Biography:

Beeta Baghoolizadeh (PhD, History, University of Pennsylvania) is a historian of race and enslavement in the modern Middle East. Her first book, *The Color Black: Enslavement and Erasure in Iran,* forthcoming with Duke University Press, examines conceptions of race and memory with regards to enslavement and abolition in 19th and 20th century Iran. She is currently an Associate Research Scholar at Princeton University and serves as the resident historian for the Collective for Black Iranians.

Statement:

Dear excellencies, colleagues. I wanted to begin by thanking all of you for your attention to the people of African descent in the Middle East. I also wanted to thank the staff, especially Claudie Fiorini and Khrystyna Kostenetska, as well as the interpreters for their flexibility, as I’ve amended my comments for today to better speak to the conversations and back and forth that we have been having during this conference. I wanted to reiterate the comments that others have made, that the history of Black or African descended people in the Middle East is a very old one. There are centuries upon centuries of sources indicating their deep embeddedness into these societies, from maps to paintings to manuscripts and other sources. But on this panel, where we are asked to speak on justice and the contributions of people of African descent, I wanted to share two stories from the 19th and 20th centuries that reflect how grassroots efforts towards freedom were either thwarted or more effective than the very governments that claimed to work towards freedom and abolition.

For centuries, elite and wealthy people in the Middle East, especially Iran, had enslaved Caucasians, Central Asians, South Asians, as well as Black Africans in largely domestic spaces, as nannies, wet nurses, and so on. They were, for a large part, symbols of power and status, with some examples of chattel slavery along the Persian Gulf. But, in the 19th century, geopolitical shifts made East Africans the most vulnerable to enslavement in Iran.

So let me tell you the story of Khyzran.

In 1856, Khyzran was enslaved, again. I say again because she had already been enslaved once before, when she was born into enslavement in Zanzibar, and only found freedom when her first enslaver died when she was 13. But now, Khyzran was 22, a young woman who knew what freedom was like.

One night, she had been kidnapped from Zanzibar on her way home, thrown into a boat, and weeks later found herself in the Persian Gulf, first in Ras al-Khaimah, and then sold to a man named Kamal who lived in Lengeh.

Khyzran was forced to work inside Kamal’s home. Kamal knew that the British were patrolling the Gulf to free enslaved people – and so he instructed Khyzran not to leave the house, in case they see her.

She had a friend though, and her friend told Khyzran that her enslavement was illegal. That 1848 Royal Decree was the first push towards abolishing the slave trade in Iran, and it banned the import of enslaved people via the Persian Gulf, and the British had patrolled the gulf to ensure its enforcement. But I want to be clear that it was a very lukewarm effort towards abolition.

So as soon as Kamal left for a trip to visit his family in Basra, Khyzran slipped out and went straight to the British. And after listening to her testimony, they agreed with her, that her enslavement was illegal – because of that 1848 royal decree. Khyzran also tried to free a boy, Walladee, who the British also agreed to free until they realized he was enslaved by a powerful sheikh, in which case, they denied him his freedom and sent him back to his enslaver. We do not know what happened to him after his enslavement or to Khyzran.

We know about Khyzran and Walladee because of extensive British documentation, and the work of some scholars including Niambi Cacchioli who worked on the Slave Trade Project, as well as Anthony Lee. I’ll also just note here that I worked with the Collective for Black Iranians to bring an animated version of her story to life, which was later aired on BBCPersian. During the 19th century, the British Empire used its abolitionist treaties and agreements to distract from its imperialist goals, and their imperial efforts were cloaked as abolitionist in nature. They presented themselves as champions of abolition and anti-slavery. And the British archives reflect this, there are boxes and boxes of files on slavery and anti-slavery, many of which focus on the Persian Gulf slave trade, much of which is now available digitally online, through the partnership between the Qatar Digital Library and British Library.

But anyone who has sifted through these files knows that the British regularly prioritized strategic political choices that went against the freeing of individual people or their wellbeing, and the governments they were collaborating with also did not enforce these agreements. This is so clearly shown through the case of Khyzran and Walladee, where it was Khyzran who was trying to free others from enslavement, while the British pushed them back in. And while the governments get credit for moving towards abolition, it was Khyzran and others like her that advocated for freedom on a grassroots level. We can see here that legislation was not enough, nor did it materially benefit Khyzran, the young boy, and others.

And let me tell you another story, this one from the early 20th century, in Tehran. Enslavement was still legal in Iran at this time, where most enslaved people were overwhelmingly of African descent.

In her memoir, Munis od-Dowleh narrated the story of a prominent merchant, a Haji, who bought a woman named Narges for his wife during the Constitutional Revolution. Narges was described as “raisin-colored,” but for three days and nights, she cried, saying, my mother was a nanny – implying that she was an enslaved Black woman – but that her father was a free man. Per religious and social norms in Iran, Narges was free, a status she inherited from her non-Black father. But the Blackness of her skin had made her captors view her as enslaved. The Haji’s wife felt badly for Narges, and they came up with a way for Narges to both escape and for them to get their money back, the 80 toman that they had paid for Narges. The next day, Omm Jafar - the captor and slave trader – came back, returned the money, and started to leave with Narges when Narges slipped into their neighbor’s home, a cleric who would give her refuge. No one could force Narges to leave, but regardless, the slave trader found another buyer for Narges – the wife of a parliamentary official. And so, Omm Jafar bribed the mullah and his wife to help her capture Narges to sell her to this government official’s family. Despite their promises to keep Narges safe, the mullah betrayed her. Narges, despite her free status, was enslaved again, and she remained enslaved until she made contact with another Black woman, who was known as Haji Naneh. Haji Naneh had a network of people who helped Narges escape. With Haji Naneh’s help, Narges went to the Parliament, where they affirmed her free status and gave her her free papers.

Although the parliament seems like a fair arbiter in this story, it was Haji Naneh that found Narges her freedom. Otherwise, Narges would have been enslaved by the very government officials who had the power to recognize her freedom.

Other enslaved people, however, who could not prove their worthiness of freedom, remained enslaved in Iran until 1929. The abolition law of 1929 banned enslavement altogether. All those formerly enslaved were now free and would be given Iranian citizenship. But the abolition law was not necessarily a humanitarian process, it was much more a process of erasure. In the decades that followed, Iranians erased references to enslavement, and by extension, erased Black Iranians, as they emphasized a national identity surrounding Aryanism or Persian-ness, and provided alternate histories of enslavement that rendered American and US enslavement as the only “real” forms of slavery or racism. Many Iranians today, like in other parts of the Middle East, may claim, “we never had slavery!” or “they were like family!” undermining the seriousness of this past and preventing for honest conversations about the racism that continues to reify social dynamics across the middle east.

As I reflect on this decade dedicated to people of African descent, I wanted to leave you with these stories and realities. And while I shared with you the story of Khyzran, Narges, and Haji Naneh today, there were many more I could have shared about Yaqut, Mobarak, Firuz, and others. For those of you interested in learning more about these histories and stories from Black Iranians themselves, I invite you to look at the work of the Collective for Black Iranians.

The history of enslavement and racism in the Middle East must be acknowledged through educational curricula or through popular narratives. In these two stories, we saw examples of how legal proclamations and treaties might be easily circumvented, ignored, and undermined. Legislative work is important, but governments are not merely legislative bodies. They are structures that can enact power in social, political and economic contexts as well. It is important that governments harness their full capacity in addressing the inequalities in their societies, otherwise, laws and constitutions can and will be undermined.

And finally, we must move away from exclusionary nationalist identities. Even today in Iran, the protests, uprisings, and strikes are multi-faceted, but they reflect those marginalized and minoritized voices in Iran. One path forward would be to embrace all different identities, including those once erased, like Black Iranians, as fully a part of the societies they live in.