



What is a MENA checkbox?

The Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) checkbox would be a new minimum reporting ethnic category on the decennial census and other federal surveys. MENA populations, including Arab Americans, would get their own box for their ethnicity, while having the option to also check any other category, including another ethnic category or one of the racial categories.

- MENA would be an ethnic category, not a racial one, as people from MENA can identify with any racial group.
- MENA is a geographically based category as it represents diverse populations from that part of the world. This geography has many sub-ethnic identities which should still be supported and reported rather than a "MENA identity."
- MENA includes the 22 members of the League of Arab states (Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen), the three non-Arab MENA states (Iran, Israel, and Turkey), and Trans-national communities (Armenians, Assyrians/Chaldeans, Kurds, Amazigh).
- A MENA category would allow people from the MENA region, including Arab Americans, to select the MENA checkbox, list their ethnicity or national origin, and also check a race category they may identify with. Remember, it is based on self-identification so it is entirely up to the respondent to choose which category to check and all the categories that may apply.
- A MENA category is about collecting more accurate data. A MENA category on the Census or other federal surveys does not convey eligibility for federal programs.



What is OMB's Directive No. 15 that is currently under review?

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), housed within the Executive Office of the President, oversees the performance of all federal agencies and the budget process. The first time it provided standards for the collection and reporting of race and ethnicity data across government was in 1977 with the issuance of Statistical Policy Directive No. 15. In that same Directive, "White" is defined as people from Europe and the Middle East or North Africa. In 1997, OMB issued significant revisions to Directive No. 15 but despite a national campaign for a separate classification, it simply found further research was needed on an "Arab or Middle Eastern ethnic category." After 25 years, OMB announced last year they were beginning a formal review to revise Directive No. 15.



Why is revising OMB's Directive No. 15 so important?

While the Census Bureau's own testing has found a combined race and ethnicity question and a new MENA category will improve data quality, the Bureau cannot move forward without OMB revising its standards on collecting race and ethnicity contained in Directive No. 15. With the revision of the Standards, a new minimum reporting ethnic MENA category will be used by all federal agencies to provide people from the MENA region, including Arab Americans, with accurate data on our communities. An accurate count of MENA populations, communities currently rendered invisible in the data, will improve representation, services, and research, including access to information on health outcomes, educational achievement, social and economic trends, language needs, and more.



What's next for securing the MENA category?

After OMB announced a formal review of the race and ethnicity standards in 2022, an Interagency Technical Working Group was formed to aid in the process. On January 27, 2023, OMB published a Federal Register Notice seeking the public's comments on the Working Group's initial proposal for updating the Standards. The comment period will close on April 27, 2023 and OMB is expected to complete its revisions of Directive No. 15 no later than Summer of 2024.

For the first time ever, a government Working Group's initial proposal calls for adding a Middle East or North Africa (MENA) category. After decades of work to secure a MENA category so that we can improve data collection on Arab Americans, we are finally in a position to support a Working Group's recommendations.

Our ask is simple:

- We support a MENA minimum reporting ethnic category as part of a combined race and ethnicity question.
- We support continued stakeholder engagement to ensure the MENA category, the detailed subgroups listed as examples, and the guidance provided for the collection and reporting of data allow for the best self-identification by respondents and accurate, more granular data about communities.