Yasmina Sahir

Adoption of a Separate Middle Eastern, North African and Arab (MENA) Racial Category at University of Iowa

INTRODUCTION

University of Iowa should change their demographic data collection to include a separate racial category for Middle Eastern, North African, and Arab (MENA) Americans. This group would be a new addition to the already established racial categories utilized in campus surveys, removing MENA Americans from White American status for the first time in American history.

Following current U.S. federal guidelines on racial and ethnic descriptions, almost all University of Iowa demographic surveys require Middle Eastern, North African, and Arab (MENA) students and staff to label themselves as White Americans. By looking at recent political and social world events, this demographic labeling causes disproportionate harm to the MENA community through lack of access to social resources, protections from discrimination as a marginalized group, and underrepresentation in conversations on diversity and inclusion.

HISTORICAL and DEMOGRPAHIC BACKGROUND ON MENA-AMERICANS

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) most commonly includes the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine and the occupied territories, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Although variances in language, religion, and culture exist, the MENA region has a shared history marked by western exceptionalism, colonization, and cultural genocide (Gelvin 2020). In the United States and at University of Iowa, MENA-American students continued to be alienated through simultaneously white-washing and oppressive actions by their White peers. These historical and current experiences unite MENA students and faculty more with their Black, indigenous, and person of color (BIPOC) peers than European white Americans.

MENA Americans, mainly those who migrated in the first wave of MENA immigrants in the early 20th century, were negatively affected by racially restrictive legislations alongside other immigrants of color in the U.S. Under the 1790 Naturalization Act, only free white persons were eligible for citizenship (Ray 2022). While eligibility for American citizenship was later expanded to include free Black persons after the passage of the 13th Amendment, those of Asian, "other" or "yellow race" lineages were not eligible for citizenship until the 1954 McCarran-Walter Act ("Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (the McCarran-Walter Act)" 2020).

Because there was no formal place for MENA Americans in American demographics, some first wave immigrants began to fight in the American court system for their right to be naturalized citizens. The 1909 George Shishim's case is one of the most reflected on by Middle Eastern, North African historians. Shishim, a Syrian Muslim, was a 25-year resident of the United States and an active member of his California community. He argued he should be eligible for citizenship because of his level of commitment and care for American values. Initially, the courts determined Shishim to be non-white and ineligible due to his national origin from the Arab World. Shishim appealed this decision and was later the first Arab person to become an American citizen. To win the case, he had to rely on his Christian faith. He claimed this made him more similar to white Europeans than Black and brown MENA immigrants. Because the MENA region and Islamic practice are seen as closely intertwined in the modern day, the legacy of this case is still felt in modern U.S. sociopolitical culture (Beydoun).

The Shishim case also proves MENA Americans have been historically considered non-white under American law unless they show explicit ties to the Christian faith. What is unclear is why and when ideology changed to include MENA Americans as White Americans without an ethnic distinct on demographic surveys. Researchers hypothesize resistance to separating MENA Americans from their white peers would reveal further disparities in American healthcare, education, and politics. In the War on Terror Era and the ongoing invasion of the MENA region to maintain a tight control over natural resources (e.g., oil), the U.S. government may feel incentivized to promote rhetoric that determines Middle Eastern, North African, and Arab Americans as an nonmarginalized population in order to gain continued support for international political goals (Gelvin 2020).

Currently, U.S. federal racial/ethnic guidelines describe White Americans as "a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa". However, research shows the treatment of European White Americans differs greatly from MENA-Americans. MENA-Americans suffer economic, political, social, healthcare, and education outcomes more similarly aligned with their Black, indigenous, and person of color peers (Yamamoto, et al. 2003). One example of this was the national call by conversative politicians to detain Arab Americans following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in a similar fashion to the detainment of Japanese-Americans following the Pearl Harbor bombing in 1941. Likewise, MENA migrants continue to face immigration struggles through immigration restrictions like President Donald Trump's "Muslim Ban" restricted immigration from certain MENA countries until President Joe Biden repealed this legislation in 2021 ("Muslim Travel Ban" 2020).

MENA AS RACE OR ETHNICITY

To ground the conversation on demographic identifiers and potential changes to the way groups are labeled, it's necessary to have a common understanding of the difference between the terms *race* and *ethnicity*. According the US Census Bureau, race is viewed by the American government as "a social definition…recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically. In addition, it is recognized that the categories of race item include racial and national origin or sociocultural groups" ("About the Topic of Race" 2022). In comparison, ethnicity is commonly defined as a common linguistic or other cultural quality belonging to a certain group or subgroup within a racial group.

Based on the above definitions, arguments have been made that a Middle Eastern and North African category could be ethnic or racial. But, the claim for MENA as an ethnicity is based on skin tone alone. As noted by the US Census Bureau, racial categories are not and should not be used to justify ideas of race based on biological or anthropological arguments that have historically relied on superiority of certain groups over others based on outward racial appearances (e.g., skin tone, eye and head shape, muscular-skeletal structure, etc.). Descendants of the MENA region come in all skin colors: light-skinned, brown, and Black.

OBJECTIONS TO A MENA RACIAL CATEGORY

The demographic policy change solution appears simple to advocates for MENA-Americans. Offices like that of the Registrar, Provost Office, Orientation Services, and other departments requesting demographic data could include a separate racial category for Middle Eastern, North African, and Arab campus community members. This is as simple as adding another box on the many Qualtrics surveys students are forced to complete to obtain

appointments with student services, gain admission to the University of Iowa, and/or apply for diversity based scholarships and grants.

As easy as it may appear to those in favor of the change, resistance from University actors has been felt. In emails from UI representatives sent in response to my inquiry on the subject during the summer semester in 2021, the Provost's Office and UI Orientation Services declined an ask for an informal survey asking students if they identified with the MENA region. Their responses included the justification that: 1) the U.S. Department of Education requires adherence to federal racial/ethnic guidelines and 2) University of Iowa's practices are in line with that of other Big10 institutions.

Upon hearing that this was a problem resulting from policies outside University of Iowa control, the author of this paper completed further research in the form of surveying Big10 universities through email and telephone conversations. In conversation with University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, MI), Ohio State (Columbus, OH), and University of Illinois (Champaign, IL), representatives from each of the aforementioned universities confirmed their respective universities were already collecting data on MENA students and staff through demographic questions. These questions were largely offered in the form of ethno-racial survey responses included in student portals similar to the MyUI website. After speaking with several institutions, UI and Iowa State can be considered the oddities compared to other Big10 universities in their choice to not officially record or offer the option of a distinct identifier for the MENA populations on their respective campuses. The answer of Big10 policy limiting UI action does not appear to be stopping other Big10 schools from making the requested change.

However, Big10 policy does not necessarily reflect federal policy. But, federal guidelines may soon allow MENA-Americans to identify as their own separate category in American data collection like the U.S. Census. In January 2023, the Biden Administration recognized the need for separate racial categories for Latino/a/e and MENA Americans. These categories would no longer be placed under the "White" racial categories as ethnicities, but rather as standalone racial categories (Orvis 2023).

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDED UI POLICY CHANGES

An easy first step to include MENA-Americans and establish a baseline population count of MENA students and staff on UI campus would be to include this category in demographic collection response surveys. This can be easily accomplished with UI's access to survey tool such as the Qualtrics survey program. Adding a MENA racial category on campus is a cost-free option that could have many tangible results including, but not limited to: 1) better identifying needs of MENA students by knowing which services they are accessing frequently, 2) creating a concrete population count of MENA UI students and staff, and 3) showing MENA students they matter on this campus, potentially attracting more MENA students to UI in the future. Demographic data impacts research, a field UI – as a Research 1 institution – prides itself on being an academic leader in. Population counts are necessary to begin allocating research funds to studies on the Iowa City and wider MENA American community.

These changes are already known to be successful and easy to implement. In conversation with the UI Student Legal Services office, a SLS lawyer shared that this change had been implemented due to the author of this paper's advocacy and research on campus. To accomplish this change, the SLS office added a distinct MENA racial option in their demographic questionnaire provided to students before appointments with UI student lawyers and legal aids. This was done through the Qualtrics program, as recommended above in this

policy brief. Other ways Qualtrics and other survey programs can be utilized to accomplish the recommendation for a MENA American racial category is to include an optional survey question on MyUI. During orientation or through email, it could be communicated to students the option exists to self-identify as MENA-American. Potentially uses of this opt-in service could be to connect MENA students with campus cultural organizations, programming, and help build a MENA community. Similar methods of data collection for MENA students are already in use at University of Michigan and Ohio State.

CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN SOCIAL CHANGE

Global social movements – including Occupy Wallstreet, the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and pro-Palestine resistance – have depended on academic spaces and students to further sociopolitical goals. Because of this, any forward movement to better represent MENA Americans in discussions on diversity and inclusion must include conversation within higher education. The ideas we share and uplift in the classroom are fundamental to changing the future. Campus practices, including demographic data, impact educational content and research outcomes. By showing MENA students they matter at UI, we uplift the statement that "[d]iversity refers to all aspects of human difference, social identities, and social group differences" ("DEI Definitions" 2023). To truly embody this ideal, University of Iowa must move past the American Exceptionalist view on racial/ethnic categories in which the legacy of white supremacy and forced assimilation which has aligned marginalized groups like MENA Americans with a white racial identity.

RESOURCES

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