The reality of Islamic racism, slavery and ANC hypocrisy

Compiled by Tony Stone

The African National Congress (ANC) has cultivated strong, active partnerships with specific Arab and Muslim groups, particularly those focused on the Palestinian cause, while strengthening diplomatic ties with various Arab nations. This support is driven by a combination of historical solidarity, political strategy, and ideological alignment, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And yet the ANC's relationship with the Arabs (Islam) could be described as "Dancing with the Devil."

Islam teaches that all humans are equal in the eyes of God, irrespective of race, color, or ethnicity. The Quran states that diversity in colour and language are "signs of God" (Qur'an 30:22). Despite these teachings, anti-black racism exists within some Muslim communities and societies, often linked to historical biases and the legacy of the Trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave trades. Black Muslims may face prejudice regarding marriage, leadership, and social interactions in certain Arab-Muslim majority countries.

Abeed (or *abīd*, plural of *ʿabd*) is an Arabic word meaning "servant" or "slave" that is widely recognized as a racist, derogatory slur against Black people in the Arab world. Dating back to the Arab slave trade, this term is used to describe people of African descent, often resulting in discrimination and social marginalization. The term is frequently used as a slur against African Americans and Black Palestinians, sometimes referring to their neighbourhoods as *habs al-abeed* ("slaves' prison").

The term is commonly used by some Arabic speakers in the Middle East and has been reported in communities within the Arab diaspora, such as in Dearborn, Michigan. The term is also known and used within certain communities in South Africa, primarily within the context of the Muslim community, though it is widely recognized as a derogatory slur rather than a standard religious term.

"Al-Abeed" (or *Harat al-Abeed*), meaning "neighbourhood of the slaves" in Arabic, is a term used to describe a neighbourhood in the Al-Jalla'a district of Gaza City, primarily inhabited by Afro-Palestinians. This area is home to descendants of African migrants and slaves, who often face racial discrimination and social marginalization within Gaza. There are about 11,000 Afro-Palestinians. The community consists of descendants of African Muslims from countries such as Chad, Sudan, Nigeria, and Senegal, often brought to the region during Ottoman times or who arrived as pilgrims. The community is described as impoverished, facing challenges such as social exclusion, limited employment, and few options for marriage outside their community. Afro-Palestinians in Gaza face "double discrimination," experiencing both social racism within Palestinian society and systemic challenges. While many inhabitants are integrated into Palestinian society, this area holds this historic, though derogatory, designation

The relationship between the ANC and various Arab nations is a complex mix of modern historical solidarity, shared political interests, and undercurrents of racial tension, with the term "*abeed*" representing a significant point of controversy and contradiction.

While the ANC holds a staunchly abolitionist and condemnation-oriented attitude towards slavery, viewing it, along with colonialism and apartheid, as a foundational injustice that caused deep economic, psychological, and social scars throughout Africa, they conveniently look past and ignore the reality of the historical 1200 years of the Arab African slave trade.

Arab slave trade

The Arab slave trade (also known as the Trans-Saharan or Indian Ocean slave trade) was a centuries-long system of human trafficking that predated the transatlantic trade by roughly 700 years and lasted significantly longer. The trade began around the 7th century (roughly 652 CE) following the Arab invasion of North Africa and continued into the early 20th century. Historians estimate that between 10 to 18 million Africans were enslaved and transported during this period. Slaves were moved north across the desert to North African hubs like Egypt, Libya, and Morocco. Slaves were also exported from East African ports (like Zanzibar) to the Middle East, India, and as far as China.

Unlike the transatlantic trade, which primarily sought men for physical plantation labour, the Arab trade had a higher demand for women and specific roles. Roughly three women were captured for every one man. Women often served as domestic servants or concubines in harems. Men were used as soldiers, agricultural labourers, or palace guards. A significant number of male slaves and young boys were castrated to serve as eunuchs, leading to high mortality rates during the procedure.

One of the earliest formalizations of the trade was the Bakt, a 7th-century treaty requiring Nubian leaders to provide hundreds of slaves annually to Arab rulers in Egypt. Zanzibar became a massive epicentre in the 19th century, where up to 50,000 slaves were traded annually at its peak. Arab-Berber merchants settled along the coast, blending with local populations to form the Swahili culture while establishing clove and spice plantations that relied heavily on slave labour.

Decline and Abolition

Pressure from European powers, particularly the British, led to the legal end of the trade in hubs like Zanzibar by 1873, though enforcement took decades. Slavery remained legal in parts of the Arabian Peninsula until the 1960s. Mauritania was the last to officially abolish it in 1981, though it did not criminalize the practice until 2007. Many scholars refer to this trade as a "veiled genocide" because of the high death tolls during desert crossings and the assimilation practices that often erased the African identities of the enslaved. While historical systems of organized slave raiding have largely been abolished, modern-day slavery affecting Black Africans in the Arab world persists through two primary channels: chattel slavery (in countries like Mauritania) and migrant exploitation (notably in Libya and the Gulf States).

1. Persistent Chattel Slavery: Mauritania (99% Sunni Muslim)

Mauritania is often cited as the last remaining stronghold of traditional chattel slavery, where people are born into servitude based on their race. Members of the Haratin community—descendants of Black Africans enslaved by Arab-Berbers—continue to be treated as property, inherited by masters and forced to work without pay. Although Mauritania officially abolished slavery in 1981 and criminalized it in 2007, enforcement remains weak. According to the Global Slavery Index by Walk Free, Mauritania has one of the highest per capita rates of modern slavery in the world.

2. Migrant Auctions and Forced Labor: Libya (94-97% Sunni Muslim)

The collapse of state authority in Libya has created a vacuum where sub-Saharan African migrants are frequently captured and sold. Slave Markets: Investigations by CNN and Al Jazeera have documented "slave markets" where African migrants fleeing war and poverty are auctioned for as little as $400 for farm work. Abuse: Migrants from countries like Nigeria, Eritrea, and Sudan are often detained by militias, beaten, and subjected to forced labour or sexual exploitation until they can pay a "ransom".

3. The Kafala System: Gulf Cooperation Council (approximately 80% Sharia Muslim)

In many Arab states, the Kafala (sponsorship) system creates conditions that many human rights organizations equate to modern slavery for African and Asian migrant workers. Legal Control: Under Kafala, a migrant worker's legal status is tied to a single employer (*kafeel*). Workers often cannot change jobs or leave the country without their employer's permission. Exploitation: This frequently leads to passport confiscation, non-payment of wages, and physical abuse. Countries with high prevalence of these issues include the Arab States, which have a modern slavery prevalence of 10.1 per thousand people—the highest regional rate globally.

Interestingly, official IRGC rhetoric often positions the Islamic Republic as a defender of oppressed people globally, particularly those in Africa who have suffered under historical colonialism and Western-led slavery. Conveniently forgetting about the Arab slave trade, that the colonial British put an end to it and that the Palestinians racially discriminate against their Afro-Palestinians. In addition, the fact that the Arab slave trade (sometimes referred to as the Islamic or Oriental slave trade) was generally larger in terms of duration, geographic spread, and total number of people enslaved compared to the transatlantic (Western-led) slave trade is ignored. And the fact that Britain and the US Union (Whites), in their 000s, fought and died to put an end to slavery.

The irony is clear. The ANC is dancing with the Devil.

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