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Saudi Arabia: Treatment of racial minorities, particularly black African Saudi nationals, by society and authorities (2012-2013)

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1. Overview

Several sources indicate that there is racial discrimination in Saudi Arabia (The Guardian 28 Sept. 2012; US 19 Apr. 2013, 34; The New York Times 10 Apr. 2009). According to Freedom House, there is "substantial prejudice" against ethnic and national minorities (2013). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a professor of political science at the University of Vermont (UVM), who conducts research on and has written books about international relations in the Persian Gulf region, noted that Saudi Arabia is a "race-conscious society" where "colour is a factor in social standing" (13 Jan. 2014).

According to the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)'s World Factbook, "Afro-Asians" constitute 10 percent of the population of Saudi Arabia, while the remaining 90 percent are Arab (4 Dec. 2013). Similarly, the Frontier Post, an English daily newspaper based in Peshawar, Pakistan, indicates that 10 percent of Saudi citizens are non-Arab (The Frontier Post 10 Dec. 2013). The same source notes that 30 percent of the residents in Saudi Arabia are expatriates from countries around the world (ibid.). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Director of the Institute for Gulf Affairs (IGA), a Washington-based NGO that conducts research and investigations into Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, estimated that at least 10 percent of the Saudi Arabian population is of black African descent, but also indicated that there are no official statistics available (14 Jan. 2014).

2. Treatment of Black African Saudi Nationals

2.1 Discrimination

Several sources indicate that Saudi nationals of African descent are subject to racial discrimination (Professor 13 Jan. 2014; CDHR 9 Jan. 2014; IGA 10 Jan. 2014). According to the IGA Director, they experience discrimination in all areas and are viewed as "inferior" (10 Jan. 2014). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Executive Director of the Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (CDHR), a Washington-based NGO advocating for democratic reforms in Saudi Arabia (n.d.), stated that black Saudis experience discrimination in employment and education (9 Jan. 2014). Likewise, the IGA Director said that black Saudis have fewer employment and education opportunities (10 Jan. 2014). Several sources indicate that there are few black Saudis in leadership positions (CDHR 9 Jan. 2014; IGA 10 Jan. 2014; Professor 13 Jan. 2014). According to the IGA Director, there are no black Saudi TV presenters, university deans, judges, senior government officials or diplomats (10 Jan. 2014). The CDHR Executive Director noted that there are "few, if any, black Saudis in high ranking positions in the government, school administration, universities or judiciary" (9 Jan. 2014). According to the IGA Director, "most black Saudi citizens have marginalized positions in society" (10 Jan. 2014). The UVM Professor similarly said that black Saudi nationals "generally fall into a lower socio-economic group" (13 Jan. 2014).

According to the CDHR Director, many black people in Saudi Arabia, both citizens and non-citizens, scavenge through garbage or become prostitutes in order to survive (9 Jan. 2014). While this information could not be corroborated by sources consulted by the Research Directorate, an article in the London-based Sunday Times, which was written by a man who taught in Saudi Arabia, noted that African women scavenged through garbage in Jeddah in "undignified and unhygienic conditions" (21 Apr. 2007).

The CDHR Director also said that Saudis of African descent are subject to "stigmatization and social segregation" (CDHR 9 Jan. 2014). For example, he said that in social situations, black people are expected to "sit in the back when in the living rooms of non-blacks" (ibid.). Corroborating information on social segregation could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. According to the IGA Director, mixed marriages between races exist in Saudi Arabia, but he noted that if a black man is married to a non-black woman and the woman's brother is against the marriage, the judge will grant a divorce (10 Jan. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The US Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012 states that racial discrimination is officially "illegal" (19 Apr. 2013, 34). The Professor said that Saudi nationals of African descent formally have the same legal rights as other Saudi nationals (Professor 13 Jan. 2014). He explained that there are no legal prohibitions against black Saudi nationals or formal discrimination against them in health care or education (ibid.).

2.2 Legacy of Slavery

Sources indicate that many black African Saudi nationals are the descendants of slaves (CDHR 9 Jan. 2014; Professor 13 Jan. 2014). Sources note that slavery was not abolished in Saudi Arabia until 1964 (CDHR 9 Jan. 2014; IGA 10 Jan. 2014) [or 1962 (Professor 13 Jan. 2014; The New York Times 10 Apr. 2009)]. The UVM Professor expressed the opinion that racial discrimination generally stems from the history of slavery (13 Jan. 2013). Several sources indicate that the term *abeed*, meaning "slaves" [or *abda* "slave" (The Guardian 28 Sept. 2012)], is still being used to describe black Saudi citizens (IGA 10 Jan. 2014; CDHR 9 Jan. 2014a; The Guardian 28 Sept. 2012).

The Executive Director of the CDHR stated that "many black people are still treated as slaves by members of the royal family and the rest of society" (CDHR 9 Jan. 2014). He said that there is no official data on the number of people in the royal family, but that estimates range from 10,000 to 40,000 members (ibid. 10 Jan. 2014). The IGA Director also noted that black people continue to work for the Saudi royal family in positions of servitude in the same capacity as slaves (10 Jan. 2014). For example, many of the maids and drivers for the royal family are black Saudis (CDHR 9 Jan. 2014; IGA 10 Jan. 2014). According to the IGA Director, black Saudis may also be used as "sexual slaves" by members of the royal family (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The UVM Professor cautioned against comparing the current situation with slavery, stating:

Without a doubt there are black Saudis working within the royal family whose families have been attached for generations. However, they do not live in poor conditions and legally they are allowed to go on and do other things. (13 Jan. 2014)

2.3 Violence

According to the Professor, to his knowledge, there is no "regular pattern" of violence against black Saudi nationals, but there is also an absence of studies on this subject (Professor 13 Jan. 2014). He expressed the opinion that if in a confrontation, black Saudi nationals may be more likely to be subject to violence "on account of their lower socio-economic status" (ibid.). The CDHR Director said that "black people may be subject to more violence and mistreatment [than Arabs] since there is discrimination against blacks throughout the system" (9 Jan. 2014). For his part, the IGA Director expressed his opinion that black Saudi nationals are "not generally" subject to violence, but he also said that it is difficult to ascertain the full extent of the problems of racial violence and discrimination, since there has been no movement among citizens to bring these issues forward (IGA 10 Jan. 2014). He noted a case in which a black man was killed by the Saudi police, who were cleared of responsibility for his death, which he also wrote about in an article in the Guardian newspaper (ibid.; The Guardian 20 Oct. 2010). The man was beaten to death by 10 members of the Saudi religious police (ibid.).

Further information about violence towards black Saudi nationals could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. State Protection

3.1 Government Efforts

Several sources state that the government has not taken any initiatives to address racial discrimination (Professor 13 Jan. 2014; CDHR 9 Jan. 2014; IGA 10 Jan. 2014). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a volunteer at CDHR, who is of African descent and was born in Saudi Arabia, stated that the government does not recognize racial discrimination as an issue (Volunteer 9 Jan. 2014). Similarly, the Professor said that the official line of the government is that "all citizens are equal" and there is no problem with discrimination (Professor 13 Jan. 2014). He noted that there are no equal opportunity programs or special state protection against discrimination (ibid.). According to the UN Human Rights Council, the International Labour Organization (ILO) Committee recommended that the Saudi government pursue a national policy to promote equal opportunity and to eliminate racial discrimination as well as other forms of discrimination (UN 6 Aug. 2013, Art. 44).

The king reportedly appointed a black imam at the Grand Mosque in Mecca (The New York Times 10 Apr. 2009; Professor 13 Jan. 2014; IGA 10 Jan. 2014) in 2008 (The New York Times 10

Apr. 2009). The Imam said that the appointment was a way for the king to show "that he wants to rule this land as one nation, with no racism and no segregation" (ibid.).

3.2 Treatment by Law Enforcement

The Executive Director of IGA said that wealthy black Saudis, such as athletes, may receive protection from the police, but noted that many police officers discriminate against black Saudis, particularly those with low social standing (10 Jan. 2014). Similarly, the CDHR Director said that black Saudi nationals are likely to receive "harsher treatment" by the police or government officials (9 Jan. 2014). The CDHR volunteer shared his personal experience of being spat at and verbally abused by an immigration officer in Saudi Arabia because of the colour of his skin (Volunteer 9 Jan. 2014).

Both the directors of CDHR and IGA said that there are very few black police officers and no senior police officers who are black (IGA 10 Jan. 2014; CDHR 9 Jan. 2014). According to the CDHR Director, the general public does not show respect to the black police officers as they do for non-blacks (ibid.).

According to Country Reports 2012, the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior and National Guard have held anti-discrimination training for law enforcement officers in the past, but there were no reports of anti-discrimination training or evaluations of the success of the training in 2012 (19 Apr. 2013, 35). Further information about anti-discrimination training could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In an article about a Saudi prince who was convicted of murdering his black servant in the UK in 2010, the author, who is also the director of the IGA, said that this was the first time that a Saudi Arabian royal was "held accountable for his actions against a commoner" (The Guardian 20 Oct. 2010). He noted that this verdict would not have been possible in Saudi Arabia, because the people "are divided into rulers and subjects" and the judicial system is controlled by the ruling family (20 Oct. 2010). Freedom House notes that the judiciary is not independent (2013).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact the following were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: a representative of Human Rights Watch and an academic at Miami University Ohio. A representative of the Middle East Media Research Institute was unable to provide information.

Internet sites, including: Alkarama; Amnesty International; Brookings Institute; ecoi.net; Factiva; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; International Federation for Human Rights; King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue; Middle East Media Research Institute; Minority Rights Group International; Saudi Arabia - Ministry of Interior; United Nations - Human Rights Council, Integrated Regional Information Networks, Refworld; Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy.

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