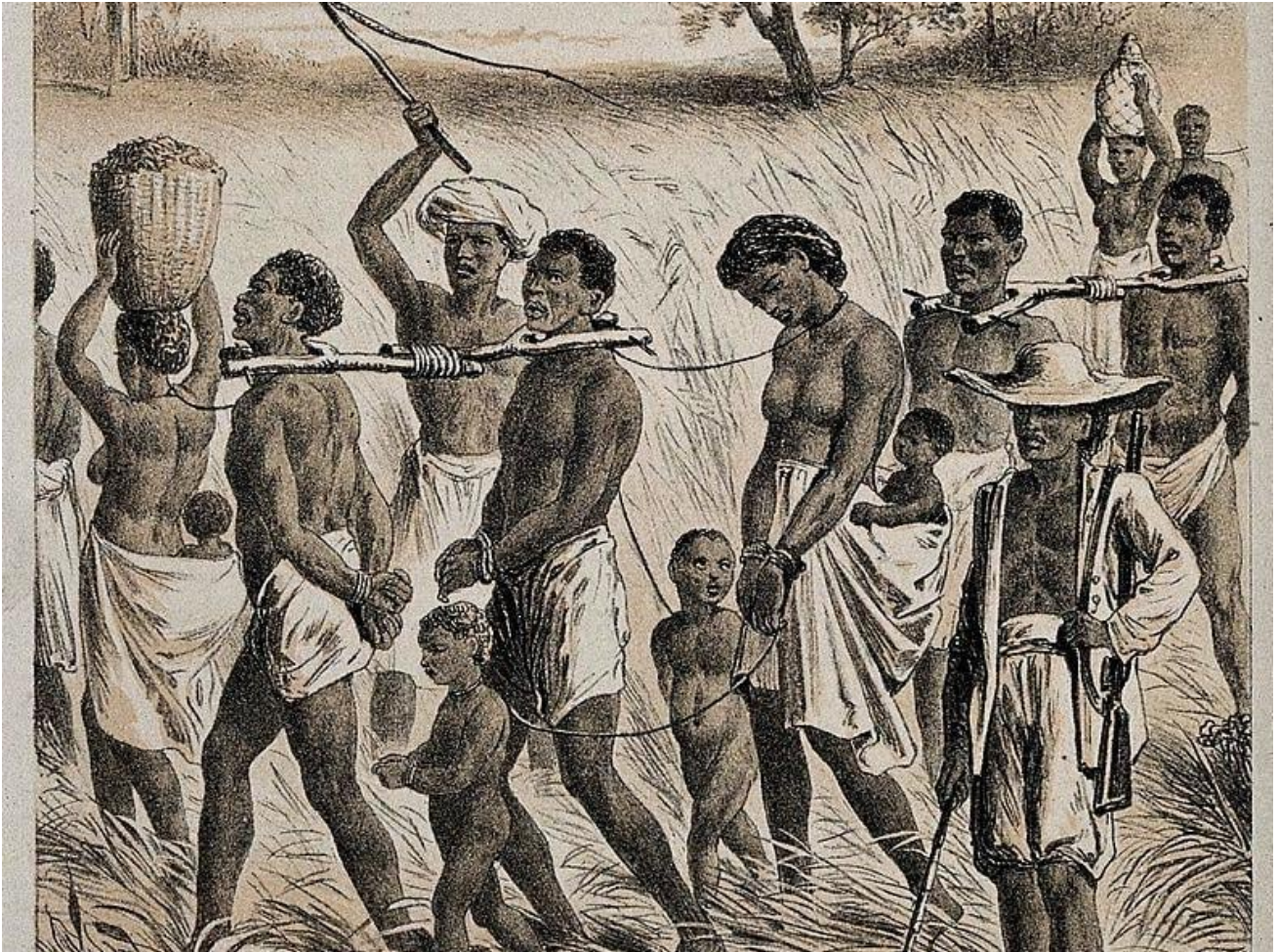


Muslim Arab Reparations for Black Africa

by Hugh Fitzgerald



On MSNBC's "Andrea Mitchell Reports" yesterday, Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX) [called for](#) the establishment of a commission that would "study reparation proposals." These proposals would be "designed for those descendants of slavery. Tragically, 250 years of slavery in the United States for those enslaved Africans did not receive workman's comp, salary, 401(k), or anything, and literally built the wealth of the United States and Europe...I think America is ready for this because of what we have been going through in the last couple of weeks, because of the attitude of our Commander-in-Chief, and because of what we have seen. The dastardly impacts

of white nationalism, white supremacy, and outright racism that has impacted others but certainly has impacted over the decades and centuries African-Americans, the descendants of enslaved Africans.”

What about reparations from Muslim Arabs to black Africans? A German-Egyptian scholar, Hamed Abdel-Samad, has created [a series of YouTube talks](#) entitled “Box of Islam,” in which he offers a critical appraisal of many aspects of Islam. Several months ago, he devoted his talk to slavery in Islam. It was a remarkable display of candor. Abdel-Samad said that 29 verses in the Quran endorse slavery and that “the Arabs enslaved the Africans more than any other nation did.” This is an important admission by an Arab scholar of Islam who has the unusual habit of saying what he believes to be true; naturally, he has endured death threats and is under police protection from Muslim fanatics even in Germany, where he lives. His main point – that the greatest enslavers of Africans have been the Arabs – should be kept firmly in mind by African states as they consider their future relations with the Arabs, and what they may legitimately demand from them.

Because of those 29 verses in the Qur’an, and because Muhammad, the Perfect Man and Model of Conduct, held slaves himself, the Arabs and Muslims were unwilling to abolish slavery. It was profoundly part of, and justified by, Islam. There never was a Muslim William Wilberforce. When the Arabs and other Muslims finally did abolish slavery, it was done under terrific Western pressure. The Royal Navy interdicted the Arab vessels carrying Africans to the slave markets of Arabia in the 19th century. But slavery continued in Muslim lands well into the twentieth century. It was abolished in Turkey in 1924, thanks to Ataturk’s determination to secularize and modernize his country; he was not impressed with the example of Muhammad, whom he described as an “illiterate bedouin.” Slavery was abolished in Iran in 1929. The Arabs of the peninsula held out much longer, but

eventually pressure from the West forced them, most reluctantly, to abolish slavery. In 1962, it was ended in Saudi Arabia and in Oman, and in Yemen in 1970.

But that is not the end of the story. For despite the official abolition of slavery in Muslim countries, there are still, today, more than a million black slaves of Arab masters. In Mauritania, there are 600,000, in Mali 200,000, and in Niger 680,000 black slaves. Furthermore, during the Sudanese civil war, northern Arabs enslaved hundreds of thousands of southern blacks. And in Libya, where many Africans arrived during the last decade in the hope of making it across the Mediterranean to Europe, those who didn't have the money for passage stayed in Libya in the hope of somehow raising the funds. Hundreds of thousands of these Africans were left stranded; thousands of these [ended up on the slave markets](#) – at least nine have been identified – set up by Libyan Arabs.

How did the Arab slave trade differ from the Atlantic slave trade? First, it began many centuries – nearly a millennium – before the Europeans started to take African slaves across the Atlantic. The first of the rebellions of black slaves (the Zanj) against Arab masters took place in Iraq in the late 7th century, which tells us that the Arab slave trade began in the very first century of Islam. We know that black African slavery in many Arab lands continued until the late 20th century, at least 100 years after it ended in the West. And surely it is significant that, as noted above, the Arab enslavement of black Africans continues right up to the present day in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and, most recently, Libya.

It is estimated that 12 million slaves were taken in the Atlantic Slave trade, with 10.5 million surviving the Middle Passage to the New World. The Arab slave trade was quite different, for a large part of it was devoted to seizing black boys who would then be castrated in the bush, of course without anesthetic, to serve as eunuchs in Muslim harems.

Those who survived the primitive operation were then marched in slave coffles from the interior either all the way up to the Muslim slave-markets of Egypt and North Africa (from Tripolitania to Mauritania), or taken by dhow to the Arabian coast, often to Muscat, and from there to the slave-markets of Islam – Riyadh and Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, even as far as Constantinople and Smyrna. In *The Hideous Trade*, Jan Hogedoornd has calculated that the mortality rate of these boy slaves, due to the conditions of their castration and subsequent forced marches hundreds of miles through the African bush, ended with between 10% and 30% of those originally seized actually managing to survive to be sold on the slave markets of Islam. Despite this mortality rate, the trade was profitable because eunuchs fetched higher prices than ordinary slaves. The best estimate now is that 14-17 million black Africans survived the trip from Africa to reach the Islamic slave-markets. Many of them were those castrated boys, to be used as eunuchs; the others taken – men, women, girls – had much higher rates of survival than the boys. It is hard, then, to estimate the actual numbers of black Africans seized by Arab slavers, but surely, given the data offered by Hogedoornd and others, it was at least several times the number who survived. At least 40 million seems a reasonable estimate – a number that far exceeds the 12 million taken in the Atlantic slave trade, the trade about which we hear so much. This wreaked havoc all over East and Central Africa, disrupting tribal societies. In his monograph on “The Wanderings of Peoples,” the British historian A. C. Haddon notes that in Africa “the slave trade, as carried on under Arab influence...contributed powerfully to the dislocation of tribes.” Damage was done to the African social order because of this slave trade, which went deep into Africa, as deep as the Congo, unlike the Atlantic Slave Trade which confined itself to the coast of West Africa where Europeans did not seize, but bought their African slaves from other Africans, many of them Muslims.

Social dislocation, and in some cases economic collapse, followed upon the activities of the Arab slavers. One thinks of Tippoo Tib, whose depredations in Central and East Africa were well known in the 19th century; he was a celebrated Arab trader (mainly in ivory) and a dealer in slaves, too; he and other Arab slavers were among the worst of the calamities visited by outsiders upon Black Africa. Unlike the European colonialists, the Arabs who enslaved 14-17 million black Africans and were responsible for the deaths of many times that number (who died on the trek from the bush to the slave markets) have never been called to account for this. The statement of Hamed Abdel-Samad is most significant: I do not remember another occasion when an Arab scholar of Islam has publicly dared to tell two home truths: first, that there are 29 passages in the Qur'an defending slavery; second, that the greatest enslavers of black Africans, by far, have been the Arabs.

Why shouldn't the countries of black Africa make some demands for reparations from those Muslim Arabs awash in oil revenues? Black Africa is poor; Western aid is being cut; out of desperation, many African countries have been selling off their resources to China.

If Black Africa is poor, some of the Muslim Arabs are fantastically rich. They have done nothing to deserve that wealth; it is merely a question of an accident of geology. The black Africans have for more than half a century done the diplomatic bidding of the Arabs at the U.N. After the Six-Day War, they dutifully cut relations with Israel, thus ending that country's very successful aid program directed at improving small-scale agricultural projects. What did they get from the Arabs for this? Nothing. A few of the African despots – the Big Men – may as individuals have made money from the Arabs, having been paid off to become Muslims. One thinks of Idi Amin, turning Muslim and then retiring for life to Saudi Arabia. Similar stories of others who “reverted” to Islam for

a payoff could be told. But there has been no visible Arab aid program to black Africa, certainly nothing on the scale of the Israeli aid programs that, prodded by the Arabs, the Africans closed down, and nothing, either, to compensate for the permanent damage done to black Africa by that "social dislocation" caused by that vast slave trade over many centuries.

Is it beyond the wit of the Infidels in the West, in Europe and America, to back up black Africa should it make demands for reasonable reparations from the Arabs? The Arab slave trade did so much damage; yet the Arabs, as Hamed Abdel-Samad says, unlike Americans and Europeans, have never publicly recognized their own significant role, much less offered the aid to Africa that has come from Europe and America. Why should the fabulously rich Arabs of Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Kuwait, and Qatar be allowed to pretend to be fellow victims of the Western colonialists, which they never were, and so, by this charade, absolved from the duty of reparations?

Somewhere, in all of those schemes and pan-African dreams, there must be some black African leaders willing and able to demand that the rich Arabs make amends for the Arab slave trade in black Africa, which began earlier, ended later, and was far more extensive, than the European slave trade, by offering what we now call reparations. If Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the U.A.E., Qatar were forced to disgorge, as penitential pence, to black Africa every year, say, \$50 billion (for the four of them together, that is only a few weeks of income from sales of oil and natural gas), it would constitute a very modest compensation for the great damage inflicted by the Arab slave trade on black Africa. That money could do a great deal of good for cash-starved African countries. It would also use up some of the revenues in those Gulf Arab countries that otherwise, inevitably, go to fund mosques, madrasas, propaganda, campaigns of Da'wa, arms acquisition, and other instruments of the Jihad.

Suppose the Arabs refused to come through with the sums requested as reparations, which for them would mean so little and for the black Africans mean so much? The very act of raising the issue of such reparations could force the Arabs to come through with an offer, if only to stop all the talk about the Arab slave trade, which would be so damaging both to their image and to the image of Islam. Until now, whenever the subject of reparations comes up, it has always had to do with reparations from the West to third world nations, or reparations within a country, as in the United States, from whites to non-whites. Talk about reparations to the black Africans from the Arabs should be accompanied by focusing the world's attention on the black slaves still being held, and mistreated, even today, by the Arabs in Mauritania (600,000), Mali (200,000), and Niger (870,000), a fact that the Arabs would prefer not receive sustained, or indeed any, attention. Nor would they relish any discussion about the full extent of their trade in African slaves over more than a millennium. They also would wish to prevent anyone bringing up the indisputable fact that 29 verses in the Qur'an endorse slavery, and that Muhammad himself owned slaves. The longer the Arabs refuse to supply such reparations, the more likely the very topics they wish to avoid will be raised – repeatedly.

The West has since the 1950s given black Africa hundreds of billions in foreign aid, which some might regard as its own form of reparations. Why should the Muslim Arabs, whose slave trade was far more extensive and brutal and disruptive than that of the Europeans. be allowed to get off scot-free? It's time for a public reckoning. The black African states have nothing to lose, and a good deal to gain, if they can shame the Arabs into making some sort of reparations. They need the money; their claim for such reparations is both riveting and convincing, one not easily forgotten. How long can the Arabs hold out, when the sums involved are for them so modest?

Demands from black Africa for reparations from the rich Muslim Arabs are not only a matter of simple justice. They will also have a beneficial effect in the West, in limiting Islam's appeal. These demands, and the reasons the African states offer as to why such reparations are justified, also make things harder for those conducting campaigns of Da'wa among black people both in Africa, and in Western countries, where black populations, especially in the prisons, have been targeted for conversion. A truthful historical narrative would show black people in the West that Islam has not been a liberating force for blacks against the "Western oppressor," but instead has justified in Muslim Arab eyes their own, much more devastating traffic in African slaves.

Both the more than 1300 years of Arab enslavement of black Africans, and the continuation of Arab enslavement of blacks even today in four countries (Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Libya) should become topics at the United Nations, raised at least as frequently as the putative perfidy of Israel. The Africans have nothing to lose. And nothing will bring back the 40 million or more Africans who were seized in the bush by Arab slavers, nor make up for the damage that the Arab slave trade did to African societies, but reparations from the rich Arabs will constitute the first step in owning up to, and making minimal amends for, a terrible history.

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