

## **“Cultural racism is a problem in the Middle East and North Africa”: Qualitative research about black racism in the Arab world and the MENA region**

*„A kulturális rasszizmus probléma a Közel-Keleten és Észak-Afrikában”: Kvalitatív kutatás a feketéket érintő rasszizmusról az arab világban és a MENA-régióban*

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**Submitted** (beérkezett): 2024.12.02.

**Out for review** (lektorálásra kiküldve): 2024.12.06.

**Accepted** (közlésre elfogadva): 2025.06.10.

### **Abstract**

Racism is found all around the world, in every country, and every city. Racism is manifested in diverse forms. However, racism towards Afro-Arabs is a social issue that is not properly identified in the Middle East and the MENA region. In this study, using discourse analysis as a method, I concentrate on answering the question of how Black Arabs experience cultural racism and how destructive it is in the Middle East and the MENA region. Additionally, the goal of this study is to learn more and have a deeper understanding of the racism that Afro-Arabs face in the region. Africa, the ancestral home of humankind, has long been a source of racism, similarly to the other continents. This issue is primarily discussed in the West but is less discussed in Arab countries. To understand racism towards Afro-Arabs, it is essential to clarify the historical backgrounds and acknowledge the issue from the perspective of Afro-Arabs themselves. To understand how racism in the Middle East and the MENA region is different from racism in the West, it is crucial to examine existing frameworks from the West and activists' speeches and actions regarding cultural racism in the Middle East and the MENA region.

**Keywords:** Black Arabs, racism, cultural racism, MENA region, discourse analysis

### **Absztrakt**

A rasszizmus az egész világon, minden országban és minden városban jelen van, és sokféle formában nyilvánul meg. Az afro-arabokkal szembeni rasszizmus azonban olyan társadalmi probléma, amelyet a Közel-Keleten és a MENA-régióban még nem azonosítottak megfelelően. Ebben a tanulmányban a diskurzuselemzés módszerét alkalmazva a szerző arra összpontosít, hogy megválaszolja, hogyan élik meg a fekete-arabok a kulturális rasszizmust, és milyen romboló hatásai vannak a Közel-Keleten és a MENA-régióban. Emellett a tanulmány célja, hogy mélyebben megértsük az afro-arabokat a régióban sújtó rasszizmust, és többet tudjunk meg a jelenségről. Afrika, az emberiség őshazája, a többi kontinenshez hasonlóan régóta a rasszizmus forrása. A kérdést elsősorban Nyugaton tematizálják, az arab országokban kevésbé. Az afro-arabokkal szembeni rasszizmus megértéséhez elengedhetetlen a történelmi háttér tisztázása, és a kérdés megismerése az afro-arabok szemszögéből. Ha meg akarjuk érteni, hogy a Közel-Keleten

*és a MENA-régióban tapasztalható rasszizmus mennyiben különbözik a nyugati rasszizmustól, elengedhetetlen a nyugati keretrendszerek összevetése az aktivisták beszédeinek és tevékenységeinek vizsgálatával a Közel-Keleten és a MENA-régióban tapasztalható kulturális rasszizmussal kapcsán.*

**Kulcsszavak:** afro-arab, rasszizmus, kulturális rasszizmus, MENA-régió, diskurzus-elemzés

## **Introduction**

Racism is found all around the world, in every country and in every city. Still, racism towards Afro-Arabs is a social issue that is not properly identified in the Middle East and the MENA region. Therefore, this qualitative paper seeks to explore how Afro-Arabs experience racism in the Middle East and the MENA region.

One thing to keep in mind when conducting research on this subject is that definitions and perspectives of certain terms can vary from nation to nation, and from place to place. It is also important to understand the differences between racism, and cultural racism. I will discuss general issues related to these topics as well as the ones specific to Africa. Africa is the ancestral home of all humankind (Cann et al., 1987), but racism has always existed and persisted against Africans worldwide. Racism against persons of African descent is a problem that is primarily discussed and studied in the West. Even though the conversation about race, racism, and the traumatizing impacts of racism is one that society is still adjusting to (Francois & Davis, 2022), racism against Black Arabs is not discussed as openly in the Arab countries as it is in the global North, due to viewing it as a “taboo topic.” In this study, I address questions of how racism is experienced by Afro-Arabs, of its severity in the Middle East and North Africa and study the topic from an Arab and North African perspective. To understand racism towards Afro-Arabs, the historical background of Africans and Arabs should be clarified. To acknowledge the issue from the point of view of Afro-Arabs themselves, it is significant to address the problem that has persisted for a long time but is not yet identified in the society. Learning about and answering questions about the subject is one thing; combating the problem is quite another. Fighting cultural racism is a complex issue that cannot be summarized in just one article.

## **Background**

### ***Definitions***

Terms such as cultural racism, decoloniality, intersectionality, racial discrimination, anti-Black discrimination, and Eurocentrism are at the center of discussions. What is cultural racism, and how is it viewed? It places more emphasis on the cultural distinctions than on the biological indicators of perceived superiority or inferiority based on race (Encyclopedia of race and racism, n.d.). According to Cook (1993), cultural racism is a comparative social process that leads to the subjugation of an “outgroup” by an “ingroup,” which measures the value or merit of members of the outgroup using its own group as the positive standard.

Decoloniality critiques the perceived universality and superiority of Western (Eurocentric) knowledge hierarchies and the systems or institutions that reinforce these perceptions (Quijano, 2007). Intersectionality has only recently come into widespread use. It was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw twenty-eight years ago to help illustrate how

African American women experience oppression. Over the years, Crenshaw's scholarly term has influenced legal discussions and is now central to national conversations about identity politics, policing, and racial justice (Columbia Law School, 2017). The concept of intersectionality refers to the connections between, and mutual reinforcement of, the different forms of oppression and domination. "(Institutional) structures make certain identities the consequence of, and the vehicle for vulnerability...(and) play a role in contributing to the exclusion of some people and not others..." (Crenshaw, 2016).

According to Hilizah (2022), racial discrimination refers to prejudice based on someone's race. Race has no exact meaning in sociology and cultural anthropology, but it can relate to individuals who share similar visible and quantifiable attributes, such as physical traits like height or hair, or it can refer to the biological classification used to categorize human variations. Hilizah (2022) also mentions that anti-black discrimination is a form of institutional and systemic racism. It occurs when there is prejudice and discrimination against black people of African origin. She further explains that anti-blackness ideology seeks rationalizations in the combination of skin tone and the location of origin, intertwined with certain forms of slavery.

The term "Eurocentrism" is crucial for understanding this research. Eurocentrism refers to the practice of viewing events through a European lens or perspective (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In the context of cultural racism, Eurocentrism neglects the experiences of non-Western communities and can perpetuate and reinforce racial hierarchies by prioritizing European cultures, knowledge systems, and historical narratives. A Eurocentric approach is but one way to approach what cultural racism is. Racism in Europe is founded on a complex combination of ethnicity, country of origin, dialect, physical characteristics, religion, and (assigned) foreignness (Ball et al., 2022). Considering the subject from a European perspective can help grasp the issue.

How do we address cultural racism or racism in a more general sense? There are varied approaches to discussing this subject, and one of these is the post-colonial approach. This approach critiques and challenges Eurocentrism and examines racism and cultural racism from a non-European perspective. It also challenges the structures, ideologies, and power relations that were established during the colonial era, continuing to shape societies today. The post-colonial approach, using decoloniality, aims to highlight the voices, histories, and agencies of colonized peoples, helping to deconstruct the dominant narratives and representations produced by colonial powers.

Another way to approach cultural racism is through understanding race-making processes. Race-making refers to exploring the active cultural and institutional processes involved in constructing and maintaining socially constructed racial categories, drawing on critical race theory and intersectionality (Marx, 1996). Racialization refers to the idea of different "racial" categories arising from the transformation of social and historical differences, intertwined with systems of power, inequality, and exploitation through social practices and discourses. Instead of being fixed, biologically determined, or inherent, these categories are socially constructed (Balibar, 2004, 2017).

### ***Historical background***

To interpret the racism perpetrated towards Afro-Arabs, it is imperative to know the historical backdrop of Africans and Arabs, which started with the African migration. According to Rodriguez-Flores et al. (2016), this migration happened around 125,000 to 60,000 years ago.

As pointed out by Hunwick (2005), the Arabs of the Ḥijāz and Yemen had a certain knowledge at least of Ethiopia, known as “al-Ḥabasha” in Arabic, prior to the advent of Islam, before the year 520. Africans have been known to the rest of the Arabs since around 610 CE. Ethiopia was the destination of the first “hijra”, meaning the migration of persecuted Muslims from Mecca in 615 CE. Ethiopians maintained respect in the eyes of Arabic writers who extolled their virtues. Because of Ethiopia's closeness to both Egypt and Arabia, as well as the connections between Ethiopian Christianity and Coptic Christianity, the region continued to pique Arab attention, and various Arab writers wrote about it (Hunwick, 2005).

The common history of the Arabs and Africans continued in the seventh century when the earliest slave trade known to the Arabs took place. According to Gakunzi (2018), the Arab slave trade lasted for more than thirteen centuries and was a significant aspect of African history. It started in the seventh century and lasted until the 1960s. As stated by González (2020), Tunisia was the first Arab and Muslim nation to outlaw slavery in 1846, before several Western nations, including the United States (UNESCO, n.d.). However, slavery remained acceptable and lawful in Morocco until 1922. The transatlantic slave trade has been the subject of several studies. Ironically, nothing is known about the Arab-organized slave trade in the East and the Trans-Saharan region; it appears to be a topic that is intentionally avoided and banned (Gakunzi, 2018).

Looking at Africans and Arabs today, Human Rights Watch (HRW) cited by Gebeily (2022) reported that thousands of Ethiopians and Somalis risk their lives every year to escape persecution and violence, or to look for employment in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. However, many of them end up stuck in Yemen, where the ongoing conflict makes their condition even worse.

Despite the massive cultural racism that Black Arabs face, there is limited research on the topic of cultural racism in the Middle East and the MENA region. As racism and human rights are major concerns in social work, it is important to reflect on, and analyze the speeches of activists in the Middle East who have spoken up about the issue. Black Arabs are Arabs, and they will continue to live there and try to build their lives despite the racism that they must deal with and the extremely hard life situations that they face. They need to be integrated into society. This qualitative research aims to explore how and why racism towards Afro-Arabs is a major concern in the Middle East and the MENA region and how it affects their everyday lives.

### **Research questions**

Racism is a pervasive issue that exists worldwide. How do Black Arabs experience racism specifically in the Middle East and the MENA region? Is discrimination based on their skin color or historical background? How severe is the racism towards Black Arabs in the Middle East and the MENA region? What are the solutions and implications for the Afro-Arabs facing racism? And finally, is it visible to the Arab society that there is racism specifically towards Black Arabs, or is it an issue that is not properly identified?

## **Study design**

### ***Discourse analysis as a method***

Using discourse analysis within the broad area of qualitative research, this paper studies the communication, speeches, and actions of local activists who have been vocal about the problem in their events to reach a deeper understanding of the problem. According to Healy & Mulholland (1998), discourse analysis covers a wide range of topics related to communication, such as the differences in talk patterns between cultures and groups. The philosophical underpinnings of practice theories, such as activist practice models, have been emphasized and criticized through the application of discourse analysis techniques (Leonard, 1996; Rojek et al., 1988). The general goal of discourse studies is to increase and/or improve our comprehension of how people construe their social environment in text and talk (Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 2001).

Thus, discourse analysis investigates language, communication, and vocabulary, focusing on how particular words, phrases, and sentence structures are manipulated in specific contexts to achieve certain goals. Discourse analysis refers to how various forms of language build meaning and examines spoken and written language in its social context (Newcastle University, n.d.). Usually, larger linguistic segments are examined (Tannen, 2012). Studying the reasons behind how discourse markers or phrases can convey distinct meanings to readers or listeners is a key goal in the analysis.

### ***Sample***

By using specific keywords (Black Arab activists, MENA, Anti-racism activists, Middle East, North Africa, Afro-Arab rights activists, Black identity, MENA region, Racial justice movements, Arab world, Afro-Arab discrimination activism), I searched Google to collect information on activists in the Middle East and the MENA region who have advocated for years about the issue and fought against racism in the different countries. These activists have devoted their lives not only to amending the problem but also to informing societies that this issue exists and should be addressed.

A total of four local activists' speeches, fourteen texts were analyzed, focusing on blogs, interviews, resources on major achievements, and speeches regarding racism towards Black Arabs. These activists were all highly educated individuals who worked as academics, researchers, or politicians. They are well known in their respective countries and have dedicated their lives to improving their nations' futures. One interpretative framework was also analyzed to deepen the understanding of the topic.

### ***Data analysis***

The discourse analysis to answer the research questions was conducted by the author. To explore the message that the speakers intended to convey about the topic, the author examined a variety of online quotes from different activists.

## **Results**

Is there racism towards Afro-Arabs in the Middle East and the MENA region? There are several local Arab activists who have spoken about the issue of Afro-Arabs during their events, speeches, or blogs. One of these activists is Khaled al-Khamissi, a well-known novelist from Egypt, an instructor at universities, and a cultural activist. He has spoken about cultural racism in the Middle East and authored an online article under the topic “The Controversy Surrounding Racism – Are Arabs Racist?” He asserted that racism is the idea that a person's attributes and skills vary depending on the color of their skin; and it may occasionally be expressed as a division between various religious beliefs (al-Khamissi, 2020). In one of his essays, he raised the following questions: “Are Arabs racists? Are Egyptians racists? A question that was once a priority has quickly become submerged beneath those issues most relevant to our daily struggle today” (al-Khamissi, 2020). This was the first sentence in his essay, and analyzing this text confirms that the question whether Arabs are racist is a particularly prominent social issue that should be continually addressed. However, Arabs are ignoring it because they claim that they have more important things to deal with. He used a question to grab the reader's attention and open the discussion before he began to dive into the topic. He continued by saying, “Owing to the breadth of the subject, the sensitivity surrounding it, and the difficulty of undertaking serious opinion polls in the Arab world, the jury would still appear to be out” (al-Khamissi, 2020). In this sentence, he is implying that there is a huge gap regarding the topic of whether Arabs are racist, and it is an overly sensitive topic to talk about in Arab society. We can conclude from the last statement “the difficulty of undertaking serious opinion polls” (al-Khamissi, 2020) that there is a hierarchy in the Arab world and authoritarian power over such topics. He is inviting the reader to understand how, in Arab societies, topics such as racism remain silent: “The social and legal system of the Umayyad and Abbasid states and their successors was one that clearly discriminated against people” (al-Khamissi, 2020). Here, he contrasted the historical and the contemporary social and legal systems. The most frequent contents related to this theme are ‘Arab’ (10 occurrences) and ‘slave/slavery/slaves’ (21 occurrences). By this, he drew our attention to the fact that certain Arabs might have prejudices because of the ancestry of a person. In this case, Black Arabs are viewed as less important in the society because of their history of slavery in Arab countries. According to al-Khamissi, a person's roots and origins are decisive when construing racism in the Middle East.

Another advocate on the subject of Black Arabs is the Egyptian scholar Hilmi Sharawy, who has spent decades attempting to decolonize “African Studies” in Egypt by criticizing the British-built departments and research facilities, and speaking up against Arab nationalist views of Africa while pointing out that pre-Islamic Africa is seen as a tabula rasa (Aidi, Lynch, & Mampilly, n.d.). Hilmi Sharawy spent his whole life trying to stop the division between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa to view it as one unit. He won several prizes and was honored at various events due to his novel approach to African studies. Additionally, Abou-El-Fadl (2023) mentioned that he had also conducted fieldwork in Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Ghana for a report on the Arab diaspora populations in Africa. His efforts to counteract racism in mainstream Arab culture and cultural essentialism in some Arab historiographies are continuously maintained in his contributions on the subject of racial relations between Arabs and Africans (Abou-El-Fadl, 2023). Adding to his achievements, Sharawy's writings and encouragement of translations from English have further enhanced the body of information about Africa in the Arab world. He co-translated anthropologist Archie Mafeje's book *African*

Social Formations in 2007 and translated sociologist Kwesi Prah's publications, such as those on African languages for mass education in 2001 (Abou-El-Fadl, 2023).

An Afro-Arab activist who has fought against racism towards Black people in Yemen is Noman Al-Hothaifi. Previously employed as an inspector at the Ministry of Public Works in Yemen, he made the decision to resign and pursue advocacy after meeting a Yemeni mother who had been expelled from the hospital along with her child because they were Black. Al-Hothaifi said, "I felt I had the obligation, as a Black person myself, to speak against this injustice" (United Nations, 2023), emphasizing the fact that, as a Black Arab himself, he saw it as a significant issue that needed to be addressed. He started the sentence by identifying this as an obligation, which draws the reader's attention to the fact that this is not a simple issue of choice that can be avoided. He continued, "And this is how my struggle against racial discrimination in Yemen all started. I wanted to defend the rights of my people, to fight for them" (United Nations, 2023). Using "to fight for them" as a concluding sentence shows that he wanted to send a strong message, signaling that fighting for his own people would not be easy, but he was ready to do it. As he claimed, "Black Yemenis were merchants, nobility, and royalty" (United Nations, 2023). By using such words in the same sentence, he wanted to highlight that Black Yemenis had been respected members of the society and had held a high social status. Using past tense ("were"), he has emphasized that it happened only in the past, and now they are treated very differently. Not only that; but by starting with the word "Black," which he used in many of his quotes, he makes the reader focus on the fact that their status changed due to the color of their skin. In another quote, "Black children are constantly bullied in Yemeni schools" (United Nations, 2023). Starting with the word "Black" again strengthens the message, making it clear that their treatment is rooted in their race. This communication style convinces the reader of his point of view, which was Al-Hothaifi's aim. Further, he asserted: "Arab culture is all about customs and traditions, and ours are quite discriminatory against Black people; they dictate how we should get married and how we should bury our dead" (United Nations, 2023). By starting with discussing "culture," he wants the reader to understand that traditions and culture are deeply rooted in the Arab society. He refers to "we," indicating his inclusion in, and identification with the Black Arab community that is being controlled by the traditions and culture. His quote can also be interpreted to show how deeply personal practices like marriage and funerals are connected to both a person's private life and to society. Additionally, Al-Hothaifi played a key role in the founding of numerous civil and human rights groups that served Yemen's African diaspora. His presidency of the National Union of the Marginalized, which he founded in 2007, was the most well-known of these. He also founded the Marginalized Voice News (United Nations, 2023).

Lastly, I would like to mention the activist and former member of the Tunisian parliament, Jamila Debbech Ksiksi, a Black Arab. Ksiksi played a significant role in Tunisia's anti-racism campaign. After the 2011 revolution, she worked with Black civil society members in Tunisia and Sub-Saharan Africa to act against anti-Black racism (Parikh, 2023). Parikh (2023) continued to mention that Ksiksi became the first Black woman to have a seat in the Tunisian parliament in 2014. She was also the first person in the history of Tunisia to speak about the racism that Black people faced and fought against it in a plenary session. Parikh had a conversation with Jamila Debbech Ksiksi, and in the interview, she noted, "I became the first Black woman [to be in parliament] in the whole white Arab world" (Parikh, 2023). She began by mentioning her struggles concerning her own intersectionality, emphasizing that not only is she Black but also a woman, and that she was the first Black woman to take a seat in parliament in an Arab country where everyone else is white. This sentence can be read in more depth: it

signifies how remarkable her achievement was in 2014. She continued: “I spoke up for the cause of anti-racism, as well as the issues of gender and Africanness” (Parikh, 2023). Previously, racism was not discussed in Tunisia. Her mentioning anti-racism first to be followed by gender emphasizes her focus on racial issues. Throughout the interview, she claimed: “It is terrible, and it is shameful” (Parikh, 2023). These words reveal the guilt and concern she felt during the conversation and her deep pain witnessing such issues in her country. Speaking in the Parliament and trying to convince the people of Tunisia that racism against Black Arabs existed and should be abolished took her three years, from 2016 until 2018 (Parikh, 2023). After three years of effort, a law was passed in Tunisia (Law 50) that made racial discrimination illegal (Parikh, 2023). Ksiksi mentioned that her presence in the parliament was needed to have the bill passed in these three years. With this, she wanted to highlight that, had she not been there, it would have been much more difficult to address the issue. She also noted that racism is completely denied in the Tunisian or Arab society, and this is why it was so remarkable that the law passed relatively quickly – given the situation. The law was an outcome of joint civil activities and her own efforts (Parikh, 2023). Parikh (2023) asked: “What do you think is the reason for this lack of recognition?” She responded: “I think it is culture” (Parikh, 2023). This specific answer can be interpreted in different ways. By using the word “think,” Ksiksi might imply that she believes culture is the reason, but there might be other factors as well. In conclusion, Jamila Debbech Ksiksi’s achievements were outstanding and she made history in Tunisia; however, unfortunately, Ksiksi passed away in a car accident on December 19th, 2022 (Parikh, 2023).

### ***Interpretative frameworks***

Analyzing theoretical frameworks has yielded new insights into cultural racism. One framework that I would like to analyze is the framework proposed by Aidi, Lynch, & Mampilly (n.d.), under the topic “Racial Formations in Africa and the Middle East: A Transregional Approach,” a comparative analysis of racial formation in Middle Eastern and African regions (Aidi et al., n.d.). This framework of transregional comparative racial formations looks at how the differences in skin tone, ancestry, or language become the foundation for oppressive policies and governmental actions that exclude people (Aidi et al., n.d.). According to Aidi, Lynch, and Mampilly (n.d.), “race” can be defined in numerous ways. In a more general sense, people utilize the term to refer to human differences; in Foucauldian terms, racialization is the process by which states generate and re-create distinctions (or “caesuras”) within human populations to control these populations (Aidi et al., n.d.). Further, Aidi, Lynch, and Mampilly (n.d.) stated that several definitions focus on (anti)Blackness or specific physical traits and phenotypes. Racial formation is mentioned in this framework in several ways. Racial formation is a concept that goes beyond essentialist or oversimplified conceptions of race (Aidi et al., n.d.). They refer to Michel Omi and Howard Winant's 1986 book *Racial Formation in the United States*, who define racial formation as the procedure by which racial concepts shape categories of race; and by which economic, political, and social factors define the content and significance of racial categories (Aidi et al., n.d.). The essay also mentioned in the framework, *Racial Formations in Africa and the Middle East: A Transregional Approach*, racial formations are shaped by many factors, such as slavery, colonialism, religious beliefs, familial and “tribal” relationships, post-colonial state-building, and current migratory movements, which have influenced racial formations in Africa and the Middle East (Aidi et al., n.d.).



### ***Examining current experiences***

Examining the struggles and experiences of Afro-Arabs will enable further discussions and a deeper understanding of the subject. Afro-Arabs are found in many, if not all, countries across the Middle East and the MENA region. Gebeily, a correspondent at the Thomson Reuters Foundation in the Middle East, wrote a news article in March 2022 entitled *In Yemen, racism dooms Black people to life on the margins*. She approached the situation of Black Yemeni people by describing what they went through and continue to go through every day. She interviewed these Black Yemeni people and included many of their quotes in her article. Analyzing the quotes from the Afro-Arabs in Yemen themselves allows us to dig deeper into the topic and see things not only from an outsider's point of view but from a first-person perspective. Racism in Yemen is a significant issue, especially towards Afro-Yemenis.

Gebeily (2022) mentioned that even though Yemeni law does not discriminate between people based on skin color, activists claim that because the society is partially divided along tribal lines, people with dark skin or unrecognized ancestry have endured decades of prejudice. I want to elaborate on this topic as a Yemeni person myself. This article was eye-opening, and it helped me see things in a broader manner. I have always known that there is a large population of Afro-Yemeni people due to Yemen's history with Ethiopia and our African roots. Unfortunately, I did not know about the racism against Black Yemeni people. As a child, I heard many comments like "that Black person" or "he cannot marry a black Yemeni," and calling someone "black" was used as a curse word. What is worse is that the word "slave" was and still is used to describe Black Arabs. González (2020), a political scientist and journalist specializing in the Arab world, quotes a Black Tunisian: "People frequently refer to us by the terms 'abd' (Arabic word for slave), 'wassif' (a term slaves once went by), or 'kahlouch' (black) in our dialect." Unfortunately, this happens not only in Yemen or Tunisia, but all Black Arabs have experienced some form of verbal abuse in one way or another.

In addition, having fair or lighter skin is seen as a form of beauty. Girls with lighter skin are desired for marriage and get married first, while girls with darker skin are married later or not at all. Girls are usually told to stay away from the sun, so they will not "turn black." This also applies to men. If a man has darker skin, it is harder for him to find someone to marry because most people would not accept a person with such skin tone. According to the feminist and anti-racism activist who co-founded the Voices of Black Tunisian Women group, Khawla Ksiksi, "Black women are pushed to straighten their hair, remove their curls, and whiten their skin as a way to be accepted by society and fit in with the standards," she informed the Thomson Reuters Foundation (Barkawi, 2020). Sadly, Black men and women in the Middle East and North Africa have heard comments like "You're pretty for a black girl" or "You're handsome for a black guy," – among many others that are even worse.

However, in Islam, the most common religion in Arab countries, there is no difference between people, whether a person is black or white. According to religious books and teachings, racism should not exist, and everyone is equal. Many people conclude a discussion about racism against Black Arabs with the phrase "But we are Muslims, and everyone is equal in Islam," instead of actually discussing the issue and how to fight against it. Even though religion does not allow it, culturally and politically, racism was and still is accepted, and is not condemned openly. Many people in Yemen are not educated about racism or cultural racism due to the shortcomings of the education system. Only recently, with many activists getting more educated on the subject and starting to write about it, has talking about racism with family and friends become more accepted—though inclusion remains a minority view.

Not only is it harder for Black Arabs to get married, but it is also harder for them to build a life. It is significantly harder for them to find good jobs, even if they have a diploma. According to Black Yemenis, prejudice keeps the nation's Black population, which also includes roughly 35,000 African immigrants, out of official employment, educational institutions, and decent housing (Gebeily, 2022). Moreover, Gebeily (2022) stated that according to a U.N. Children's Fund survey, many Black Yemenis fail to register their children, with only nine percent of them possessing birth certificates (UNICEF, n.d.).

Additionally, Sharan Grewal (2018) in his article entitled *In another first*, Tunisia criminalizes racism mentioned a national survey conducted in 2018 by Afrobarometer, where for the first time, the race of the respondents was reported. According to the national survey results, Black Tunisians appear to be in a worse socioeconomic situation than other Tunisians. Black Tunisians are 15 percent less likely than other Tunisians to own a computer, a car, or a radio, and they are roughly 10 percentage more likely to live in rural areas. They have about a 10 percent lower probability of completed primary education. The most startling finding is the unemployment rate, which was 25 percent for other Tunisians, while Black Tunisians had nearly twice this rate at 42 percent.

Quotes from Afro-Arabs or Black Yemenis who were interviewed by Gebeily in her article (2022) are also revealing about these issues. An Ethiopian man commented on his position as follows “It’s absolutely no use being Black here. We are only allowed to work in garbage or cleaning.” Another man said, “Every time you feel like you are okay and starting to be integrated, that you are part of this city, something reminds you that you are not.” Not only do these people live lives far worse than non-Black Arabs and endure verbal abuse, but their lives are always under threat. They live in constant fear of being stabbed, beaten up, or even shot. One racially motivated crime that rocked Tunisia at the end of 2016 and compelled the government to act was when three Congolese students were attacked with a knife in the center of Tunis (González, 2020). Gebeily (2022) claimed that what is happening is “modern-day slavery.”

## **Discussion and solutions**

Cultural racism is a major problem that we must understand, both the whys and the hows. Fighting against racism as social workers in the Middle East and the MENA region is another issue that must be studied. The findings of this research show that Middle Eastern and North African countries still have a long way to go before racism against Black Arabs is fully abolished and the cultural changes promote inclusion. From a social work perspective, advocating for the issue is one solution that can be pursued.

Taking legislative action is also part of the solution. Tunisia with its positive traditions is currently among the first to make racism illegal (Grewal, 2018). Grewal (2018) expressed that the anti-racism law in Tunisia is meant to combat the political and socioeconomic inequality that Black migrants and Tunisians face. Racist rhetoric carries a sentence of one to three months in jail; inciting hatred, spreading notions of racial superiority, or helping a racist group can result in a sentence of one to three years in prison (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

In addition to the laws approved in some North African countries, conversations and speeches from activists indicate that many people were initially in denial of the problem. However, some have begun to speak up more about racism toward Black Arabs because of the protests. A workable solution could be one’s involvement in social movements and protests.

The influence of global movements can highlight the issues hidden in some parts of the world. For example, one of the biggest movements against cultural racism in the Middle East and the MENA region was the "Black Lives Matter in Arab Countries" movement. This protest began as a response to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, which started after the killing of George Floyd. This movement addressed an issue that had been happening for a long time in the United States. As González (2020) mentioned, the Black Lives Matter movement opened a crucial discussion regarding the continuation of structural racism in the society in the United States. It is widely established that racism is an issue found everywhere in the world. Middle Eastern countries have had racial discrimination toward Afro-Arabs for many years, which is rarely discussed. However, the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States allowed many people in the Middle East to begin speaking up about the racial discrimination they had been facing. Due to the significant backlash from the U.S. protests, equality campaigners in the Arab world now have an opportunity to address a major taboo in public discourse: racism against Black people (González, 2020).

Inspired by the worldwide Black Lives Matter movement, Ksiksi stated that Black Arab women wished to draw attention to the ongoing racial discrimination and mistreatment they experience in an area where there is a general lack of awareness of the issue (Barkawi, 2020). Tunisia was the first country to protest in the "Black Lives Matter" movement toward Black Arabs in the country. According to González (2020), hundreds of people gathered in the nation's capital at the start of June to express support for the Black Lives Matter movement and to protest the maltreatment and abuse of the Black community in the nation. It was the only protest in the entire Arab world in favor of Black Lives Matter (González, 2020).

In addition to Black Lives Matter, which helped raise more awareness about the issue and encouraged people to speak up, the ongoing Pan-Maghrebi Awareness-raising Movement against racism in Morocco also contributed to promoting awareness of racial discrimination in the Middle East (Aidi, Lynch, & Mampilly, n.d.) – another approach to raising regional awareness.

## **Implications**

Social work supports societal development, social cohesion, and individual liberty and empowerment (International Federation of Social Workers, n.d.). It is the ethical responsibility of social workers to combat racism on both personal and professional levels and to provide an example of antiracism (National Association of Social Workers, 2020). Furthermore, social work focuses on human rights. According to the *Global definition of social work* (International Federation of Social Workers, n.d.), social work is based on the fundamental values of social justice, human rights, group responsibility, and respect for diversity. However, Black people encounter discrimination—whether they are students, employees, or clients—when they utilize social work services (Dominelli, 2010). Therefore, all social workers must critically examine racism, as it is widespread, endemic, and historically rooted in systemic assumptions of racial superiority (Rodgers, 2015). Social work is all about standing up for those who are discriminated against and disadvantaged, and Afro-Arabs in this context are no exception.

Cultural racism has significant consequences for the people who face it. In other words, the human rights of individuals are taken away from them simply because they are not part of a particular culture or society. Cultural racism is a form of prejudice that limits the opportunities of different social groups within a specific society. For instance, in the Netherlands, the

government requires passing a twelve-month course where migrants learn to speak Dutch fluently and dress according to Dutch cultural standards. This is a precondition for residency and eligibility for social benefits (Siebers & Dennissen, 2015). Many international human rights organizations have condemned the Dutch government for consistently infringing on the human rights of migrants (Siebers & Dennissen, 2015).

Another example of cultural racism and its consequences involves the Māori, who are indigenous to New Zealand. Māori people needed to integrate into Pākehā (European-type) systems and culture (Addy, 2008, p. 13). Pākehā did not anticipate learning the Māori way of life; rather, Māori people were expected to adopt the Pākehā way (Consedine & Consedine, 2005, p. 209). These circumstances suggest a violation of the constitutional principle of equal treatment before the law, as well as a cultural hierarchization of citizenship into two categories: first- and second-class citizens (Schinkel & Van Houdt, 2010; Siebers, 2009b).

Black Arabs face similar consequences in the Arab world, whether in terms of culture, traditions, or language. They do not have the same human rights as Arab citizens, particularly in areas such as education, healthcare, or social security. Blackness has been constructed within Arab, African, and Islamic concepts of difference, as well as in relation to whiteness (Young & Weitzberg, 2022). According to Siebers and Dennissen (2015), racism is not based on presumed biological inferiority, but the racism conveyed in migrant-hostile discourse is primarily explained through a language of ethnicity and culture.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to note that the question “Is there cultural racism towards Black Arabs?” should not be answered from a Western perspective but within the Arabic societies and countries where it is happening. However, applying existing local and national frameworks about cultural racism and racism in general can be helpful when working on the issue. By looking at things from a cultural perspective, the experiences of Black populations in the Middle East and the racism they face, we can better comprehend the problem; the historical, social, and cultural elements that have contributed to the region's marginalization, discrimination, and the devaluation of Black people and communities.

As I have mentioned earlier, Black people were seen as equal to Muslims and were treated the same according to Islam. According to many Islamic scholars, the abolition of slavery was seen as a positive development (al-Khamissi, 2020). However, after the slave trade started, Black people were discriminated in the Arab world. This is because they were—and still are—seen as slaves or as coming from a slave heritage, which leads to them being perceived as inferior to other humans. Thus, Black people were reduced to the status of a subordinate race, treated like slaves, deprived of all their rights, and prohibited from engaging in commerce, owning property, or sending their kids to school. According to Al Hothaifi, historical prejudice eventually became ingrained in the people's customs and traditions, and this is how racial discrimination in Yemen began (United Nations, 2023).

Historically, racism in the Middle East and the MENA region has taken on distinct forms compared to the West. People are discriminated against more for their ancestry as slaves than for the color of their skin (González, 2020). Hilizah (2022) also addressed the issue of slavery: “Color and phenotype are not the sole markers of difference. Instead, racial discrimination in MENA encompasses a broader range of prejudices based not only on skin color but also on ethnicity and place of origin” (Hilizah, 2022). She continued to mention that the majority of

scholars identify the connection between skin color and place of origin with particular types of enslavement as the core cause of anti-Black sentiment (Hilizah, 2022).

Al-Khamissi (2020) has claimed that we are not far from having a racist system based on the idea that certain people are biologically inferior to others. This is something that has happened recently, in the twentieth century. Some Arab states may continue to buy and sell slaves even today. Studying the historical, social, and cultural elements is important, but the local interpretative frameworks also demonstrate how the intersections of race, ethnicity, and other aspects of social identities, such as religion and country of origin, influence our experiences of cultural racism.

In addition, when analyzing local frameworks about racism in the Middle East and the MENA region, we will be able to uncover the racial hierarchy maintenance mechanisms, as well as cultural biases and stereotypes directed against Black people. Finally, studying frameworks—whether they are local or not—will emphasize the importance of forming coalitions with other marginalized groups in the fight against systemic racism and the advancement of social justice in the Middle East and the MENA region. While studying the frameworks can be extremely helpful, one issue needs to be addressed: frameworks from outside the Middle East and the MENA region can help with understanding the topic but not with addressing it. The Middle East and the MENA region have different norms and cultural perspectives. Hilizah (2022) has claimed in her report that the MENA area and the United States have different perspectives on race. Recent events in the United States have brought racism to the forefront of the international community. Racism in the global North has been seen as a significant issue for several years, and many people are aware of this problem and are working toward abolishing it. Therefore, the frameworks about racism toward Black people are mostly from the outside.

I want to conclude this paper by a question that was mentioned by Aidi, Lynch, and Mampilly (n.d.) in their framework, which will allow for different interpretations and opinions and help raise deeper discussions on the issue: "How can local actors address questions of racial exclusion and inequality when the demand for racial politics is coming largely from outside?" (Aidi, Lynch, & Mampilly, n.d.).

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