



RESPONDING TO RACE/ETHNICITY QUESTIONS & MIDDLE EASTERN/NORTH AFRICAN (MENA) IDENTITY



CACF
Coalition For Asian American
Children+Families

NYU Grossman School of Medicine at NYU Langone Health

WHO ARE MIDDLE EASTERN/NORTH AFRICAN INDIVIDUALS?

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a geographic region that lacks a universal definition. For example, there is no MENA region among the official United Nations Regional Groups and there is no official definition in U.S. policy or law.

Most often, MENA is used to refer to people with roots in one of the 22 Arab League states (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Comoros Islands) AND those from the non-Arab states of Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey. Sometimes the region known as the South Caucasus is also grouped together with the Middle East, and it includes those with roots in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

Additionally, there are minority groups that live in the countries listed above with their own ethnic identities. These include (but are not limited to) Chaldeans, Copts, Kurds, and the Imazighen. These groups may identify with both national and ethnic identity (for example, the Syrian-Kurdish population). Therefore, disaggregating the MENA group into distinct ethnic identities requires expanding categories beyond nation-states (see table on pg. 5).

WHY DOES THE OMB INCLUDE MENA IN THE 'WHITE' CATEGORY?

Between 1870 and the early 1930s, around 130,000 Arab immigrants came to the United States after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. These early immigrants were mostly Christians from Greater Syria (modern day Syria, Lebanon and Palestine). A barrier to immigration from this region was the U.S. Naturalization Act of 1790, which restricted citizenship to «any alien, being a free white person.» To combat discrimination, these early Arabs sought to be identified as White (Foad, 2013).

The fact that many of the early Arab immigrants were Christian and light-skinned helped make the argument that they are closer to the 'White' category than the category in which they were previously placed at the time ('Chinese-Mongolian'). (Beydoun, 2013). Therefore, racial formation of "MENA" is due to a limited view of the region, focusing solely on Arabs of the Levant/Eastern Mediterranean, and influenced by the Christian majority of incoming immigrants at that time. However, MENA can be considered a multi-racial and multi-ethnic region, with many languages, skin colors, religions, and cultural practices represented.

WHY GROUP ALL OF THE MENA REGION TOGETHER?

"MENA" is a somewhat controversial term. Many Americans, especially younger generations, reject the MENA label due to its colonial origins, defining the region in relation to Europe. Instead, they advocate for usage of the term, 'Southwest Asia and North Africa' (SWANA). According to the SWANA Alliance, this new decolonial term does not have concrete borders but is used to "speak to the diversity of our communities and to forward the most vulnerable in our liberation."

However, both SWANA and MENA refer to the same geographic area and group of people with shared cultural characteristics. Even though this group is diverse in many ways, it is a relatively small proportion of the population and in many cases, it may be better for privacy protection and data reliability to group all people descending from this region instead of breaking them up into even smaller groups.

HOW MANY MENA INDIVIDUALS ARE THERE IN THE U.S.?

It is difficult to know the MENA American population size as a whole because they are not included on the U.S. Census. Some larger ethnic groups within the MENA category include the Arab American population, which is estimated to be over 3.5 million. The largest and most-concentrated Arab American communities are in Detroit, New York City, and Los Angeles (Arab American Institute, 2017). Similarly, most of the U.S.'s Iranian/Persian Americans live in California, while approximately 9.1% live in New York and New Jersey (Soraya & Raha, 2003). The states with historically the largest number of Afghan Americans live in California, New York and Virginia. Afghans are among the immigrant populations that increased the most between 2010 and 2019 (Budiman, 2020).

HOW SHOULD I RESPOND TO DISAGGREGATED RACE/ETHNICITY QUESTIONS?

There is no 'right' way to answer questions about race and ethnicity. The way you respond to question(s) about race and ethnicity may also depend on how the question is formatted.

Self-reporting provides the most accurate responses to race and ethnicity questions. This means that these questions should be **open-ended questions**, giving people the opportunity to write in any response you wish. In this case, you should write out the race/ethnicity that you feel best represents your identity. If you identify with more than one racial/ethnic group, you should list all of them.

Sometimes, it can be hard for institutions and people who manage data to organize many written race/ethnicity responses, so instead they offer specific racial/ethnic categories for you to choose from. Including more specific race/ethnicity categories allows more options for accurate self-reporting.

Most forms will include a **multiple-choice** race/ethnicity question. In this case, the race/ethnicity options may vary. For example, there may only be one MENA category, or there may be more specific categories to choose from. You may or may not decide to select more specific groups. However, selecting all of the relevant racial/ethnic groups that you identify with is recommended for more accurate reporting.

Here are some examples of POSSIBLE ways to respond to different race/ethnicity question formats:

Scenario 1: Multiple choice, limited disaggregated options; respondent identifies as Libyan but prefers to report 'MENA' only	Scenario 2: Multiple choice, limited disaggregated options; respondent identifies as Moroccan
<p>What is your race or ethnicity (check all that apply)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Black <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Middle Eastern or North African <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian, Native, First Nations, Indigenous Peoples of the Americans, or Alaska Native <input type="checkbox"/> Some other Race or ethnicity: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer <p>Since "Middle Eastern or North African" was selected as your race or ethnicity, which group best represents your ethnicity or ancestry (check all that apply)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Algerian <input type="checkbox"/> Armenian <input type="checkbox"/> Egyptian <input type="checkbox"/> Iranian <input type="checkbox"/> Lebanese <input type="checkbox"/> Moroccan <input type="checkbox"/> Palestinian <input type="checkbox"/> Syrian <input type="checkbox"/> Turkish <input type="checkbox"/> Yemeni <input type="checkbox"/> Another option: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer 	<p>What is your race or ethnicity (check all that apply)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Black <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Middle Eastern or North African <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian, Native, First Nations, Indigenous Peoples of the Americans, or Alaska Native <input type="checkbox"/> Some other Race or ethnicity: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer <p>Since "Middle Eastern or North African" was selected as your race or ethnicity, which group best represents your ethnicity or ancestry (check all that apply)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Algerian <input type="checkbox"/> Armenian <input type="checkbox"/> Egyptian <input type="checkbox"/> Iranian <input type="checkbox"/> Lebanese <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Moroccan <input type="checkbox"/> Palestinian <input type="checkbox"/> Syrian <input type="checkbox"/> Turkish <input type="checkbox"/> Yemeni <input type="checkbox"/> Another option: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Arab American Institute. **Quick Facts About Arab Americans**. 2017. Available from: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c96c17de5f7d145081a1f94/t/5ca263184785d3b98ad81311/1554146073428/Quick+Facts+About+Arab+Americans+2017.pdf>

Beydoun, Khaled. **Between Muslim and White: The Legal Construction of Arab American Identity**. New York University Annual Survey of American Law. Volume 69, Issue 1. 2013. Available from: https://annualsurveyofamericanlaw.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/69-1_beydoun.pdf

Budiman, Amy. **Key findings about U.S. immigrants**. Pew Research Center. 2020. Available from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/20/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>

Fata, Soraya; Rafii, Raha. **The Relative Concentration of Iranian Americans Across the United States: Iran Census Report**. National Iranian American Council. 2003.

Foad, Hisham S., **Waves of Immigration from the Middle East to the United States**. 2013 Dec 20. Social Science Research Network. Available from: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2383505>

National Public Radio (NPR). **The U.S. census sees Middle Eastern and North African people as white. Many don't**. 2022 February 17. Available from: <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/17/1079181478/us-census-middle-eastern-white-north-african-mena>

The Leadership Conference Education Fund (LCEF). **Will You Count? Middle Eastern and North African Americans (MENA) in the 2020 Census**. 2018 April 17. Available from: <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/census/2020/Fact-Sheet-MENA-HTC.pdf>

Sahir, Yasmina. **SWANA students at the UI want to feel heard**. The Daily Iowan. 2022 Oct 18. Available from: <https://dailyiowan.com/2022/10/18/southwest-asian-and-northern-african-students-want-to-feel-heard-at-the-university-of-iowa/>

SWANA Alliance. **What is SWANA?** Available from: <https://swanaalliance.com/about>

