern Iraq. When I first met Jalal in 2009 following President Barack Obama's victory in the presidential election, he was hanging up a picture of Obama and US civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. on the wall of his school dedicated to educating poor Afro-Iraqis. The two pictures depicted an unexpected identity awakening among Afro-Iraqi minorities in Basra, who dreamt of another "possible" Iraq envisioned in the struggle of freedom advocates calling for equality and the uprooting of racial discrimination. The inspirational power of this icon revived the history of these marginalized and excluded groups which has long been concealed in the books of Arab Muslim historians – stories of abduction and enslavement of Jalal's ancestors by the Arab slave traders, their transport from Africa to Iraq, and their rebellion, long-buried in Arab history books.

The Revival of the Forgotten Zanj Rebellion

In the Umayyad and Abbasid eras, Muslim Caliphs distributed vast areas of land to



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the leaders of their armies, who had conquered vast territories of the world in the East and West. These leaders used “dark-skinned” people to reclaim and cultivate the land, where tens of thousands worked under harsh circumstances. Consequently, they revolted several times, most famously in the “Zanj Rebellion” which lasted for more than 15 years (between 869-883). It is worthy to note, moreover, that its spark spurred from the same homeland of Jalal in Basra. The insurrection was met with severe oppression accompanied by harsh measures to quell this rebellious Black power for what was considered then a political and religious taboo: namely, the disobedience of the authority of the sultan and the Muslims’ Caliph.

This unyielding revenge from the revolutionaries calling for equality may account for their tarnished and buried history, given the scarcity of the books depicting the plight of those ill-fated people of African origins. Moreover, there are largely no contemporary research attempts to reflect new data, except for a few useful sources that portrayed this historical background: one example is *Zanj Revolution*, written by Faisal al-Samer, an Iraqi historian and Minister, and published by *Al-Mada* publishing house, Baghdad, 2000. The book was a reprinted of an earlier version first published in Baghdad in 1952. Nine years later, researcher Ahmed Olabi published, entitled *The Zanj Rebellion and its Leader Ali ibn-Muhammad* in Beirut in 1961. Aside from these sources, it is safe to say that Afro-Iraqi grandsons failed to document their ancestors’ agony and memories. Rather, their image was tarnished, and their rebellion was deemed a stain in Islamic history books – a negative stereotype that has remained influential in the works of contemporary Muslim researchers and historians. This is particularly evident in the works of the two Egyptian writers, namely: Ahmad Amin’s famous book *Zuhr al-Islam*, and the Egyptian historian Hassan Ibrahim Hassan’s *The History of Political, Religious, Cultural, and Social Islam*, both of which were printed in more than ten editions.

The historical writings portrayed the Zanj rebellion in the context of accusations, very similar to its contemporary counterpart of the supposed threat that minorities pose to national unity, particularly when ethnic political movements demand the right of self-determination, champion the slogan of equality, or defend their right to citizenship and non-discrimination. Conversely, the writings



that revolted against the stereotyping of the revolution and its leaders depended on a revolutionary consciousness, or rather, reflected a leftist interpretation of those dark-skinned people's movement as a social revolution against oppression and the brute force under the Abbasid rule. For example, when the Lebanese leftist writer Hussein Muruwwa discussed the Zanj rebellion among social revolutions in the first chapter of the second part of his book *Materialism in Arab Islamic Philosophy*, the researcher overlooked the revolutionaries' descendants and their experiences, even though they still live in Basra and other Iraqi cities and continue to face flagrant social discrimination. Indeed, the legacy of this oppression is very much present and endured by the descendants of the Zanj rebellion and remain rooted in the culture of the country to this very day. After the rebellion, their identities were deliberately watered down through their dispersal among different Arab tribes, intended to weaken their resistance and convince them that they were meant to be slaves and that this was their destiny. This resulted in an inferiority complex, as Bahraini writer Nader Kazim explains in his book *The Image of the Black in the Average Arab Imagination* that: “they have to be convinced of the description attributed to them; ignorance, stupidity, ugliness, deformity in manners and appearances, which is the most remarkable stereotype articulated by Arab culture and thus, stored in the Arab conceived picture of them.”

Jalal's ancestors lived in the swampy areas of Basra, known for its harsh climate and often susceptible to fatal epidemics. They exerted daunting labour to restore lands and dry out the swamps, and there was hardly enough food to endure the severe conditions of enslaved work. Part of their work included transporting salt on mules back to the markets and food outlets, and some worked in the houses of merchants, the wealthy, and the elite. Moreover, their support systems were fragmented because of how far away they were from their original homelands. Their offspring later became part of a legacy inherited by the wealthy people of Basra, chieftains of the tribes in the south, and the feudal lords in local elite families, and throughout the centuries, their stories accumulated and established a culture that is still massively influential today.

The Contemporary Revolution of the Afro-Iraqis



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Jala Dhiab – whom I called the Martin Luther King of Iraq after he was assassinated in 2013 – is the man behind the revival of all of this hidden history. He linked the painful past of the Afro-Iraqis with promises of liberation in post-American occupation Iraq. He also drew attention towards another force of change: rituals, through which Afro-Iraqis contributed to enriching Iraqi diversity and plurality. Afro-Iraqis often used oral elements of their culture to preserve their identity over time, and their rituals were transferred from the founders to their children to preserve their personal histories and to serve as a form of entertainment amid the oppression they endured. Among the most prominent are Nuban rituals (from Nuba in Egypt) and Haboush rituals (from Abyssinia, currently Ethiopia), as well as other rituals that come from the coastal areas of Kenya, particularly the Mombasa tribes. These rituals developed during the slave trade of the first Abbasid era, between 750-785 AD, and came to be practised after slaves settled in Basra and formed small communities.

The movement that was initiated by Jalal Dhiab almost transformed into a social revolution against racial discrimination, in an attempt to echo the social justice demands of the Zanj revolution and link the struggle of the revolutionary forefathers to the contemporary demands of their descendants living in Basra. With the media busy with scenes of sectarian violence and instability in Iraq, no one paid attention to the small miracle happening in Basra that was unimaginable before 2003, and particularly before Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 US presidential elections. Along with his companions, Jalal Dhiab established the "Free Iraqi Movement," the first political platform in the Middle East to represent Black people in the region, and it needed a reinvigorated group of individuals to work towards the revival of Black identity.

The movement's demands began to develop under Jalal and called for representation in the quota system – either at the level of the national parliament or local governments – similarly to other minorities. However, it seems that their struggle did not yield tangible results. One of the most prominent candidates of the "Free Iraqi Development", Salem Shaaban, explained to me the reasons for this failure. Salem, a well-built man at the beginning of his seventies, failed in his campaigns for political office several times. He explains: "I ran for the Basra Governorate Council elections for 2010 and I got more than 2000 votes because I



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was an international champion and well-known in sports circles; I won the Asian Boxing Championship in 1971, and I was Iraq's champion between 1969 and 1977. My colleagues got varying votes, but ultimately, none of us managed to win a seat in the Governorate Council. The rival parties possessed tremendous resources and distributed money and relief that drove people to vote for them, while we had nothing but our electoral promises." Indeed, what Salem did not state is that those same incumbent political parties were unwilling to lose the Afro-Iraqi vote to independent representatives of the community. This explains the assassination of Jalal Dhiab in 2013, which constituted a devastating blow to the political and social aspirations of this marginalized minority, and left its impact on other activists also trying to spread awareness within this community, whether they worked directly with Jalal Dhiab or not.

Despite my relationships with the movement's Afro-Iraqi founders, and my being familiar with all of their activities, I have not found reference papers or theoretical attempts at forming an intellectual framework for the movement. This seems to be the result of the enthusiasm caused by President Obama's victory and the desire of Black people – regardless of their ethnicity – to create a collective awareness that will pave the way for reviving the identity of an old culture.

The Afro-Iraqi movement was not based on a specific form of polarization, given that they do not belong to a specific race despite their skin colour, and even though their colour has become an indication of classification at the bottom of the social pyramid. Indeed, they are of several ethnic African origins: there are Nubians (southern Egypt), Zanzibaris (from Zanzibar, an archipelago belonging to Tanzania), and others from Ghana and Ethiopia. Thawra Youssef, an expert in the folklore of the Afro-Iraqis who belongs to the African community of Basra and wrote her doctoral thesis on these rituals, inferred their African origins by the folk rituals they practised for centuries in special places called "Makayed", and in specific areas of Basra Governorate, including the Zubair and the Abu al-Khaseeb districts.

The identity of the Afro-Iraqis gradually vanished because of their assimilation into the Arab Muslim tribes of southern Iraq, where they subsequently adopted their popular heritage as well as their religious beliefs, doctrines, and customs. They divided into Shiites and Sunnis. Some turned to leftists in the hope of finding



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acceptance within this universal ideology that might potentially relieve them from their sense of inferiority while others engaged in the Arab nationalist parties that have come to power in several countries in the region, hoping to find compensation and recognition.

Afro-Iraqis also joined the Islamist parties that became increasingly influential after 2003. Yet, this did not result in a clear improvement in their conditions. The "Free Iraqi Movement" was a revolution against these affiliations that divided Black Iraqis, and the various political movements that deceived them with the rhetoric of change and equality. Thus, in its essence, the movement intended to emancipate Black Iraqis from the myth that working within liberal frameworks was the only way in which they could defend their causes and revive their identity.

One of the young men I met in summer of 2012 became the movement's media officer. This young man, whom I will call here "Ammar", has faced racial discrimination since childhood. He recalls a poem for me by the most famous Arab poet Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi that has been drilled into his memory since he was a schoolboy. While in Egypt, Al-Mutanabbi praised the Egyptian ruler Kafur al-Ikhsheedi, but once he left, he satirized al-Ikhsheedi with poems and referred to him as "the slave because of his dark skin".

the free is enslaved and the slave is worshipped

...

Do not buy a slave without a stick

Slaves are troublesome and filthy

For Ammar and other dark-skinned children, the punishment of al-Mutanabbi's imaginary stick was much more painful than the punishment of the real stick used by the teacher. Al-Mutanabbi's poetic stick in his famous satirical poem for Kafur Al-Ikhsheedi (905-968 CE) was not just a poetic image, but eloquently captured and represented the lived reality of Black people in Iraq.

While al-Mutanabbi's stick humiliated Ammar and dehumanized him, al-



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Mutanabbi and his poetry are collectively celebrated in Iraqi culture. "This verse caused me to suffer a lot," he said, "it became a dark cloud covering my life. No one around me felt that this verse had turned into a real stick that hit my soul and destroyed it. As soon as the teacher got out of the classroom, students turned to me with the question: 'O slave, where is your stick?'"

Afro-Iraqi progress stagnated until the revolutionary Jalal Dhiab appeared and had effectively "broken" al-Mutanabbi's stick through challenging a traditional culture of obedience and holding religious traditions accountable. Indeed, Jalal witnessed how an unqualified interpretation of the religious texts was able to legitimize anti-Black discrimination in Iraq, despite the country's different constitutions, the multitude of parliamentary sessions held, funds allocated in each election round, and the loud voices that came out each evening to preach democracy and equality under the American occupation.

Ammar, who followed in the footsteps of his mentor Jalal Dhiab, realized the lack of familiarity that Black Iraqis have with their culture, and said: "We had to start working from scratch, and Jalal provided me with sources that helped me to be more open and effective. The first two books that had deeply influenced me were Faisal al-Samer's *Zanj Rebellion* and the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*." Ammar left the old social order behind him and dedicated his efforts to reinvigorate the Afro-Iraqi community. His liveliness successfully attracted young people. He said, "It wasn't easy – Black people had totally surrendered to their fate centuries ago. Reviving their imprisoned souls needed a rare touch. There were other individuals with us, so we distributed the tasks, and this was my chance to change the world."

To me, Ammar seemed full of hope and change, like his peers who went out in the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 to topple the region's old, suffocating regimes. When I was training young people from all over Iraq's provinces after the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, Ammar's approach was sharp and bold, with a prophecy of a future revolution. He used to declare that every Black person had a "ticking time bomb" inside them, waiting for a racist to turn up to press the button for it to explode, wherein another character inside them, long suppressed and stifled, would break free from this surrender to fated reality and rebel against these standards. For some, this will happen eventually, but most live in the shadow of this suppressed character and die without actually rebelling against the injustices



they suffered.

Jalal Dhiab was the one who seized this time bomb within Ammar, through working towards the liberation and revival of the African identity and awakening its human sense. Ammar describes meeting him: "Jalal knew that we were similar in our rejection of the reality in which Afro-Iraqis live. That is why both of us were looking for each other. Once we met, everything started again, as if it happened for the first time".

"I have a dream" in Basra

As the lively spirit of the Afro-Iraqi movement was growing, Jalal Dhiab appeared in the midst of it like a father of a family whose members were dispersed and where no one recognized the other except through silence, repression, and memory loss. Jalal Dhiab's modest words and work were the cement that held them together. The meaning of his work was no less than Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial on 28 August 1963 during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, when he expressed his desire to see a future in which black and white people coexist freely, equitably and in harmony.

Because Jalal, the father, was like a Pope for Black Iraqis; he came to declare a new doctrine. His association, the "Human Freedom Advocates," became something of an impoverished church, home of the Pope and visited by believers to be given the blessing of their new birth. Volunteer work, learning new professions, and wedding events all occurred in the association. Before Jalal became aware of the symbolism of the place he used for the construction of Black identity, the building transformed into a sacred shrine in the archaeological area of Zubair, and its walls were painted with henna.

Before the advent of the "Black Pope," people usually turned to the tribal elders if there was a disagreement or a quarrel. The Afro-Iraqis were semi-tribe members or even fell just short of that status; the Sheikh (head of the tribe) could easily have overlooked their rights, or give advantages to others at their expense just because they belong to the tribe only superficially and are different from the real descendants of the tribe (i.e. those who descend from one lineage). As a result of



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this partial assimilation, Afro-Iraqis could not form a family tree on their own, so people started to go to Jalal Dhiab seeking solutions for their problems, knowing how long he had been fighting to stop the humiliation of Black people. Thus, the traditional power of the tribal Sheikh dissolved, and a new form of authority was created that attracted Black Iraqis to a force difficult to interpret without understanding the history of the Iraqi people from the Zanj Rebellion until today. When Jalal awakened this spirit, he had already crossed the red line, challenging several symbolic and real authorities around him.

Jalal started a fund to help Afro-Iraqis organize their marriage receptions and provide all their requirements, as the newfound spirit of Afro-Iraqis needed a consistent and absolute joy to overpower their sad past. But the most important thing he offered was the establishment of a school to teach Afro-Iraqis to read and write, which focused, through their lessons, on social and cultural education. The association's building, like Noah's Ark, stood firm in the middle of the flood of Afro-Iraqis' slums. The Black Pope's ship opened its doors for those who wanted to be free from marginalization and neglect, and the residents of the slums flocked around the association's building in Al-Zubair's archaeological area, attracted to a hidden force, as these are the areas where the majority of the Afro-Iraqi people settled after the foundation of contemporary Iraq and their subsequent emancipation from the authority of the preachers and feudal lords.

But the dream that Jalal Dhiab awakened was silenced with bullets in 2013. Such a movement threatened political Islamist parties which were imposing a different culture in the country and viewed it as a side-effect of America's damaging influence that could threaten the ideological identity that they had been forcibly imposed on people. Such a memory, however, cannot be silenced for long. Seven years after the assassination of Jalal Dhiab, the murder of George Floyd awakened the Iraqi Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of equality and combating discrimination in Iraq, and became evidence that it will never end, and may awaken a similar dream for all Middle-Eastern Africans.



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