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Minority or Not?

Intro

For the past thirty years, Middle Easterns and North Africans have been fighting for the right to identify as 'MENA' on the U.S. census bureau. And until recently one of the very few states to officially sign a legislature to finally classify Middle Eastern and North Africans as their own category was Illinois. JB Pritzker came out stating that "Here in Illinois, we are committed to instilling the values of inclusion and equity in every department of state government."¹ After many protests and petitions advocating for the right to identify themselves as their own, Illinois became the first state to officially change the course of the game. All thanks to Abdenasser Rashid, one of the state's representatives. But what took so long? For years, MENA people who may perceive themselves as white, have struggled to gain acceptance from those of European ancestry. However, despite all the discrimination the MENA people have faced, the federal government still found it fit to officially categorize MENA as white. Meaning any state exam, state identity verification, surveys, etc; were forced to put themselves as white because they had no other options. Illinois successfully was able to change that.

The Origin

Although the Arabs are advocating for the right to freely identify themselves as their own, the story wasn't always like this. Back in the early 1880s to the 1940s, the people of the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, and part of Turkey) were fighting for the opposite of what the newer generation is fighting for. And that was for the government to admit that they too, are also white. They are Mediterranean and the same way the Italians and Greeks fought for that category, the Levants fought because they were the exact same as them until eventually they got what they asked for. This was a way for MENA to also be "categorized as white in hopes of receiving protection by their proximity to whiteness." Many have tried to do what the mediterranean people did, but many failed because none passed with the "eurocentric features". An example of this is the South Asians who immigrated to America trying to argue that they were "caucasian", but the court rejected it not only because of their physical features but because geographically they weren't even as close to the border of their countries. Same goes for East Asians, who may have had white skin, but were not considered under the term 'caucasian'.² Levants being able to obtain and convince others that they were white was a lot easier than present day. Back then, christianity was a thriving religion in the Middle East, especially the Levant. So not only did their physical features help further make the government admit they were white, but their religion also played a huge role. It is sad to say that after the unfortunate event that happened, 9/11, MENAS were being seen as nothing but "savages" and "terrorists" due to their dominant religion, Islam, therefore they can't have a connection to white people. An organization called "Al Qaeda" at the time used Islam to their advantage to justify their narrative on the attacks, therefore shifting the American public view on Islam and getting them to believe one side of the story. Hence the

¹ Illinois.gov, *Gov. Pritzker Signs Legislation Expanding Racial Classification Categories*, August 4, 2023.

² Suwafta, "Arab Americans Have Been Without A Census Category for Years. Here's Why That Matters".

white privileges that they once had were “revoked”, due to a group of people who twisted the narrative. Hijab, for example, is now seen as oppression, and to many eyes what differentiates a normal white person to a nonwhite.

Gen z

Then comes the newer generation of MENA, who find that there’s no equality. Unlike the older generation, however, they see this as a way to show that they are not white but people of color. They were also treated as if they were minorities but not given minority privileges. They believed there was no point in advocating for being like people who don’t want to accept them so it’s easier to be something they see you as. In a pbs interview, an Arab named Meroueh said “When we talk about systemic exclusion of Black and brown communities, that doesn’t include MENA communities because we are considered white. I think that narrative is one that is very different from early Arab Americans that came because there is a recognition now that we all, as Black and brown communities, are impacted by these same systems.”³. This statement elaborates on the fact that despite the older generation being able to clearly identify as white, the world no longer has that perception and rather see the Arab Americans as a separate entity to the ones of European ancestry. Because of the discrimination many people of Middle East and North Africa face in America it tends to be more complicated compared to an average white American to find jobs or even affordable health care. Everything that the MENA suffer and struggle with does not align with being in the “white” categorization. The young Arab Americans decided to create petitions since no polls for the public interest were not being made, so they figured small changes will lead to big changes. Enter change.org, an affordable website many people of the young generation use to spread awareness of certain things going on in the world.

Benefits of New Category in IL

Lets now discuss what this new policy that has been attained in Illinois provides to those of Middle Eastern and North African descent. The new policy allows new data to be processed to help improve the health, educational, and economic conditions, and advocacy for political representation in congress for MENA. Many Middleeasterns who work for congress struggled to represent the MENA community because their voices and votes would line up with the Whites. Having their own category gives them civil rights- to ensure they have equal social opportunities, and a sense that they are getting something in return for the discrimination they have been experiencing. Most importantly they would get proper representation in the health care system. The reason why health care was very crucial for the MENA community was because, for example, taking a look back during COVID-19, Itedal Shalabi, co-founder and executive director of the social service agency Arab American Family Services stated, “Our community was one of the last ones to get resources, to have those vaccinations”.⁴ This statement pertains to the inequity the Arab Americans were struggling with because of their demographic erasure, and the speaker argues that if this category were to exist this issue wouldn’t arise and the MENA community would have received the vaccine sooner. This bill now acknowledges them in the system and grants them rights many marginalized groups were given. Many sought the new bill

³ Hwa Wang, “Why Arab Americans are pushing for a ‘Middle East or North African’ category on the census”.

⁴ Yoon-Ji Kang, “Arab Americans aren’t ‘white,’ study authors tell Census”.

as an achievement, for all the opportunities the community was about to have, but in spite of that, many saw this as a failure because what they (the elders) fought for was now taken away. It was and still is a fight for the same battle. No one wants to be told who they are, and controlled for it. The term “MENA” itself is essentially just a word created to identify specific regions that are connected culturally. However, it is not a race nor an ethnicity. “There is no MENA community per se, no one goes around saying I am ‘MENA American.’” Merouh stated in a pbs interview.

Downsides and Data

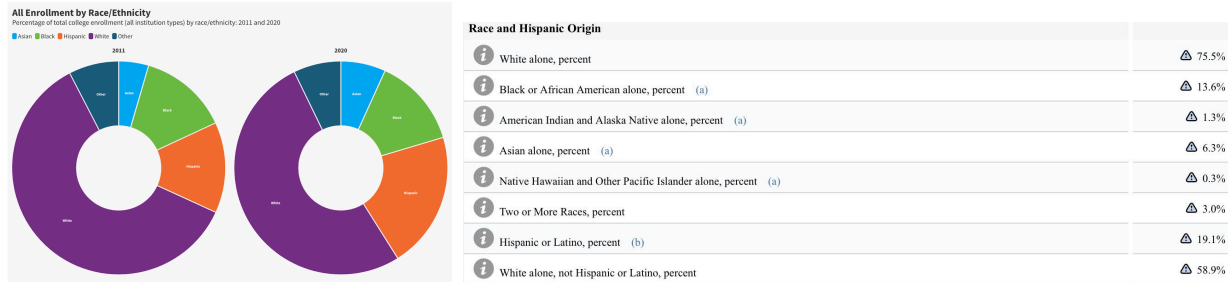
Unquestionably, the benefits that the Middle Eastern and North African community have from this new bill being processed into congress is high. Even so, that doesn't mean having their own category wont come with issues for both the community, and the U.S government. The result to the community can lead to more racism and discrimination than there was before. Not being placed as white anymore will remove some of the protection that they had. As for the U.S. changing their placement on the census bureau can alter the system and data they built up. Back in 2020 when president Donald Trump was in office, he and the trump administration decided to keep, especially Arabs, and had stated that keeping it that way would be the plan. The administration aggressively made a decision without looking at the public interest. The reason being was because after they did a “test run” in 2015 for MENA as its own categorization, the government found two things it was changing in their data. One being that state exams such as SATs and ACTs, were exceptionally reduced under the white category after the MENAs were separated. It messed with their data.

Two, giving Middle Eastern and North Africans the right to have their own checkbox means the millions of money that goes to federal, state funding, and things such as health care to other minorities would also additionally have to be added to the MENAS. The U.S. already spends about \$400 million dollars in funding just from each decennial census.⁵ As indicated on the U.S census, %75 make up the white race, %13.6 of African Americans, %6.3 of Asians, %19.1 of hispanics and latinians, and %1.3 of Native Indians/Alaskans.⁶ MENAS make up %4, assumingly. Don't let that little number fool you, it's a big amount to add additional funding. And by the year the number of Middle Easterns is increasing. The issue though, is that number possibly might not be accurate. Since MENAs are considered to be white, many continue to place themselves as so or even as Asian or African American. The MENAs have been so dispersed whenever they have to check that checkbox that it has been hard to identify who is of Middle Eastern or North African descent from how spread out they are through demographics. Through the government's logic, since Arabs had no set identification, it meant they would “lose out” and the rights to keep it as it is would go to the government. The problem at hand was, how is it fair to claim MENA as white, if they were not going to be given the same privileges as white people? Illinois happens to be the state with one of the largest Middle Eastern communities, especially those who come from Palestine.

⁵ Al-Dabbagh, “Al-Dabbagh: Despite Trump’s decision, Arab Americans want their own Census box”.

⁶ Census.gov, “Race and Hispanic Origin”.

The outcome was inevitable when the state is filled with such a large number of Arabs who are very involved with social and political movements that deal with their civil rights. Despite understanding why the United States could feel uncomfortable about this, it is still about \$4 million that is already being provided to other minorities which in this case %4 of MENA should be nothing, especially since \$877 billion is directly spent on military that majority of the time take stand in the Middle East for battles that have nothing to do with them, and put a hold on people that they think are terrorist organizations. Below you'll find the official page by the census that states the percentages, and an overall demographic of what most years look like in regards to race.



My thoughts and results

In conclusion, after much thorough research on the topic, and just from experience as a MENA from Syria and Turkey, I think that MENAS having their own category was very much needed. Even though others may be looking at this economically to perhaps gain more interest in loans, I happen to view this more as a social justice issue and right to freedom of identity. As stated in the text, “public policy originates in our understanding of the public interest.”⁷, and although the U.S. census saw them as white because of public interest back in the 1900s, the years that went by no longer put that statement into place. It became of the government's interest rather than the actual community affected by this. Many people of the Middle East and North Africa have had identity crises not knowing where they fit in or where they belong. And although I'm sure that JB Pritzker didn't do this because he felt for the community, he still took a step and listened. Perhaps he even benefits from this within the state more than if he wouldn't. Electives would surely indicate that the MENAS have his vote. I see this new policy was a weight lifted on my shoulder, not having to struggle to know where to place myself. I grew up my entire life told I was white, from my parents and from anything that verifies me, as me. But when it comes to explaining to the outside world who are very foreign that being white doesn't mean you have to be christian, it made me question the entirety of who I am, and I was extremely hesitant to know where to put myself on the SAT as well as college or job

⁷ Cochran and Malone, *Public Policy: Perspectives and Choices*, 1-10

1. The Uniform Racial Classification Act of 2023, Bill 3768, 103rd Cong. [press-release.26835.html](https://www.legis.ga.gov/legis/2023/bills/20230001-20230100/202303768)

applications. Bill 3768 that was introduced in august 2023, will be a requirement that goes in effect by July 2025.