

# Middle eastern and North African Americans should count in the US Census

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UTM sociology professor Neda Maghbouleh co-authored a recent study that focuses on how the U.S. Census classifies Americans of Middle Eastern and North African descent as white. Credit: Neda Maghbouleh

In the midst of growing white supremacy, the rise of the Black Lives

Matter movement and, recently, public discussion about the whiteness of Jews following Whoopi Goldberg's arguably ignorant remarks about the Holocaust, we continue to grapple with how to understand and talk about race.

But we can gain some clarity on the complex, often-contentious subject of racial categories with a new U of T Mississauga study, "Middle Eastern and North African Americans may not be perceived, nor perceive themselves, to be white" (February 2022, *Proceedings of the National Academic of Sciences*). Co-authored by sociologist Neda Maghbouleh, UTM's Canada Research Chair in Migration, Race, and Identity, it focuses on how the U.S. Census classifies Americans of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent as white.

Conducted with two sociology professors from Washington University and the University of Chicago, the study explores how the ethnoracial category of white does not reflect the lived experiences of Americans whose backgrounds are MENA, a region the United Nations says encompasses 19 countries and territories that share cultural, economic and environmental similarities. The researchers demonstrate that a lack of more granular census data about this population obscures the socioeconomic disparities or inequalities they may face, which prevents the U.S. government from creating targeted social programs and services.

"Without the numerical piece, inequities faced by this community cannot be addressed through customized resources and approaches," says Maghbouleh, who is currently on leave from UTM and serving as a Wall Scholar at the University of British Columbia's Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies.

The team surveyed 662 people who identify as being MENA, asking: What is your race or origin? In the [control group](#), the response options

listed two MENA nationalities, Lebanese and Egyptian, as examples of white subgroups. In the treatment group, "Middle Eastern or North African" was included as a distinct identity category, with Lebanese and Egyptian falling under this category.

The researchers found that without the option to choose a MENA category, 80 percent of participants in the control group identified themselves as white. By contrast, 88 percent of those in the treatment group identified as MENA, or MENA and white. The takeaway is that a majority of individuals with MENA ancestry prefer to identify not as just white.

"If our goal is to have the most accurate measure of the population as possible, then we should have this separate box on the census," Maghbouleh says.

The study also involved presenting these participants, plus 421 people who self-identified as non-Hispanic whites, with randomized profiles of fictitious individuals who varied by name, religion, language, class, skin color and family ancestry. Their task was to classify the person in each profile as either MENA, white or Black. Among the noteworthy findings: Whites associated a medium skin tone with the MENA category, while MENA respondents viewed both light and medium skin colors as typical MENA traits.

Maghbouleh says better understanding perceptions of MENA individuals by those both in and out of this group can lead to more informed perspectives and better government decision-making.

"The past 40 or 50 years has been marked by a real uptick in anti-MENA discrimination, not just at the interpersonal level, but also at the level of policy and statecraft," she says. "The power of disaggregating the MENA category in the census is that we can bring more nuance to

the conversation around whiteness, and improve public dialog about these issues."

**More information:** Neda Maghbouleh et al, Middle Eastern and North African Americans may not be perceived, nor perceive themselves, to be White, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2117940119](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2117940119)

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