Iraq - Black Iraqis

Profile

Black Iraqis are largely the descendants of East African migrants and slaves whose presence in Iraq dates back to the ninth century. Community leaders estimate their numbers today may be as high as 1.5 to 2 million. They are located mostly in southern Iraq, with the largest community residing in Basra. The majority of black Iraqis identify as Shi’a Muslims, although the community also maintains some African traditions and spiritual practices.

Historical Context

The African presence in Iraq dates back to the ninth century, when Baghdad was the capital of the prosperous Abbasid Caliphate. It was then that a robust slave trade developed between the East Coast of Africa and the port city of Basra, which would continue in one form or another for close to a millennium. Some African migrants also came to the region as sailors or laborers. Slaves worked in agriculture, as servants in the homes of aristocratic families, and occasionally as soldiers. Many were initially given the arduous task of converting salt marshes into agricultural land through manual labour. The strenuous nature of this work contributed to the outbreak of the Zanj rebellion in Basra in 869, which lasted nearly fifteen years. The rebellion reportedly involved half a million slaves and led to the creation of a self-ruling capital, before it was violently put down by Baghdad.

Slavery formally ended in the 19th century, although blacks apparently continued to be used as domestic servants in wealthy households. Moreover, the legacy of slavery contributed to long-term patterns of marginalization and discrimination against Iraqis of African descent. The community never developed an educated class nor did black Iraqis rise to positions of power in the country, although membership in the Ba’ath party reportedly provided some with access to government jobs during the Saddam Hussein era. Many earned a living as musicians, and were sought after to perform at weddings and other festivities in southern Iraq.
After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, black Iraqis began to organize and develop a political consciousness for the first time. The Free Iraqi Movement, the first political association to defend the rights of black Iraqis, was founded in 2007. Spurred by the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, many black Iraqis began to advocate for an end to discrimination and a greater role in Iraqi politics. Several members of the movement ran for the 2010 provincial elections in Basra, though none were elected. In 2013, in the aftermath of local council elections, the founder of the Free Iraqi Movement, Jalal Thiyyab, was assassinated in central Basra. Reportedly, no official investigation was launched into the investigation and the killer was not brought to justice.

Current issues

The assassination of Jalal Thiyyab was a major blow to black Iraqis’ political activism, and the minority remains underrepresented in politics and other aspects of public life. Unlike other communities, black Iraqis do not have a parliamentary quota or any official recognition as a minority. There is little appetite in Baghdad to change this reality, since black Iraqis are Muslims and are not seen as being in need of positive measures.

Black Iraqis continue to face systematic discrimination and marginalization. They are continually referred to as ‘*abd*’ (slave) and their communities suffer from disproportionately high illiteracy and unemployment rates. The community has not developed a professional class and not a single black Iraqi holds a high level position in government. Many cannot find employment other than as labourers or domestic workers. Those who make a living through music and dance have had their livelihoods threatened by hardline Islamist groups who rose to prominence after 2003 and disapprove of such activities.

Neighbourhoods inhabited by black Iraqis, especially Basra’s Al-Zubeir district, are characterized by extreme poverty and neglect. Many black Iraqis live in one-room mud brick houses that sometimes hold 15 residents or more. Many of their neighborhoods also lack a clean water supply and proper sewage facilities, and are prone to electricity shortages. Reportedly, some black Iraqis lack nationality documents for reasons connected to the history of slavery, and are therefore unable to access public services.

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