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**LIVING IN THE SHADOWS**  
**THE ENDURING**  
**MARGINALIZATION**  
**OF BLACK IRAQIS**

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International Republican Institute  
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*Living in the Shadows*  
*The Enduring Marginalization of Black Iraqis*

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*Cover Image Description: Iraqi members of the "Movement of Free Iraqis", a political party formed by the black descendants of African slaves, listen to their secretary Jalal Dhiab during a gathering in Basra.*

# FOREWORD

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The research conducted in this report took place in December 2019 and provides a qualitative picture of perceptions of select Basrawi residents on the inclusion of Black Iraqis (the preferred term for Iraqis of African origin) in Iraq's political and economic landscape.<sup>1</sup> As the study was conducted prior to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, it does not reflect the stresses placed on Black Iraqis and Iraqi society as a whole resulting from the current health emergency.

Black Iraqis live in the shadows of Basrawi and Iraqi political, social and economic life. As the second installment in our four-part research series, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has sought to better understand the Black Iraqi community's experience and the potential for democratic political solutions to the community's challenges. Questions regarding the social and political inclusion of Black Iraqis in Basra, their lack of political representation and their barriers to participation are the focus of this study.

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<sup>1</sup> As definitions of race and ethnicity are not straightforward, IRI has used "Black Iraqis" to describe the community, using a simplified translation of the terminology Black Iraqis themselves use, ذوي البشرة السمراء. For clarity, IRI has used "Arab Iraqis" to describe non-Black Iraqis. The Black Iraqi community has existed in Iraq since the eighth century, when the Abbasid Empire enslaved Blacks from the Zanj region (present-day coastal Kenya, Tanzania and northern Mozambique) and brought them to Basra. Saloum, Sa'ad. "Minorities in Iraq: Memory, Identity and Challenges." *Masarat for Cultural and Media Development*, 2013, [masaratiraq.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Minorities-in-Iraq.pdf](http://masaratiraq.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Minorities-in-Iraq.pdf).

# APPROACH

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In December 2019, IRI conducted a qualitative research study focused on the southern Iraqi province of Basra, at a time when much of Iraq was engulfed in citizen-led protests. The study sought to gain an understanding of local perspectives on the protest movement, minority inclusion, public-service delivery, corruption, foreign influence and governance. This is the second report in the series derived from that study, the first of which was *“Nurid Watan! We Want a Homeland!” Basrawi Perspectives on the 2019 Protests in Basra Province.*<sup>2</sup>

IRI contracted the research firm Al-Mustakilla (IIACSS) to lead eight focus-group discussions (FGD) with 64 Basrawi residents (referred to as “Basrawi discussants”), as well as 10 in-depth interviews (IDI) with Basrawi political, civic and religious leaders.

- The participants of all FGDs were separated by gender and grouped into age ranges of 18-35 and 36-65.
- Two FGDs included only Iraqis of African ancestry (“Black Iraqis”) between the ages of 18 and 65.
- Four FGDs were held with Basrawis between the ages of 18 and 65 who had not personally participated in the protest movement.
- Two FGDs were held with Basrawis between the ages of 18 and 35 who had participated in the protest movement.

As is common with qualitative research, findings from this study do not necessarily reflect the opinions of all residents of Basra (referred to as “Basrawis”) but point to broader trends. Quotes in this report were minimally treated as necessary to improve clarity. The originals were preserved to the largest extent possible, including errors in syntax and word choice.

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<sup>2</sup> *“Nurid Watan! We Want a Homeland!” Basrawi Perspectives on the 2019 Protests in Basra Province.* International Republican Institute, 2020, [iri.org/sites/default/files/basra-3.pdf](https://iri.org/sites/default/files/basra-3.pdf).

# BACKGROUND

Black Iraqis have lived in Iraq for centuries – most of their ancestors were enslaved under the Abbasid Caliphate in the eighth century. They were from what are now coastal Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique (known then as the Zanj), as well as Zanzibar, Ethiopia and other locations in sub-Saharan Africa, to work in southern Iraq's farms and salt marshes.<sup>3</sup> An estimated 1.5 to 2 million Black Iraqis – a majority of whom identify as Shiite Muslims – live in Iraq today, with populations centered in Basra and some neighborhoods in Baghdad.<sup>4</sup>

The issues affecting Black Iraqis are indelibly tied to issues of racial inequality seen throughout the Middle East, driven by persistent stereotypes with ancient and enduring origins. Both the Abbasid and Umayyad Caliphates utilized racist perceptions and religious mythology to justify exploiting and subjugating Black Iraqis. During the Abbasid Caliphate, Iraq was the center of East African slave trade, utilizing the port in Basra to import millions of slaves for centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Depictions of Africans and Black Iraqis in ancient secular and religious literature – some of which is still taught in Iraqi schools today without a critical examination of endemic prejudices – contributes to an enduring "othering" that marginalizes and excludes Black Iraqis. While some of the cultural practices that Black Iraqis' ancestors brought from Africa – including dances, musical instruments and songs – have been kept alive by the community, Black Iraqis have frequently been treated as only qualified to entertain, and are not taken seriously as wanting political or economic advancement.<sup>6</sup>

Slavery in Iraq was officially abolished in the nineteenth century, and Article 14 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution stipulates legal equality without discrimination based on race. However, the legacy of slavery has an enduring negative impact on the Black Iraqi community.<sup>7</sup> Most noticeable is the dehumanizing, disturbingly common practice of referring to Black Iraqis as "*abd*" (slave), which encapsulates the "otherness" and subjugation that Black Iraqis experience.

Persistent discrimination has manifested in poor literacy rates, high unemployment and

“When you see children calling [Black Iraqis] like that, it means their parents taught them wrong because they could teach them to say 'Black' instead of '*abd* (slave).’”

— Female Arab Iraqi discussant,  
18-35 years old

<sup>3</sup> Slave traders during the Umayyad Caliphate also brought African slaves to southern Iraq. McLeod, Nicholas C. "Race, Rebellion, and Arab Muslim Slavery: the Zanj Rebellion in Iraq, 869–883 C.E." *University of Louisville Department of Pan-African Studies*, 2016, [ir.library.louisville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3436&context=etd](http://ir.library.louisville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3436&context=etd).

<sup>4</sup> "Black Iraqis." *Minority Rights Group International*, Nov. 2017, [minorityrights.org/minorities/black-iraqis/](http://minorityrights.org/minorities/black-iraqis/).

<sup>5</sup> Saloum. "Minorities in Iraq: Memory, Identity and Challenges."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Slavery was officially abolished in 1924 by a royal decree from Faisal I bin Hussein bin Ali al-Hashemi, king of Iraq 1921–1933.

little to no social mobility for Black Iraqis.<sup>8</sup> Black Iraqis experience high poverty rates and low educational-attainment rates in their communities.<sup>9</sup> The Al Zubeir district in Basra, a neighborhood predominantly inhabited by Black Iraqis, ranks in the lowest per-capita income quintile.<sup>10</sup> The impact of poor or inadequate services in the governorate is compounded in the impoverished areas where Black Iraqis live.

Today, Black Iraqis remain completely unrepresented in Iraqi politics. Despite efforts to encourage a pluralistic, inclusive Iraqi democracy following the removal of Saddam Hussein, there has never been an effort to even discuss the representation of Black Iraqis — despite attempts to enhance the inclusion of religious and other ethnic minorities. Despite the community's size, approximately 5 percent of the country's population, no member has even been elected or appointed to provincial

or national government positions, nor has a legislative quota been allocated — a common practice for other minority groups in Iraq.

Emerging leaders within the Black Iraqi community have been harassed and even killed by fellow Iraqis for their political activism. In 2013, Jalal Diab, the Black Iraqi founder of *Ansar al Huriya* (Movement of Free Iraqis), was assassinated after his organization supported two Black Iraqi candidates for provincial election, one of whom was also targeted for assassination.<sup>11</sup>

The Black Iraqi community aspires to genuine equality through stronger integration and representation in Iraq's multi-communal polity. As the Black Iraqi community continues to struggle against centuries-long discrimination and marginalization, there is a long road ahead on its journey to equality.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Finding 1

**Deeply ingrained racial stereotypes, driven by the community rather than government, portray Black Iraqis negatively and reinforce their political exclusion and economic marginalization.**

The legacy of the habits originating in the eighth century persists today. Discussants and interviewees from both Arab Iraqi FGDs admitted that they sometimes used the slur *abd* to identify members of the Black Iraqi community. Many said that they use this description in front of Black Iraqis, and some rationalized it as a term

of endearment. One older male Arab Iraqi said, "They like it [being called *abd*], because they are joyful and kind people." One Arab Iraqi provincial councilor claimed he believed the term *abd* is ancient and not currently used to describe the community, despite Black Iraqis' contention that people use the term often. He later shared that

<sup>8</sup> "Black Iraqis."

<sup>9</sup> Ethnoreligious minority groups presently have nine dedicated quota seats (of 352) in parliament and many provincial legislatures also have similar quotas.

<sup>10</sup> "Basrah Governorate Profile." *UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, 2009, [reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/84897081D33A30B8C1257600003214AA-Full\\_Report.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/84897081D33A30B8C1257600003214AA-Full_Report.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> "UN Envoy Deplores the Assassination of Jalal Diab in Basra." *United Nations Iraq*, 27 Apr. 2013, [uniraq.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=894:un-envoy-deplores-the-assassination-of-jalal-diab-in-basra](http://uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=894:un-envoy-deplores-the-assassination-of-jalal-diab-in-basra).

“We are outcasts here, and I think it is all due to ignorance.”

— Female Black Iraqi discussant, 18-65 years old

Black Iraqis “tend to be in simple jobs because they are simple people with great sense of humor,” underscoring stereotypes about the community’s supposed inferiority and simple-mindedness.

Other Arab Iraqi discussants described Black Iraqis as “moody” or, as one older Arab Iraqi woman shared, “We need to pick the appropriate words in order not to provoke them.” Others relayed anecdotes about racist stereotypes involving Black people being unclean: “They [Black Iraqis] mock themselves and joke when they tell us to clean their hands after shaking hands with them,” shared a male 18-35-year-old Arab Iraqi discussant.

In nearly every case, discussants qualified statements by affirming either that they had Black Iraqi friends, that Black Iraqis were happy/joyful/simple, and that the community itself was happy with that description. Multiple times, Arab Iraqi discussants noted their appreciation for Black Iraqis’ musical and cultural talents, frequently citing their performances at weddings, and

relegated Black Iraqis to “simple” jobs because of implied inferior intelligence. According to one male Arab Iraqi religious leader who was interviewed, “[Black Iraqis] are full of joy and happiness; they are very joyful and kindhearted. They have dark skin, but a white heart and they suffer just like us because they are part of this country.”

These perspectives were common across gender and socioeconomic lines but were not universal. Younger Arab Iraqi discussants expressed more supportive, less discriminatory perspectives toward the Black Iraqi community than older discussants, who more frequently denied or questioned the prevalence of discrimination. A few Arab Iraqis rejected calling Black Iraqis *abd* and some recognized the contradiction between their use of this word and their views about the community. One young male Arab Iraqi defended his use of the term *abd* by explaining that his best friend is a Black Iraqi, and argued, “I know that this word might be harmful but we don’t mean that they are really slaves, we mean that they are dark-skinned people [...] however, we must get rid of this term.”

**Some of them [Black Iraqis] are educated with good qualifications, but they don’t have the ambition to carry responsibility.**

— Male Arab Iraqi religious leader interviewee

**We don’t suffer from discrimination from the government. We only suffer from the bias of the community.**

— Female Black Iraqi discussant, 18-65 years old

Unsurprisingly, Black Iraqi discussants viewed the way that others speak to and about them as offensive. Discussants linked the continued use of the term *abd* to not seeking more prominent positions in government and business, as they felt that being called *abd* publicly was demeaning and humiliating. A female Black Iraqi discussant said,

"Nobody listens to us and people look at us with contempt." She added that the community is not visible in the media, which fuels misinformation and stereotyping. She argued that the community needs to address these stereotypes and engage the wider Basrawi and Iraqi public to overcome prejudices.

Other discussants emphasized the bullying and insults they endured from non-Black Iraqis, causing some to retreat from engaging with the wider

Basrawi community. They also relayed that some families prohibited interracial marriage. One Black Iraqi female discussant stated, "When a Black Iraqi male asks a white [Arab Iraqi] girl to marry him, her parents reject him because of his skin tone." None of the Black Iraqi discussants blamed the government for racism, but rather viewed it as a societal shortcoming. As one male Black Iraqi discussant shared, "The government has nothing to do with those racists. It is not the fault of the government, but [rather] it is the fault of those ignorant people."

## Finding 2

### **Black Iraqi discussants want more representation in government but are skeptical about its feasibility.**

Discussants said perspectives and stereotypes negatively affect Black Iraqis' electoral chances despite the size of the community.<sup>12</sup> Discussing Black Iraqi political candidates, one former provincial councilor interviewee said, "They tend to be in simpler jobs [and] I know a lot of them would prefer to support someone in the election rather than run in the elections themselves," ascribing preferences that Black Iraqis themselves did not affirm. Other Arab Iraqi discussants remarked that they had not considered Black Iraqis' absence from the political scene until the issue was raised in the FGDs.

Conflating government responsiveness and inclusion, an older female Arab Iraqi discussant shared, "The government does not listen to the white nor the Black [Iraqi] communities. On the other hand, we have seen officials representing Kurds, Christians and Sunnis, et cetera in Parliament, but we haven't seen anyone representing the Black [Iraqi] community." While the majority of discussants made condescending statements about the Black Iraqi community, when asked about whether they would vote based on ethnic backgrounds, all of the Arab Iraqi discussants

“ I intend to nominate myself [as an electoral candidate] to break our fears and [fulfill our] need to have political representation.”

— Male Black Iraqi discussant

affirmed that they would vote for any qualified electoral candidate regardless of race.

<sup>12</sup> Iraq's current electoral system treats each province as one electoral district, rather than having smaller electoral districts that could allow Black Iraqis to leverage the population in Al Zubair administrative district to secure a seat in the provincial council or Parliament.

Several Black Iraqi discussants said they would welcome the opportunity to run for political office – noting the importance of making their voices heard, supporting their communities and tackling stereotypes. However, these discussants fear harassment if they participate in politics. One Black Iraqi male discussant reported that “[Black Iraqis] are vulnerable to insults from the community because of their dark skin color. They are afraid to participate in [politics] where they may be addressed as *abd*, even if they are qualified and have a strong educational background.” Another Black Iraqi discussant shared his belief that “People with dark skin are highly qualified, and some are doctors, but people stop them from being involved in the provincial council.”

Across all FGDs, the control of traditional political parties over Basrawi politics was brought up, with several discussants noting how little room there is for new political movements or ideas that challenge the status quo. The hurdles faced by Black Iraqis are, by extension, even higher than those any other newcomer to politics would face, given their notable absence from current party membership. The 2013 assassination of activist Jalal Diab, the first Black Iraqi activist to gain a national profile, and the attempted assassination of one of the two Black Iraqi provincial council

### Finding 3

#### Views on whether Black Iraqis should be a legally defined minority and allocated quota seats vary widely.

Across the FGDs and interviews, discussants revealed mixed feelings about defining Black Iraqis as an official minority — a definition that could lead to reserved quota seats in legislatures. While some discussants – both Arab and Black Iraqi – thought such a step would benefit the Black Iraqi community and ensure its representation within provincial and national bodies, others

candidates his organization was supporting appear to overshadow the community’s political aspirations, as noted by an Arab Iraqi political-party leader interviewed for this study.

**I want to nominate myself for the elections to raise my voice.**

– Female Black Iraqi discussant

**My wife was nominated [to run in the elections], but her pictures were removed from the streets.**

– Male Black Iraqi discussant

Despite wanting increased representation, discussants of both races stressed that racial, religious or ethnic identity was not the primary determinant in choosing representatives. A Black Iraqi female discussant argued that she would prioritize integrity in a candidate over race, despite her desire to see qualified Black Iraqis represented in politics.

**I don’t care about the skin color, religion or sect, like I care about having a candidate that will serve us and work for the sake of the country.**

– Male 18-35-year-old Arab Iraqi discussant

noted that this sort of definition would highlight its “difference” in a province that is religiously homogeneous, except for the presence of very small communities of Christians and Sabean Mandaean,<sup>13</sup> which has meant that there are no reserved minority-quota seats within Basra’s representatives in Parliament. According to one young male Arab Iraqi, “They don’t need a

<sup>13</sup> Sabean Mandaean are a religious minority located in pockets of Iraq who practice a complex, ancient religion. Their beliefs and rituals can be traced to Mesopotamian times and incorporate Gnostic and pre-Christian motifs, especially related to water, baptism, and John the Baptist. For more information please see: <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/sabian-mandaeans/>

representative or a quota because they are not different from us! Why shall we make them feel that they are different?"

**All of the sects and minorities are coexisting and integrated in this community without any discrimination – but giving them a quota is about maintaining their rights.**

– Male Arab Iraqi discussant, 18-35 years old

While Black Iraqi discussants frequently expressed frustration with their absence in parliament or provincial councils, quotas were not proposed as a solution. Instead, many Black Iraqi discussants focused on combatting stereotypes. As one female Black Iraqi shared, "I believe that people should end discrimination and stop judging people based on their skin color in order to develop our community." Others hoped that Black Iraqi political leaders would emerge to lead by example.

**I will not vote for a [Black Iraqi] candidate to represent me just because of his skin color. I would rather consider integrity as a priority.**

– Male Arab Iraqi discussant, 18-35 years old

**“ They need to have a representative that will fight for their rights. Appointing an [Arab Iraqi] to represent them is not effective and [therefore] they need to have a quota.”**

– Male Arab Iraqi discussant,  
18-35 years old

Neither Arab nor Black Iraqi discussants considered Black Iraqis to have been denied civil-service positions, nor did they feel that the community suffered from lower-quality governance because of its race. While all discussants noted the paucity and poor quality of government services and the ineffectiveness of employment schemes in alleviating unemployment, discussants considered this to be a governance issue rather than a matter of discrimination. One Black Iraqi man shared, "As a Basrawi citizen, I have the right to be provided with education, health and other services; but instead, schools are in bad condition and we suffer from excessive heat in the summer and cold in the winter because school buildings are poor. Regarding health services, we have to pay [bribes] even when we visit government hospitals." While political inclusion alone cannot fix these structural issues, some discussants maintained that more direct representation of their community can ensure that attention is drawn to the shared issues that Basrawis face.



*An Iraqi girl holds her sister as she stands outside her home in Basra.*

## CONCLUSION

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The findings of this study underscore the pressing need for more responsive governance that meets the needs of all Iraqi citizens – an issue IRI will examine in greater depth in the next installment of this series of FGD data and interviews. For Black Iraqis living in Basra, the consequences of these governance failures are compounded by the continued prevalence of racism and social discrimination – preventing them from achieving social equality and participating fully in the political life of their country. Many Arab Iraqi discussants seem oblivious to the fact that their preconceived notions about Black Iraqis' aspirations are racist and exclusionary.

While Iraq's legal framework does not condone racism or discrimination, prejudice and discriminatory practices are widespread and culturally endemic, which puts the Black Iraqi community at a disadvantage when seeking political power or civic voice. The insights gleaned from Basrawis interviewed for this study provide a valuable starting point for better understanding the persistence and manifestation of these inequalities, and can lay the groundwork to promote broader awareness of the plight of Black Iraqis in Basra.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Initiate nationwide anti-racism awareness campaigns to explain the demeaning history of the term *abd* and promote conceptions of Iraqi society that are inclusive of Black Iraqis.
- Initiate dialogues to encourage cross-cultural engagement – especially with young Iraqis – on stereotypes and inequalities, while emphasizing the shared aspiration of all Iraqi communities for citizen-centered governance and improved service delivery.
- Expand efforts to integrate and build the capacity of Black Iraqi political candidates and civically engaged youth to enable them to join mainstream political parties and compete in elections.
- Encourage community organizing and public advocacy campaigns led by civil society, to raise awareness of the discrimination endured by Black Iraqis and counter their social, economic and political marginalization.
- Inspire political leaders and movements to expand the inclusion of the Black Iraqi community members at all levels of government.

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