



**Middle
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Dear Office of Management and Budget,

The Middle East Studies Association of North America, Inc. (MESA) wholeheartedly supports the inclusion of the new Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) category, as a checkbox on the United States Census questionnaire. The MENA American community currently lacks meaningful federal data as a group, despite being a large and impacted group according to OMB data. This has severe impacts on the representation, quality of life, and rights of MENA Americans across the United States, particularly with respect to funding for research, teaching, and MENA language education.

The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) is a non-profit academic membership association headquartered in Washington DC that fosters the study of the Middle East, promotes high standards of scholarship and teaching, and encourages public understanding of the region and its peoples through programs, publications and services that enhance education, further intellectual exchange, recognize professional distinction, and defend academic freedom in accordance with its status as a 501(c)(3) scientific, educational, literary, and charitable organization.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the flagship *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has over 2,400 members worldwide, the vast majority of whom reside in the United States, and many of whom would identify as MENA American should the option be readily available.

For almost thirty years, MENA Americans have fought for more accurate representation on the United States Census and self-identifications have only increased in recent decades thanks to successful community initiatives like the HyeCount or Yalla Count! campaigns.

The inclusion of a MENA checkbox is imperative because Americans of MENA descent have faced discrimination and marginalization within the US, and simultaneously continue to be not only a minoritized population but also denied the rights and benefits of Census classification and representation. MENA Americans currently do not see themselves and their experiences accurately reflected in the United States Census, which shapes both federal and local classifications, and resultant funding, opportunity, and anti-discrimination efforts. Moreover, we believe the inclusion of checkboxes that reflect the largest MENA American communities by population size in terms of both national origin and transnational belonging categories would make data collected by the Census that much more accurate and inclusive.

MENA American communities have long faced legal, educational, workplace and linguistic marginalization in part because these communities have gone unrecognized in demographic surveys of the United States. A critical benefit of proper classification would be data collection that supports the provision of greater funding for MENA and MENA American studies. To our knowledge, only one Middle Eastern American Center for research exists in the United States, at the City University of New York (MEMEAC, Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center). From across the US, MESA routinely convenes about 100 Middle East centers, programs, and related departments, many of which could readily use their expertise to expand into Middle Eastern American studies, should more funding for research and teaching be made available.

MESA consistently advocates for greater higher education funding through the Department of Education's Title VI authorized under the Higher Education Act, which supports many of our constituent institutional member and partner institutions as National Resource Centers or Foreign Language and Area Studies grantees. MENA Americans currently do not receive federal, state, and local resources because they are not correctly classified on the US Census. We believe that more readily counting MENA Americans would more precisely illustrate the need for continuing and expanding such funding.

Additionally, because of Directive 15, neither the National Endowment for the Arts or the National Endowment for the Humanities included MENA Americans in their Equity Action Plans, though they were mandated by Congress to ensure equal access to the arts and humanities for people of all backgrounds. It is critical for MENA studies that our community has access to NEA and NEH funding on this basis.

To summarize:

- MENA Americans are a sizable and important community that currently is not counted by the United States.
- Counting MENA Americans would illustrate the need for continuing and expanding financial support for MENA and MENA American studies.
- Armenian Americans, Arab Americans, and Iranian Americans are the top 3 largest MENA communities in terms of population size. These groups should ideally be reflected in additional checkboxes that reflect classifications within the MENA category.
- Armenians, Kurds, and Assyrians are large transnational groups in the MENA region that are present in the United States and like other populations must be counted as transnational groups.
- MENA Americans, who are strongly represented within the MESA membership, overwhelmingly support Census classification that includes their community.

We join other elected officials, community leaders, and prominent MENA individuals and organizations in calling for a MENA checkbox and emphasize the need for community input and classification within this category.

We thank the Biden administration for addressing the needs of MENA communities and we appreciate this urgent and imperative action by the OMB. We urge the United States government to hear the calls of citizens advocating for the inclusion of MENA Americans. This is a vital move in forwarding the civil rights of all Americans, regardless of ancestry.

Sincerely,

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