



Arab Reform Initiative

Bawader / Commentary, 4 December 2020

# Mobilizing against Anti-black Racism in MENA: A Reader



"Untitled" by Moroccan artist M'Barek Bouhchichi - © Courtesy: Galleria Valentina Bonomo and the artist



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The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA, in May 2020 prompted a global surge of demonstrations in solidarity with the “Black Lives Matter” movement and has ushered in one of the most significant and wide-reaching anti-racism movements in recent history. While much of the world is slowly coming to terms with the painful racial histories that fuel present-day discrimination and tensions, the issue of racism in MENA and the region’s role in the slave trade have long been left either unacknowledged or explicitly denied. This denial reinforces entrenched systems of oppression, marginalization, and social exclusion with wider implications on the lives of MENA communities. Societies from Rabat to Sana’a are not as inclusive as they claim to be. Deeply ingrained racial prejudices continue to be a source of suffering and marginalization for diverse minorities, including black communities.

Despite the recent growth of interest in anti-racism in MENA, scholarly and literary work on the subject remains sparse, and history books have either glossed over the plight of black people in the Arab region or ignored the part they play in the region’s social dynamics.

As part of an effort to promote more regional discussions on the issue and our commitment to fight discrimination in the region, the Arab Reform Initiative is putting together a series of papers (as part of our Bawadar series) on [anti-Black racism in MENA](#) in an attempt to raise awareness about anti-black racism in Arab countries and highlight the mobilization that is taking place by anti-racism activists in the region. As a part of this effort, we are also compiling this reader list to draw attention to key academic and artistic works (in English, French and Arabic), but also to bring and keep the issues of anti-black racism at the forefront of public debates and actions.

This list – although not exhaustive – presents works chronicling the history of Black communities in MENA, Afro-Arab experiences, and anti-Blackness in the region. We aim to regularly update it to highlight new authors and works. If you think there is a book or paper that needs to be added to this reader, please email us at the address provided above with a link to the paper or book and a few words as to why you think it should be added.



## ACADEMIC WORKS IN REVERSE CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

- **Haroon Bashir (2019): “Black Excellence and the Curse of Ham: Debating Race and Slavery in the Islamic Tradition.” *ReOrient*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2019, pp. 92–116. DOI: 10.13169/reorient.5.1.0092**

In his paper, Bashir explores the debate and discourses surrounding blackness and the story of Ham. The historical debate on the prestige or lack thereof of blackness in Islamic tradition has been the source of much debate among scholars.

- **Stephen J. King (2019): “Black Arabs and African Migrants: Between Slavery and Racism in North Africa”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/13629387.2019.1670645**

In this article, King traces the results of the largely novel mobilization for equality by Blacks in North Africa during the Arab Spring. It looks at how slavery and virulent racism have been reinvigorated in some areas, while how in other areas the Maghrebi white majorities have taken tentative steps to, for the first time, acknowledge their countries’ legacies of racial slavery and oppression.

- **Rachel Nicole Schine (2019): “On Blackness in Arabic Popular Literature: The Black Heroes of the *Siyar Sha'biyya*, Their Conceptions, Contests, and Contexts”, *Electronic Thesis, The University of Chicago***

In her dissertation, Schine provides a pioneering study of racial difference, and specifically blackness, in premodern Arabic popular literature. She also links the dynamics of pre-modern and modern thought in relation to racial logic in the Arab-Muslim world through cross-cultural philosophical and medical analysis.

- **Corbin Treacy (2018): “Reframing race in the Maghreb”, *French Cultural Studies*, DOI: 10.1177/0957155817738675**

In this article, Treacy analyses how black Africans are represented in the



contemporary Maghreb through the examination of various media, including news, films, and novels. His work calls for a disciplinary realignment in North African cultural studies to recalibrate the field's focus equally on both "Africa" and "North".

- ***Alice Bellagamba & Sandra Greene (ed.) (2016), African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade, Volumes 1&2, Cambridge University Press.***

Volume 1 of this 2-part set provides a multitude of African sources for studying African slavery and the slave trade. The second volume explores diverse sources such as oral testimonies and African intellectual writings to discover what they can tell us about slavery and the slave trade in Africa.

- ***Nicholas C McLeod (2016), "Race, Rebellion, and Arab Muslim Slavery: The Zanj Rebellion in Iraq, 869 - 883 C.E.". Electronic Theses and Dissertations. Paper 2381. <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/2381>***

The Zanj Rebellion was a rebellion of enslaved Zanj against the Abbasid Caliphate, described by some as one of the bloodiest and most extensively covered rebellions in the history of the region. In his dissertation, McLeod examines the role that race played in this rebellion through socio-historical investigation with a structured analysis of race stratification.

- ***Touria Khannous (2014), Black-Arab Encounters: Representations of Blackness in Arabic Literature.***

Khannous' book explores images and writings of Blackness in Arabic literature from the pre-Islamic period to modern day. Through examining representations of Black Africans in Arab writings and contrasting them with African literature, the author illuminates how Blackness and race is understood in the Arab consciousness and how anti-Blackness and racism in the region is perpetuated as a result.

- ***Chouki El Hamel, Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam, 2013.***



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El Hamel's book explores the history of the enslaved Black population of Morocco from their initial enslavement in the 16th century up until the early 20th century. *Black Morocco* examines the history of race and the institution of slavery in Morocco and presents an original analysis of racial issues, as well as those of religion and gender in North Africa. Through chronicling the history, identity, experiences, and achievements of Black Moroccans, El Hamel brings to the forefront a long-overlooked subject in North African scholarship.

- ***Terence Walz and Kenneth M. Cuno, Race and Slavery in the Middle East: Histories of Trans-Saharan Africans in 19th-Century Egypt, Sudan, and the Ottoman Mediterranean, 2011.***

In light of the rediscovered sources and archives on slavery that have surfaced in the past 40 years, this book examines the lives and histories of the hundreds of thousands of Africans who were forcibly migrated to Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean region. Walz and Cuno's book uses archival records and personal accounts to chronicle the lives of non-elite trans-Saharan Africans in the region.

- [Ibraheem Mahmoud \(2009\), Invisible Walls: Anti-Black Racism](#)

In *Invisible Walls: Anti-Black Racism*, the author seeks to explore anti-Blackness in the Arab world that manifests in conscious and unconscious practices and attitudes targeting Black populations in Arab societies.

- ***Tidiane N'Diaye (2008) Le génocide voilé: Enquête historique***

In his book on the treatment of black Africans in the Arabo-Muslim world, N'Diaye seeks to shed light on how the question of race and slavery has been absent from the majority of literature in the region. He covers 13 centuries of history, detailing how 17 million people have been silently and invisibly killed, castrated, or enslaved.

- ***John Hunwick (2007), West Africa, Islam, and the Arab World: Studies in Honor of Basil Davidson, Markus Weiner Publishers.***



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This study, which provides an overview of the region's history from medieval times to the twentieth century, traces the developments following colonialism; the effects of Arab nationalism on West African politics; the role of the Israelis in helping to develop new states; the politics of OPEC; and the rise of Islamic extremism.

- Nader Kadhim (2007), *Representations of the Other: The Image of Blackness in the Arab Imaginary*

Kadhim's seminal book, *Representations of the Other: The Image of Blackness in the Arab Imaginary*, explores Arab cultural imagination and identity in relation and in juxtaposition to the Black "Other". The author delves into representations of Blackness and Black people in Arab cultural products, and how shifting standards of inclusion has informed Arab identity in opposition to Blackness.

- **John O. Hunwick (2005): "A Region of the Mind: Medieval Arab Views of African Geography and Ethnography and their Legacy", *Sudanic Africa*, 16, 103-136.**

In his article, Hunwick explores Arab perceptions of Africa during the medieval ages. His historical outlook describes the context which has given birth to current thinking. While lamenting the lack of modern studies that deal with race and colour in the Arab/Mediterranean world, Hunwick's article provides valuable insight into the perceptions of centuries past.

- **Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban and Kharyssa Rhodes (2004), *Race and Identity in the Nile Valley: Ancient and Modern Perspectives*.**

Fluehr-Lobban and Rhodes' volume explores various issues of race, racism, ethnicity, and identity in Egypt and Sudan from ancient to modern times. Throughout the articles featured in this work, authors offer a critical examination of racial-hierarchical paradigms in the region, including Egyptian and Sudanese attitudes towards racial identity and colour and the issue of race in relation to the civil war in Sudan.



- **Stephen Sheehi (2004), *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity*.**

Sheehi's original study examines the formation of modern Arab identity through exploring the work of a number of intellectuals, reformers, journalists, and writers in the 19th century. Through looking at the texts of these figures, the author offers a history and framework of analyzing Arab identity – including those who are often left behind in these conceptualizations.

- **David M. Goldenberg (2003), *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*.**

In his book, Goldenberg conducts a religious analysis of historical discourse on Blackness in a study examining almost 1,500 years of texts. Focusing on the Abrahamic religions, he explores how mentalities towards Blackness have developed and been shaped in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic societies.

- **Eve T. Powell (2003), *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan, 2003*.**

This book examines Egypt's nationalist response to colonialism and the paradoxes of the "triangle of colonialism" that was Egypt, Great Britain, and Sudan. Within these nationalist discourses, Powell illustrates Egyptian attitudes towards race and slavery during the 19th and 20th centuries.

- **Murray Gordon (1998), *Slavery in the Arab World*.**

In this book, Gordon provides a comprehensive portrait of slavery in the Arab World, complementing historical research with sociological commentary. He addresses contemporary dynamics of slavery in the Arab world while situating them in their historical and religious contexts.

- **Bernard Lewis (1990), *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Inquiry*.**

*Race and Slavery in the Middle East* explores the history of slavery in law, social



thought, and practice over a period spanning more than 1,500 years. He also discusses the European perspective of slavery in the Middle East and the impact of regional practices on current dynamics.

- ***Ahmad Alabi (1961), The Zinj Rebellion and its Leader Ali Ibn Mohammed***

Ahmed Alabi's book looks at the Zinj Rebellion with a particular on its leader, Ali Ibn Mohammed, and the political, social and economic factors behind the rebellion and the reasons that led to its failure.

- Faisal al-Samer (1954), The Zinj Rebellion

Faisal al Samer explores the Zinj Rebellion, a Black slave revolt led by Ali Ibn Mohammed during the Abbasid Caliphate (9th century). It chronicles the history of Iraq's Black enslaved population, the social and economic conditions leading up to the rebellion, and the circumstances that enabled them to revolt.

## LITERARY WORKS IN REVERSE CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

- ***Farid Ramadan (2018), The English Ocean***

Ramadan's novel chronicles the sinking of an Arab slave trader's ship on its way to the Arabian Sea, and the aftermath of this event. It centres on the lives of the enslaved Africans who were rescued from the wreck and brought to Muscat, where they lived for a short while before their eventual dispersal. It also follows the story of a young Baluchi man who is kidnapped and brought to Muscat to be sold into slavery. The two narratives and their characters intertwine to create a captivating portrayal of the history of slavery in the Arabian Peninsula.

- ***Tahar Ben Jelloun (2016), The Pleasure Marriage***

Amir, a successful merchant from Fez, temporarily marries Nabou, a Peul from Dakar, where he comes yearly for business. He finds himself in love with her and



offers to bring her back to Fez. She accepts, becomes his second wife, and gives birth to twins. One white, the other black. As adults, the twins followed different paths. The White is perfectly integrated. The Black lives a difficult life and fails to offer his son, Salim, a better horizon. Salim will soon, in turn, become victim to the colour of his skin.

- ***Hammour Ziada (2014), The Longing of the Dervish***

Set in 19th century Sudan during the collapse of the theocratic state, Ziada's novel follows the story of Bakhi Mindeel, a freed slave who is newly released from prison and seeking revenge for his imprisonment and for the murder of his lover. A love story taking place during the end of the Mahdist war, Ziada weaves love, religion, and social conflict with Sudan's tumultuous political situation.

- ***Haji Jaber (2012), Samrawit***

Jaber's novel follows the life of Omar, an Eritrean man raised in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and his search for identity. Always treated like a foreigner amongst Saudis and having witnessed the discrimination his fellow Eritreans face in Saudi society and its institutions, he is adamant that Eritrea is his home, until he realizes the abuses endured by Eritreans at the hands of their government. Samrawit weaves together the realities of both Eritrea and Saudi Arabia, finding commonality both in this character as well as the countries' shared mistreatment of Eritreans themselves.

- ***Ali Al-Muqri (2008), Black Taste, Black Odour***

Award-winning author Al-Muqri's novel explores the living conditions of akhdam Yemenis and the struggles they face in their daily lives. Examining questions of racism and social integration, he presents a compelling narrative based on historical research into Yemen's poverty-ridden slums.

- ***Mahmoud Trawri (2001), Maymouna***

Hailed as "the most important contemporary piece of fiction on enslaved Africans



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of the Arabian Gulf”, Trawri’s novel *Maymouna* centres on the lives of West African migrants in Saudi Arabia who fled from British colonization in the African continent, only to be kidnapped and enslaved in Mecca.

- ***Tayeb Salih (1966), Season of Migration to the North***

Often regarded as one of the best novels in modern Arabic literature, Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* recounts the story of a young man returning home to his village in post-colonial Sudan in the 1960s, where he meets the mysterious Mustafa Saeed, who tells him troubling stories of his time in England. Widely influential in the field of post-colonialism, the novel reckons with the aftermath of European colonialism and its effect on contemporary Sudanese society.



## About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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