

Why a MENA Category Matters

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Accurate, detailed data on our nation’s racial and ethnic composition — and information about how those data intersect with education, employment, housing, health care, political representation, and other important social institutions — are essential for realizing our nation’s goals of equity, diversity, and inclusion. But the collection of this data must be improved.

On January 27, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) **published a Federal Register notice** seeking public comments on “Initial Proposals for Updating OMB’s Race and Ethnicity Statistical Standards.” Among other things, this proposal includes adding a new, discrete ethnic category for people from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

During a recent roundtable conversation, Meeta Anand, senior director of the census and data equity program at The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, joined Maya Berry, executive director of the Arab American Institute,

and Professor **Neda Maghbouleh** to discuss Maghbouleh's book "The Limits of Whiteness" and why adding a MENA category matters.

MEETA: Neda, why did you choose to title your book The Limits of Whiteness?

NEDA: I was drawn to the word "limit" as both a noun and a verb: A limit is a ceiling on what is permissible or possible; to limit is also the act of restricting or drawing a boundary around. So first, I wanted to capture how — even though U.S. federal race/ethnicity standards place MENA squarely in the white box — many in the MENA community (in this case, young Iranian Americans) sense that they live at the edge of the boundary, that they exist at the outermost limit of who is seen, or counts, as white. But I also wanted to contest one of the oldest axioms in my field of study (Sociology) — that individuals or groups in the U.S. who can (by virtue of class privilege, physical appearance, or other means) seek shelter or reward through claims to, or proximity to whiteness, will do so. Honorary, or conditional whiteness, comes at a cost. And, maybe more importantly, orienting one's politics or scholarship or identity to whiteness limits the full potential of what can be imagined or accomplished in solidarity with others.

MEETA: Maya, Neda notes how current OMB Race and Ethnicity Standards puts the MENA category squarely in the white box. In what ways does doing that obscure or erase the experiences of those who would identify within that category?

MAYA: The challenge of accurately counting people from the MENA region, including Arab Americans, is partly rooted in America's fraught relationship with race. Since efforts began decades ago to address the well-recognized undercount of our communities, the conversation has often landed on, "are Arabs or others from MENA white?" The answer has always been some are, and some are not, but that is not the right question for me. The key question is does the census form

offer a respondent a way to accurately self-identify? In the case of people from the MENA region, the answer is undeniably: no. I can check the “white” category or the “Black” category, or what I have always personally done, “other,” and then provide my ethnicity or national origin, but under the current standards, data on our communities is simply obscured in the white racial category. Further, with my fixation on census data, I am not most people. For lack of a better term, a “regular” person will check an existing box and then we land squarely with what Meeta is raising — people from the MENA region are rendered invisible in the data. From political representation to language access to civil rights protections to countless allocations of federal resources, hidden in decennial census data are communities harmed by lack of representation, protection, and services. I mean this is precisely why candidate Biden declared that a President Biden would add a MENA category so that “Arab Americans can be more fairly counted and their needs studied and considered.”

I understand the reason we talk about white or not, but even that frame privileges whiteness. As Neda accurately points out, proximity to being white or passing as white is about proximity to power. And without getting into the complexities of the impact of racism and white supremacy on individuals and how they chose to identify (I know!), the essential point is that they do get to self-identify. This is why a MENA ethnic category as part of a combined race and ethnicity question is the most effective path to an improved count — it allows a person to check a box (MENA), list their ethnicity, and also check a race of their choosing if they so desire.

Finally, as the objective has always been about securing better data, we must acknowledge that historically, the majority of Arab Americans, or Iranian Americans for that matter, identified as white. Though I think the young Iranian Americans that Neda has studied, and their Arab American counterparts, may have a different perspective on this. Yet, this does not negate the fact that respondents also checked the MENA category when it was offered to them as a separate response category by the Census Bureau. That is how we get

to a better count.

MEETA: Neda, I'd love for you to react to anything Maya stated — but I'm very struck by her point on self-identification. Can you articulate what your research has shown regarding the importance of self-identification?

NEDA: Yes! I'll pick up on Maya's point with some new scientific findings on MENA self-identification that **I've published with collaborators**. Maya described how — when faced with the current population group options available under the federal minimum standard — she herself has checked “Other” for race and she provides further information on ethnicity and national origin when possible. Our study shows that Maya is not alone. Across a highly diverse sample of MENA Americans, we find that around 1 in 5 are making self-ID choices similar to Maya and checking “Some Other Race (SOR)” when there is no MENA identity category offered. But when MENA is offered alongside other standard options in a combined race/ethnicity question, SOR is driven down to almost zero. This is a finding of serious interest — for the Census Bureau and for any of us doing advocacy, scholarly, or coalition-building work that requires accurate and usable population data. Because the number of Americans self-identifying as SOR has grown substantially over time, reaching a new peak of 49.9 million people in the 2020 Census, offering MENA as part of a revised federal standard has significant positive implications for the usability of administrative data.

MEETA: Thank you for this thoughtful point, Neda. Maya, can you tell us WHY it matters for us to have fair and accurate data on the MENA community — not just for the census but in data collection generally?

MAYA: When you ask that, the first thing that comes to mind is health research. We have long talked about the prevalence of diabetes among Arab Americans and the need to examine other poor health outcomes. When the pandemic hit, the inability to access data about our community and their health needs and risks was yet again shown to be a potential barrier to health care delivery. Without the ability to isolate data on

people from the MENA region, including Arab Americans, how do we compare health indicators and outcomes? And the limited health data that does exist about Arab Americans is from very specific communities with high concentrations of Arab Americans (like Metro Detroit), but it is not sound to use data sets from one particular ethnic community and apply it nationally as that does not take into account the rich diversity that exists among Arab Americans and the resulting potential differences in lived experiences.

We hear it and say it all the time — data informs policy. Well, without it — particularly in the case of health care — not having the data needed means we do not fully understand the health care needs of Arab Americans on a general level, and further, lacking disaggregated data means we don't have the ability to identify potential vulnerabilities or specific issues among subpopulations within the Arab American community.

MEETA: Neda, your book talks about the experiences of Iranian Americans. To what extent does that illuminate the need for a MENA category, given the variety of lived experiences of people who are from or trace their roots back to that geographic region?

NEDA: This is a great question, Meeta, because even within the Iranian American community there is significant diversity that strongly shapes peoples' experiences, life outcomes, and politics. My book, at first glance, might give the impression of consensus — that all Iranians are sharing the same set of racialized experiences. But there is no monolithic Iranian American experience, and to bring it back to the topic of self-identification and categories: Not all Iranians will answer a race/ethnicity question the same way. This is certainly the case too when we expand out to talking about a broader MENA community: We're talking about a group with tremendous heterogeneity within the proposed category! In light of such diversity, it's actually remarkable that so many MENA Americans are calling for a MENA category. But this is because of more awareness than ever, thanks to decades of work by Maya and others, about what the downstream effects of the *lack* of a MENA category mean: Health researchers are

showing how health disparities are going unseen; professionals in fields like social work and education are showing the unmet need for linguistic and cultural resources; and community organizers know that the lack of a category contributes to discrimination lawsuits specifically falling apart for MENA plaintiffs, as I detail in my book. So, although some of the details in my book might seem super-specific to Iranians, like the Penglish (Persian-English) or Fenglish (Farsi-English) that peppers the text — everyday peoples' unmet needs, and their attempts to remediate these unmet needs, are part of a much bigger story about America.

MAYA: Neda is so right. I don't even use the term "MENA Americans" because I don't see an identity or community in the term MENA but rather a geographical category to collect better data. Within that — within a MENA checkbox — you then get to the stories of Iranian Americans that Neda shares in her book and the ones I know from my Arab American community. Stories of life experiences unique to each individual and how they choose to self-identify on a government form, but that form must have a MENA ethnic category so that we are no longer rendered invisible and lost in the data.

The MENA checkbox is the beginning because, after that, I can then share my identity by indicating my ethnicity or national origin by choosing "Iran" or "Palestine" or "Morocco," and then the race category I may identify with. The remarkable diversity within MENA that Neda highlights is a fact. It is also a fact that after decades of dealing with an undercount (OMB first said we need to study this problem more in the 1990s!), we know — and the Census Bureau agrees — that a MENA category will arrive at better data. That is how we got our respective communities here in support of a MENA category. Ultimately, it is also how we will get the MENA category on the 2030 Census, too. And thank you all for the opportunity to do this. In addition to being great fun, it is so important. Thank you!

“The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race” is the second selection of The Leadership Conference’s Census Book Club, which features books to deepen members’ understanding of the census, its rich history, and its real-life impacts. This discussion does not represent an official endorsement of the book.

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