



PRESS RELEASE

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Arab American Institute Welcomes New “Middle Eastern or North African” (MENA) Category & Revision of Race and Ethnicity Standards

Hailed Historic Category Regrettably Fails to Capture Full Diversity of Arab American Community

Washington, D.C. on September 28, 2024 - Today, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) announced revisions to [Statistical Policy Directive No. 15: Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity](#) (“Standards”). The revisions, the first since 1997, include the historic addition of a new “Middle Eastern or North African” (MENA) minimum reporting category, the use of a combined question format for collecting race and ethnicity, and the requirement of more detailed data collection by federal agencies beyond the minimum Standards in most situations to allow for greater data disaggregation.

AAI welcomes the new Standards’ improvements to data collection and the historic addition of the MENA category but is deeply troubled by OMB’s narrow definition of MENA communities and their unprecedented mandating of the detailed subpopulations groups (check boxes and write-in samples), the formulation of which is traditionally reserved for the Census Bureau based on research and testing. In a troubling move, the new Standards deny the racial diversity of the Arab American community by excluding Black Arabs and defining MENA without one of its largest populations, Armenian Americans.

Today’s announcement is the culmination of more than four decades of organizing and advocacy by the Arab American community and nearly three decades of support for a MENA category. Accurate data about the Arab American population has been a central part of AAI’s mission, beginning in the late 1980s when AAI first worked with the Census Bureau to ensure Arab Americans were accurately counted in the 1990 census. In the 1990s, AAI led the campaign for a category for persons from the MENA region in the lead up to OMB’s 1997 revision of the standards. Later, AAI helped launch the Ancestry Working Group to support the Census Bureau’s efforts to decrease systemic undercounting of Arab Americans and created the MENA Advocacy Network in 2011 after the elimination of the long-form questionnaire from the decennial census. In the last decade and a half, AAI organized Arab Americans and other MENA communities around the need for improved data, working with key stakeholders, the OMB, and the U.S. Census Bureau to make the MENA checkbox a reality.

The Census Bureau has been testing and researching to ensure that a new MENA category will yield reliable data from respondents to census surveys for years. While we do not believe the MENA examples for the 2015 National Content Test (NCT) were sufficient to capture the full racial diversity of Arab Americans because of their omission of a Black Arab example, they still remain constructive testing the Census Bureau could have built on after the release of the new Standards and in preparation for the 2030 decennial. Indeed, the results of the test indicated that further testing on a MENA category was required to better understand what detailed subgroups to include. However, without any further testing, the OMB issued revised Standards that 1) prescribe which subpopulations are included on surveys, and 2) disregarded both their own assertions in the Standards and that of the Census Bureau stating further testing is needed.

In response to the release of the Standards, AAI Executive Director Maya Berry made the following statement:

“The revision of the Standards is a major accomplishment, one that would not have been achieved were it not for the Biden Administration’s commitment to data equity and the valuable work of OMB, the Census Bureau, and key stakeholder communities who have engaged fully throughout the process. The new Standards will have a lasting impact on communities for generations to come, particularly Arab Americans, whose erasure in federal data collection will finally cease. For the first time, Arab Americans will be made visible—not just on the decennial census, but in all federal data that collects race and ethnicity and that is historic. However, it is unfortunate that instead of celebrating what should have been this momentous victory for improved data collection and our community, we are concerned about the erasure of a key segment of our community and the very real possibility of continued undercounts.

Though we strongly welcome and support the collection of more granular data, the signaling to respondents in the check boxes and write-in examples, unnecessarily prescribed by OMB without sufficient testing, regrettably do not take into account the racial and geographic diversity of MENA communities here in America, including its members from the Black diaspora community, who will most assuredly be undercounted under the new Standards. Because of this, we have deep concerns the new Standards may result in an undercount of Arab Americans, the single largest segment of the MENA category.

We’ve operated without a checkbox for decades, we will now adjust to having a checkbox that does not accurately represent us and keep pushing for the accurate data we must have. We will continue to work with our community’s leading academics and researchers, and our community-based organizations whose work is on the frontline of what it means for a community to be undercounted. We will continue to work with our partners in the civil rights community and other key stakeholders, with OMB, and with the Census Bureau to move toward a more accurate and inclusive MENA category in support of an accurate count of all Americans, including Arab Americans.

We are pleased to see additional major steps forward with these revisions, including the required collection of disaggregated data by federal agencies and the combined question format. We will work with the newly established Federal Interagency Technical Working Group on Race and Ethnicity Standards in support of a more inclusive and accurate MENA category, including supporting the additional research called for in the Standards. And we will build on the federal, state, and local level with an eye for how we will mobilize our community for the get-out-the-count efforts for the 2030 decennial census.”

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The Arab American Institute is a national civil rights advocacy organization that provides strategic analysis to policy makers and community members to strengthen democracy, protect civil rights and liberties, and defend human rights. AAI organizes the 3.7 million Arab Americans across the country to ensure an informed, organized, and effective constituency is represented in all aspects of civic life.