ADVANCING RESEARCH WITH MENA COMMUNITIES

A GUIDE

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A warm café illustration depicts Middle Eastern and North African community members gathered in conversation, symbolizing connection, dialogue, and shared community space.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This guide is designed for researchers who wish to conduct meaningful and ethical research with MENA communities. The approach detailed below provides not only a contextualized lens for studying topics of relevance and urgency among MENA communities, but also a framework to mitigate the historically extractive ways of conducting research with ethnic and racial communities.

The Middle Eastern and North African (MENA)[1] community in the United States is diverse and growing. People in the MENA community in the United States can trace their ancestry to two dozen countries throughout northern Africa and western Asia, or can trace their ancestry to sub-national ethnic groups within MENA countries, such as Amazigh or Yazidi. There has been continuous immigration to the U.S. for nearly 150 years. MENA community members can be recent immigrants or fourth or fifth generation Americans. There is a broad diversity of religious practices and community members may speak Arabic, Farsi, Armenian, Chaldean, Somali, or any other number of languages found in the region.

Due to the history of exclusion of MENA Americans from traditional data collection measures, future work to elucidate their community and health needs must explicitly and intentionally make MENA communities across the U.S. visible.

Through a detailed look at how the research life cycle can be influenced by the MENA American lived experience, we highlight tangible ways that researchers and community members can work together to honor the community's needs and produce more effective research.

The guidelines presented are influenced by the project team's experiences and may not reflect all MENA American community needs. This guide is an initial step for researchers engaging in research with MENA American individuals and should be supplemented by reading existing literature and in-depth training with regional and local community-based organizations.

In addition to this guide, our partners at the Arab American Health Network Alliance (AAHNA) created a guide to help influence engagement in patient-centered health research in Arab and MENA American communities. You can download the guide at https://www.arabamericanhealthnetworkalliance.org/ or by emailing abueleza@msu.edu

[1] When discussing the actual MENA check box approved by the Office of Management and Budget in 2024, we will use their phrasing of "Middle Eastern or North African." When referencing our national community, we will use "Middle Eastern and North African."

II. LEGACY OF IMPERIALISM

Big Picture

Since the late 1700s, some European countries and later the United States, have had continual involvement and influence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). These actions, often imperial in nature and resulting in direct colonization, have been justified through stereotypes that depict the region's peoples as uncivilized, anti-modern, or incapable of self-governance. These views, shaped by Orientalist thinking, have provided ideological support for colonial and imperial projects intersecting with broader systems of racism, white supremacy, and xenophobia that continue to affect MENA communities in the United States and in the MENA region.

Today, U.S. political, economic, and military interventions in the region—often supported by domestic policies and media narratives—remain key ways that these legacies of European imperialism persist. At the same time, individuals of MENA background in the U.S. experience these dynamics in everyday life through surveillance, discrimination, and harmful stereotypes.

Centuries of Orientalist discourse about MENA communities has created a need to clarify the community's role within research while remaining sensitive to the diversity in the community across numerous axes. The role of this guide is to provide recommendations that re-center the community and honor their needs within the research process.

Orientalism

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) provides a foundational framework for understanding how knowledge production—through travel writing, scientific exploration, art, and popular culture—portrayed the Middle East as backward, dangerous, and fundamentally "other." These portrayals helped justify European (mainly British, French, and Italian) colonial domination. After World War I, as U.S. global influence grew, similar narratives appeared in American political rhetoric, news coverage, and popular culture.

Orientalist ideas circulate through:

- **Film and television**, where Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Muslims are often portrayed as violent or anti-Western.
- **News media**, which frequently frames conflicts in the region through U.S.-based security and terrorism narratives, devoid of historical context.
- **Public policy**, by being used to help justify military interventions, travel restrictions, and refugee bans.
- **Domestic enforcement**, including targeted surveillance of Arab, Muslim, and MENA communities.

The cumulative effect has been to construct MENA people in the U.S. public imagination as inherently violent or suspect. Political rhetoric and military actions often set the tone, with cultural industries reinforcing those narratives for mass audiences.

Post-9/11 Policies and Surveillance

While negative stereotypes existed long before the attacks of September 11, 2001, the fallout marked a turning point. Policies such as the USA PATRIOT Act (2001) dramatically expanded government surveillance, detention, and deportation powers. Scholars have documented how Arab, Muslim, and MENA communities were subjected to increased monitoring, FBI interviews, and programs like “special registration,” which required tens of thousands of men from predominantly Muslim countries to register with immigration authorities.[2]

These measures contributed to increased hate crimes, workplace discrimination, and social exclusion. They also reinforced broader public perceptions of MENA people (particularly Arabs, Iranians, and Muslims) as threats, deepening mistrust between communities and government institutions.

Although U.S. popular culture and media tend to present all Arabs as Muslims and all Muslims as Arabs, Arabs represent only one-fifth of the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims. Arabs are a minority of Muslim Americans as well. A 2011 Pew Research Center survey found that only 26% of Muslim Americans and 41% of foreign-born Muslims were from the Middle East or North Africa. There are large Christian communities in many MENA countries, particularly Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, as well as in diaspora.

However, it is important to note that the broader Muslim community has also been severely impacted by the anti-Muslim and anti-refugee rhetoric that led to the series of travel bans (popularly called the Muslim Ban) during the Trump administration’s first term in 2017, building upon already existing patterns of policies, interventions, and rhetoric that targeted these communities.[3] The cycle continued under the Biden administration, given how former President Biden cracked down on pro-Palestinian protests around the country, paving way for President Trump to attempt to implement policies that persecute anyone critical of the state of Israel.

These policies and representations isolate the community, creating an environment where they may be more averse to seeking services or identifying as MENA on forms and surveys. This causes several struggles, from public health crises to difficulty acculturating and even a disconnect with one’s identity.

Impact of Racism Against MENA Communities

While surveillance and racism continue to make MENA communities vulnerable to state and interpersonal violence, these communities are underrepresented when it comes to federal data collection, such as the U.S. Census.

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[2] For a full accounting of pre- and post-9/11 actions against Arab, MENA, and Muslim communities in the U.S., see Nadine Naber’s introduction in her volume Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11 (2006) as well as Louise Cainkar’s Homeland Insecurity (2009).

[3] The Center for Arab Narratives published an accounting of the so-called “Muslim Ban” on the community. See “The Muslim Ban, MENA Migration, and the Shattered Dream of America” (2025) https://www.arabnarratives.org/the-muslim-ban

Even though MENA individuals experience racial discrimination, as of January 2026, they remain largely categorized as White in important data on community well-being, collected by multiple federal agencies.[4] This means researchers cannot adequately measure MENA community experiences with important issues related to environmental justice, health, employment and labor, and more. MENA communities therefore confront a paradox of being hyper visible in contexts of racism, yet invisible when it comes to the distribution of public resources and recognition of social injustices. MENA communities being federally categorized as racially White has aided Orientalist ideologies in the government and civil society, because it allows for a lack of acknowledgment or accountability of harm done.

Political Narratives & Research Suppression

Scholars such as Louise Cainkar (2021) note that U.S. political discourse around the Middle East, especially concerning Palestine and Israel, has often relied on racialized narratives that portray Arabs and Palestinians as inherently violent or inferior. These portrayals draw on older Orientalist tropes while serving contemporary political goals of U.S. government support for Israel and delegitimizing Palestinian claims to land. Within academia, research on Palestinian, Arab American and MENA American experiences has sometimes been marginalized or treated with hostility, limiting scholarly engagement.

This pattern demonstrates how Orientalist logics can shape not only popular culture and policy but also knowledge production.

The post- 9/11 era proved to be a turning point where, although racism against MENA communities was already widely acceptable, there was a general consensus in popular and political discourses that individuals from the Middle East and North Africa were all potential enemies/threats to the public. The public took their cue from the government, which at the time was ruthless in its persecution.

"For example, the [George W.] Bush administration passed the PATRIOT Act, then thousands of people were placed on a list; then came the random calls from the FBI to people's homes, followed by missing people who were picked up, often without charges and held indefinitely. Later came deportations and, in many cases, family and friends were denied information regarding whereabouts of detainees or deportees. December 2002 marked a new phase in the backlash with the beginning of special registration – the most egregious period where thousands of men were locked up even though many had valid visas (Naber 2006)."

Researchers and institutions play an important role in either reinforcing stereotypes or countering them. Responsible scholarship requires acknowledging the histories, cultural practices, and lived experiences of MENA communities rather than reducing them to tropes of violence or suspicion.

[4] See later sections in this guide for more on the history of federal categorization of MENA communities.

Transnationalism

Many people of MENA origin, like other immigrant communities, exist in two spaces at once. They experience what happens in their countries of origin as well as their lived reality in the United States.

This relationship varies depending on individual and family histories but is particularly stark in populations who are in the U.S. because of U.S. military and political interventions in their home countries. Isolation and the inability to return home or visit families overseas can have negative impacts on MENA Americans' mental health and cultural resilience.[5] Youth may feel particularly disconnected from their identity because of how they see MENA communities portrayed in media, in addition to attitudes within the MENA community that assimilation entails minimizing one's heritage.[6]

Some examples are:

- Many members of the MENA community struggle with acculturation in the U.S., knowing that U.S. military violence is the reason they or their families left their country of origin.
- Communities in the U.S. watch the U.S. fund military campaigns abroad, meaning their family, neighbors, and other community members are attacked using the MENA person's tax dollars.
- Arab and MENA communities are sometimes forced to deny their native culture, heritage, or history in order to appear more patriotic and grateful.
- Many individuals experience health risks/issues due to displacement after war, but find they have limited access to culturally and linguistically compatible health resources once in the U.S.[7]
- Individuals experience economic insecurity after migrating due to prior degrees, skills, and/or experiences being rejected by employers, or because they struggle with English language proficiency.
- Emotional trauma is often neglected due to inaccessible resources.
- There is a double standard regarding U.S. political rhetoric and depictions of the violence Arab and MENA communities experience (For example, U.S. media coverage of Russian aggression in Ukraine versus Israeli aggression against Palestine),
- Due to government and societal surveillance, Arab and MENA communities feel targeted.

[5] A number of studies, using mainly convenience samples, have found correlations between U.S. domestic and foreign policies and mental health stressors among Arab and MENA communities. See, for example: Moradi, B., & Hasan, N. T. (2004). Arab American Persons' Reported Experiences of Discrimination and Mental Health: The Mediating Role of Personal Control. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 51(4), 418–428. "https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-0167.51.4.418" https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.51.4.418

[6] There are multiple studies about the negative effect on diaspora communities. See, for example: Muniba Saleem, Magdalena E Wojcieszak, Ian Hawkins, Miao Li, Srividya Ramasubramanian, Social Identity Threats: How Media and Discrimination Affect Muslim Americans' Identification as Americans and Trust in the U.S. Government, *Journal of Communication*, Volume 69, Issue 2, April 2019, Pages 214–236, https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz001

[7] For more on the mental health costs for MENA refugees, please see: Awad, G. H., Kia-Keating, M., & Amer, M. M. (2019). A model of cumulative racial–ethnic trauma among Americans of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent. *American Psychologist*, 74(1), 76–87.

- Witnessing their community members being targeted and feeling discouraged/fearful for their safety in trying to advocate for their concerns.
- Dismissed and pressured to see their concerns, positionality, or opinions as "wrong" or anti-American; alongside the construction of Arab/MENA identity as tied to "terrorism."

In MENA immigrant households, the generational divide is heavily influenced by the history of imperialism and ongoing anti-MENA racism.

Immigrant parents tend to place great emphasis on retaining their native social norms, language, and cultural memory. Meanwhile, their children grow up surrounded by Western culture and adopt cultural modes that may differ from their parents, such as language, communication styles, cuisine, social values, etc. Additionally, the age of the parents at the time of immigration plays a large role in how openly they welcome their child's cultural integration. In 2023, a group of researchers found that ethnic centrality in Arab Americans under the age of 25 was significantly lower than in adults over 25 years old.[8]

This can result in a disconnect that can lead to familial tensions over identity, with children feeling pulled between two cultural worlds and parents fearing the loss of their heritage.

Homeland Crises

Additionally, it is important for researchers to understand the deep connections many MENA community members have with their home or ancestral countries. Many community members in the U.S. may experience emotional turmoil watching "invisible conflicts" in their home countries. Invisible conflicts, in this instance, refers to the violence or unrest in one's home country that U.S. media is not covering. This is particularly important for the MENA community, because often the crisis in their home country is a direct or indirect result of U.S. economic, military, or cultural imperialism.

Unfortunately, researchers are often not sensitive to these struggles. Some researchers use times of extreme stress and sadness for the MENA community as opportunities to advance their own research projects. It is important to understand that communities may not want to engage with researchers while they are actively mourning their communities back home. Opportunistic research does not build trust with the community.

Safeguarding Against Orientalism

The legacies of Orientalism and imperialism can impact both the researcher's initial approach and the community's willingness to participate. MENA and non-MENA researchers can be susceptible to Orientalist methodologies, though in different ways.

[8] See Rahal D, Kurtz-Costes B, Volpe VV. Ethnic Identity in Arab Americans: Gender, Religious Upbringing, and Age Differences. Soc Identities. 2022;28(4):544-569. doi: 10.1080/13504630.2022.2110464

Considering systemic racism, imperialism, and colonialism as obstacles for reaching and retaining respondents, researchers should strive to:

- Ask questions that are important to community members and are driven by community needs.
- Maintain active consent throughout the research process.
- Refer to, and be familiar with, literature representative of MENA experiences and communities.
- Implement safeguards that avoid harmful generalizations, specifically in terms of intersecting marginalized identities.
- Consider the nuances of family structure, acknowledging the prevalence of multigenerational homes, separation of family members across the U.S. and country of origin, and potential causes for unique family/housing situation.
- Recognize heterogeneity in MENA communities in terms of gender, sexuality, religion and religiosity, and cultural practice.

The long legacy of Orientalist knowledge production about the Middle Eastern and North African community impacts not only the position of the MENA community in the U.S. but also the power dynamics between scholars, community-based organizations (CBOs), and community members. Researchers, even a researcher with MENA heritage, should be aware of these power dynamics. No single researcher can be an expert on every MENA community or on every aspect of a specific MENA community.

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The annual Advocacy Days hosted by NNAAC and CAN held in Washington DC (May 2025)

III. MENA COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND DATA COLLECTION

Big Picture

On March 28, 2024, the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) updated Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 (SPD 15), introducing several significant changes to how federal agencies will collect race and ethnicity data. The update also included revised terminology to reflect current understandings and usage. Notably, "Middle Eastern or North African" (MENA) is now recognized as a distinct, minimum reporting category, separate from the White racial box, where most MENA communities had been aggregated since the 1950s.

The revised standards require federal agencies (including the U.S. Census Bureau) to use a single, combined question for race and ethnicity, and allow individuals to select multiple identities. As of January 2025, federal agencies have until March 2029 to begin implementation of the MENA category—which was the result of decades of research and advocacy by scholars, community organizations, and researchers all over the country and at the U.S. Census Bureau (hereafter Census). Consensus between these entities pointed to the need for identifying the MENA population as a distinct reporting category due to a number of social and historical factors.

What is your race and/or ethnicity?
Select all that apply and enter additional details in the spaces below.

☐ **American Indian or Alaska Native** – *Enter, for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation of Montana, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, Aztec, Maya, etc.*

☐ **Asian** – *Provide details below.*
☐ Chinese ☐ Asian Indian ☐ Filipino
☐ Vietnamese ☐ Korean ☐ Japanese
Enter, for example, Pakistani, Hmong, Afghan, etc.

☐ **Black or African American** – *Provide details below.*
☐ African American ☐ Jamaican ☐ Haitian
☐ Nigerian ☐ Ethiopian ☐ Somali
Enter, for example, Trinidadian and Tobagonian, Ghanaian, Congolese, etc.

☐ **Hispanic or Latino** – *Provide details below.*
☐ Mexican ☐ Puerto Rican ☐ Salvadoran
☐ Cuban ☐ Dominican ☐ Guatemalan
Enter, for example, Colombian, Honduran, Spaniard, etc.

☐ **Middle Eastern or North African** – *Provide details below.*
☐ Lebanese ☐ Iranian ☐ Egyptian
☐ Syrian ☐ Iraqi ☐ Israeli
Enter, for example, Moroccan, Yemeni, Kurdish, etc.

☐ **Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander** – *Provide details below.*
☐ Native Hawaiian ☐ Samoan ☐ Chamorro
☐ Tongan ☐ Fijian ☐ Marshallese
Enter, for example, Chuukese, Palauan, Tahitian, etc.

☐ **White** – *Provide details below.*
☐ English ☐ German ☐ Irish
☐ Italian ☐ Polish ☐ Scottish
Enter, for example, French, Swedish, Norwegian, etc.

New federal race and ethnicity data collection guidelines, March 2024.

Understanding the MENA Box

Following the passage of restrictive immigration laws in 1921 and 1924, most Arab and MENA people were barred from immigrating to the United States. Additionally, for the first half of the twentieth century, some MENA individuals were denied citizenship based on judgments about their skin color, ancestral heritage on the Asian continent (because of the Asian Exclusion Act that denied citizenship to Asian immigrants), and Muslim identity.[9] Early Arabic-speaking immigrant communities in the U.S. fought court battles to be legally recognized as White in order to become citizens.

[9] See Naber, "The Rule of Forced Engagement: Race, Gender, and the Culture of Fear among Arab Immigrants in San Francisco Post-911." *Cultural Dynamics* 18 (2006).

Even as MENA people in the U.S. have been “othered” through political rhetoric and Hollywood representations for more than 100 years, intensifying following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, MENA people have remained part of the White racial box according to federal categorization.

The national Arab American community began a sustained push in the 1980s to have the Census count Arab Americans as distinct from the White racial category. After more than 30 years of constant pushing, coalition building, and working directly with the Census to conduct national-level testing of a separate box (which by the time the Census conducted the historic 2015 National Content Test the proposed box had shifted from Arab to the more inclusive MENA designation), the community achieved a major victory in March 2024 with the revised SPD 15 announcement.

More recently, The Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), the largest Arab American community non-profit in the country, through its national institutions, the National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC) and the Center for Arab Narratives (CAN), played an active and sustained role in advocating for revised federal standards to establish a dedicated MENA reporting category. In the summer of 2021, the Biden administration established an Equitable Data Working Group (EDWG) which, pursuant to Executive Order 13985, was tasked with identifying gaps and areas for improvement in federal data.

In August of 2021, NNAAC presented to the EDWG a case for revising SPD 15 to establish a MENA category, outlining its potential benefits in terms of data quality, reducing disparities, and program administration. In the ensuing months, NNAAC held the administration accountable to its campaign promise to establish a MENA category, guiding the House and Senate congressional committees with jurisdiction over the OMB to issue congressional letters urging action on SPD 15.

In January of 2023, the OMB issued an opportunity for the public to comment on its initial proposals for revising SPD 15. During the public comment period, NNAAC, CAN, and ACCESS collaborated on the #countMENAin campaign, a grassroots effort to mobilize community members to express their support for the MENA category. The success of the campaign in driving over 13,000 public comments in support of the MENA category was cited by the OMB as a factor that led to their final decision, issued in March of 2024, to establish a MENA category through the revised SPD 15.

As of January 2026, according to the U.S. Census, the MENA community is comprised of people who identify with 20 different ancestries, including nationalities and a handful of ethnic or ethno-religious groups like Amazigh (Berber) or Kurdish peoples. The Census has done extensive testing and held many community conversations to help determine which communities they will code as MENA which standardizes the Census’s racial and ethnic code for most researchers and agencies.

Identities federally included as MENA as of January 2026 are:

Algerian, Arab, Assyrian, Bahraini, Berber/Amazigh, Chaldean, Egyptian, Copt, Emirati, Iranian, Iraqi, Israeli, Jordanian, Kurdish, Kuwaiti, Lebanese, Libyan, Middle Eastern, Moroccan, North African, Omani, Palestinian, Qatari, Saudi, Syriac, Syrian, Tunisian, Yazidi, and Yemeni.

Some national Arab and MENA orgs, like CAN and NNAAC, would like to see Armenians, Sudanese, Somalis, and Mauritanians counted under the MENA community. Sudanese, Somalis and Mauritanians are already counted within the Black racial group, but it would be useful if there were also coded as MENA.
The prominent inclusion of "Israeli" as one of the detailed options in the new OMB standards is causing some concern in the Arab American community[10], specifically. Further, as far as research validity, the Census's own research shows that people who self-identify as Israeli are the least likely to select the MENA box.[11]

Self-identification is the most important factor in implementing the MENA box for research. Like all identity categories, the definition of MENA is very fluid, includes many countries and ethnicities, and is based on user response.

Some state governments and other entities (like universities) have already begun data collection using some version of a MENA category or box.

Effective ways to implement the MENA box can be found in collaboration with community-based organizations and other community consultants.

As a note, despite the creation of a MENA box amidst the community's continued marginalization, the presence of the MENA box does not equate to a protected, federally recognized minority status. Accessibility to resources such as grants, scholarships, and federal funding may vary accordingly.

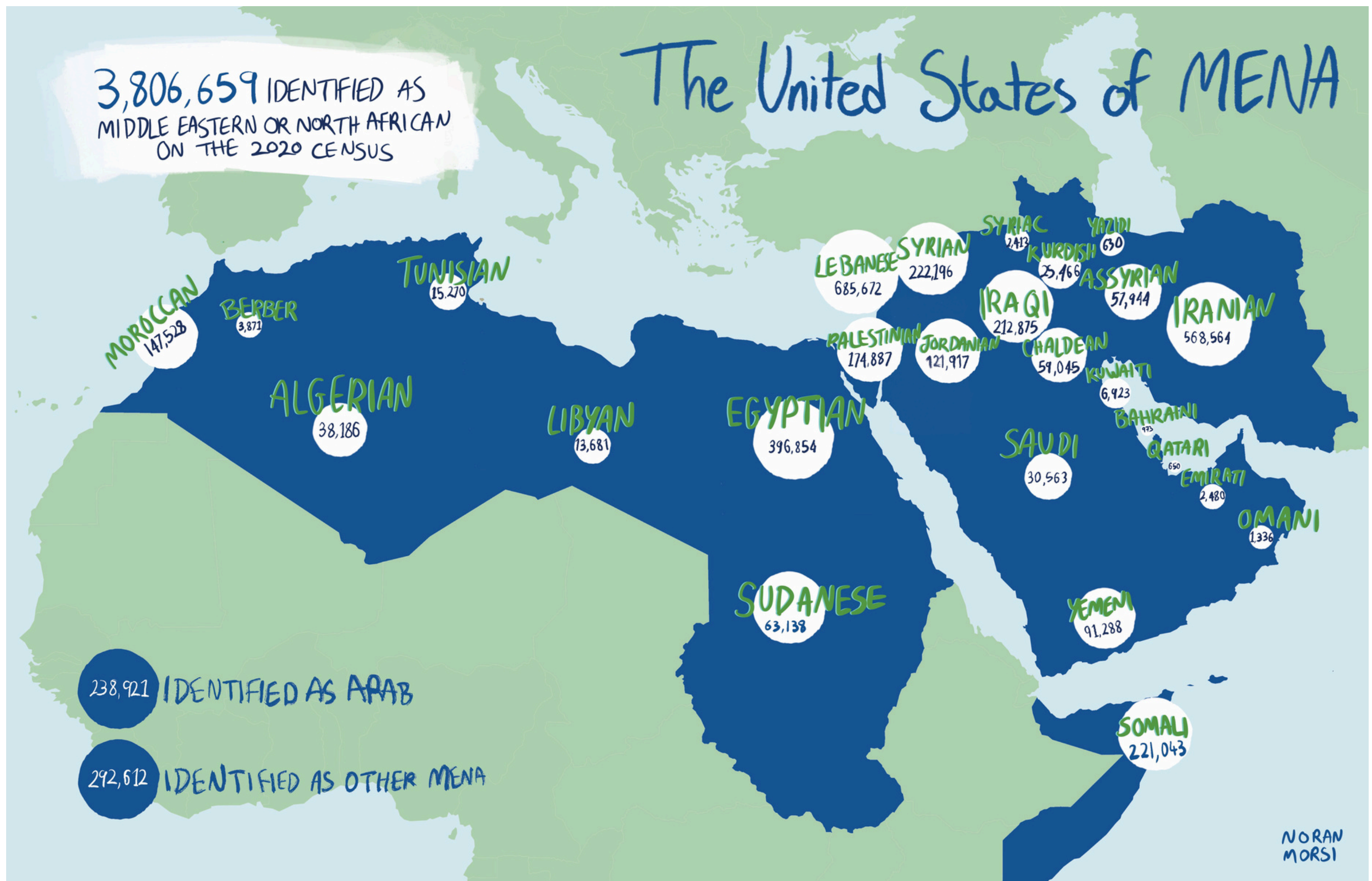
Still, MENA Americans can be protected by non-discrimination policies in areas such as employment and education, specifically Section 1981 (officially 42 U.S.C. § 1981), which is a federal law that prohibits discrimination in contracts based on race, color, and national origin, with employment being a significant application. MENA American claimants have found redress (not always but sometimes) through this.

Selecting MENA Criteria

The OMB's race and ethnicity standards, including subgroup coding, are largely standardized across the federal government, relying heavily on guidance from the U.S. Census Bureau. However, individual researchers can modify and adapt the MENA category according to research goals. Researchers can collaborate with CBOs to be more precise about the community of study. Deciding which communities to include in the MENA category for a particular study should align with the purpose and goals of the research.

[10] See Adely, Hannan. "Will Arab Americans finally be counted on the US Census?" https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/2023/02/20/us-census-ethnicity-categories-nj-arab-americans-want-inclusion/69906692007/

[11] See the results of the U.S. Census' 2015 National Content Test, specifically Table 22 https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020/planning-management/plan/final-analysis/2015nct-race-ethnicity-analysis.html



"The United States of MENA," original artwork by Noran Morsi, 2024. Data from the 2020 Decennial U.S. Census.

The MENA community is not a monolith, so generalizations of the community, such as MENA regions or nations, can be dangerous for accurate data.

Although researchers can rely on existing academic research to better understand nuances of the MENA box, collaboration with community-based co-Principal Investigators (PIs), consultants, organizations, and advisory boards can help fill in any gaps in the literature.

By working with CBOs and consultants, researchers can better navigate how to:

- Understand the relevance of a MENA identity or category to local populations
- Determine MENA subgroups and selection criteria specific to their research project
- Effectively communicate the new MENA box with participants.

Existing resources, such as CAN's Portrait of Arab America data report, highlight that certain MENA subgroups are more prominent in different metro areas, and that MENA community profiles vary across geographic regions.[12] For instance, San Diego has a large population of Somalis and Iraqis, whereas metro Detroit has a large Lebanese, Iraqi, and Yemeni population.

[12] See the full report here: https://www.arabnarratives.org/portrait-of-arab-america

Questions to consider when collecting and analyzing MENA data from regional or national sources include:

- What is the impact of acculturation on second-or third-generation MENA Americans, as opposed to more recent immigrants?
- What are the migration patterns from home countries (e.g. push/pull factors)?
- How to account for regional differences in the MENA region (e.g. Levant, Gulf, North Africa, etc.)?
- What are the different local contexts in the U.S. (socioeconomic factors of the metro region or state)?
- How does heterogeneity in the MENA community impact research design?

Heterogeneity and Diversity

The MENA community is as heterogeneous in the United States as it is throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Individuals in the MENA community can and do identify with multiple identities at once, such as Afro-Arabs in North, East, and West Africa or MENA individuals with mixed ancestry, such as Palestinian and Italian.

Diversity within the MENA region and communities in America can elicit disconnect between regions of origin (Gulf, Levant, North Africa, East Africa) due to a history of Arabization, nation-state building projects, and colonization projects.

The Arabization of lands across the region (in which Islam and Arab culture spread from the Arabian Peninsula through northern Africa, western Asian and into Europe) combined with European colonialism shaped what we now consider to be the borders of MENA, making it ever more important to recognize the heterogeneity and the ongoing impacts of imperialism.

The community in the U.S. may experience both external pressures (see Legacy of Imperialism section) as well as internal divisions based on race or phenotype. Some members of the MENA community have access to white privilege due to their lighter complexions and/or Christian identities.

The fight for whiteness among the early Arab and MENA community, coupled with long-standing colorism and anti-Blackness in many Arab and MENA countries has created tense racial dynamics within the community. Other people of MENA origin, darker-skinned, Black, and Muslim people have not enjoyed that same access to white privilege.

Instead, they experience both anti-Black racism in the U.S. as well as racism within the MENA community.

MENA and Muslim identity have often been equated in the U.S. rather than seen as independent, yet at times intersecting, identities. Religious identity and lived experience should not be conflated considering the religious diversity within the MENA community as well as the ethnic/racial diversity in the Muslim community.

Comparing MENA Data with Other Racial and Ethnic Groups

Before the announcement of the federal MENA box in 2024, most studies of Arab and MENA communities, especially in health-related disciplines, only compared MENA experiences to that of the White racial group—to argue for the disaggregation of Arabs and MENA from the White box.[13]

With the increasing push at federal and state levels for disaggregating MENA communities from the White racial box, including the addition of a separate MENA box, it is important to further understand the MENA experience by comparing MENA data to other marginalized communities, such as Black or African American and Asian or Asian American. The drivers of racism against each of these communities may be different, but the real-world impacts of racist policies and interpersonal racism should be measured. Using other minority groups as a reference point decenters whiteness from the research while potentially shedding light on overlapping experiences amongst marginalized people.

Communicating the MENA Box to the Community

Communicating the MENA box to potential participants may vary depending on the targeted study population.

Collaboration with CBOs or consultants, or relying on community-specific resources, can allow for the most effective way to discuss or explain the MENA box to potential participants. The MENA box is not only a new category for researchers, but for the majority of the community.

Historically, most people that fall within the new MENA box have been accustomed to selecting "White," "Black," "Asian," or "Some other race," on data collection forms that did not have a distinct MENA box.

Some members of the MENA population, such as older generations, new immigrants, or individuals who speak English as a second language, may not understand the MENA box as a distinct racial/ethnic category within the U.S. racial landscape. Although the community is very familiar with the framing of Middle East and North Africa as a geographic region, the idea of identifying with a MENA racial/ethnic category may be new. In the U.S. content they are familiar with identifying as Lebanese, Persian, or Algerian, but may not understand how these identities are connected to the MENA category.

Also, a "MENA box" may not translate the same in another language (especially because there are no acronyms in Arabic), or identity formation and identification may be different in their country of origin.

Researchers should include examples of potential subgroups or identities that are being considered as part of the MENA category for their project.

[13] See Awad, Abuelezam, Ajrouch, and Stiffler. "Lack of Arab or Middle Eastern and North African Health Data Undermines Assessment of Health Disparities". *American Journal of Public Health.* https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306590?journalCode=ajph

Best practices would also suggest including check boxes for the top sub-groups in the geographic area being studied (such as Lebanese, Chaldean, Iranian, etc.) as well as emphasizing the ability to have multiple identities at once (e.g. Arab and African or Iraqi and Assyrian).

There are also other reasons why the MENA box may inhibit some participants from self-identifying with the category.

There has been some pushback from community members about the term "Middle East," which is a geographic designation created by the British to mark how far east from Great Britain the region was. In a push to decolonize terminology and community identity, some community leaders and organizations may be more comfortable with the category SWANA—which stands for Southwest Asian or North African.

One way for researchers to overcome this barrier is to communicate that MENA may not be the best terminology, while it is the largely agreed upon categorization for data collection of the community. It would also not be detrimental to list the category on your instrument as "MENA/SWANA" since they include essentially the same subgroups.

Another barrier for community members to self-identify within the new MENA category stems from the scrutiny and surveillance that the MENA community has been experiencing for decades. This is a key reason why transparency and effective communication from the researcher to potential participants is so crucial.

Communicating to potential participants that there are laws and procedures that ensure security of demographic data (IRB protocols), and that the potential benefits of the research to the community may outweigh the potential risks to individuals. Risks still do exist, though, depending on data being collected in conjunction with MENA identity, such as citizenship status.

The participants must ultimately decide whether, and in what manner, to respond to the MENA identity question. It is the researcher's responsibility to clearly articulate the available options, communicate them in language accessible to the participant, and ensure that the participant's understanding aligns with the researcher's intended meaning.

Despite some real barriers to implementation, researchers, most community leaders, and data scientists at the U.S. Census agree that the new MENA box will result in better, more actionable community data.

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Members of the Arab American community in Dearborn attend ACCESS's annual Back to School Fair (August 2025)

CENTER FOR ARAB NARRATIVES

IV. REDESIGNING FOR MENA COMMUNITY RESEARCH

Big Picture

Whether the research team follows the tenets of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) or Community-Engaged Research (CEnR), or some combination of multiple approaches, the goal should be the same: to move as close to true community partnership as possible.[14] Partnership entails shared power, mutual accountability, and co-ownership of the methods and results.

Consultation and collaboration with community organizations and individuals is a great place to start, but engagement should aim to move beyond input to decision-making and shared governance. Especially for the MENA community, the community-centered approach must pursue improved conditions for the community as part of a transformative, justice-oriented paradigm that seeks to address the impacts of imperialism and Orientalism as outlined earlier in this guide.

To help contextualize local MENA populations, please consult CAN's data report that highlights the nuanced community profiles of many MENA communities across the country. The report, titled "Portrait of Arab America," uses extensive data from the American Community Survey (ACS) to disaggregate all Arab and Chaldean subgroups from the White racial category. The report offers a deep dive in six metro areas. CBOs can further contextualize for their region.

Community-Informed Design

Researchers should collaborate with, and compensate, community members to create easily understandable, community-informed tools (such as survey instruments, questionnaires, recruitment flyers, and even IRB consent forms) and design methods to produce a respondent- centered research process.

Researchers should design projects where the results can positively impact services and programs or shed light on community issues with an eye towards solutions. Researchers should also identify exactly which aspect of the community is under study.

Is the study national or regional in scope? Does it investigate the MENA community in general or specific subsets?

[14] For an overview of CPBR, consult Wallerstein NB, Duran B. Using community-based participatory research to address health disparities. *Health Promot Pract.* 2006 Jul;7(3):312-23. doi: 10.1177/1524839906289376. And for a lengthy discussion and examples of CEnR, *Principles of Community Engagement*, 3rd edition, Center for Disease Control. https://hsc.unm.edu/population-health/_documents/principles-of-community-engagement_3rd-edition.pdf

These questions will determine community outreach, question design, and other sampling or research methodologies.

To move towards the goal of true partnership, CBOs, other community-based consultants, advisory boards or steering committees, should be involved early in the research design process, appropriately compensated for their involvement, and acknowledged in the project as Co-PIs or another appropriate role.

Working with communities in the design phase helps ensure that the project is co-created and mutually beneficial to all parties involved. Long-standing relationships and communication between CBOs and researchers uncover community-specific needs, priorities, interpretations, and existing infrastructure relevant to the project. Even if researchers are of MENA descent or part of the community being studied, working with CBOs will not only enhance the research but also balance the power dynamics between researchers and participants.

Additionally, it helps ensure that the research components (including survey questions and focus group guides) are not harmful to the community. Researchers should be cognizant of the fact that different organizations can have different capacities for their involvement as well as their own protocols for collaboration.

CBOs can be helpful with:

- Ensuring methods and community engagement efforts are effective and collaborative.
- Understanding the population, history, demographics, etc.
- Collaborating with other community organizations/leaders/consultants
- Seeking training for creating and implementing culturally responsive tools or methodologies
- Recruiting and retaining participants.

It is also helpful to work with CBOs to make informed consent comprehensible for participants through accurate translations and simplified language. The National Institute of Health's (NIH) All of Us study, which was very inclusive of the MENA community, is a great example of making informed consent acceptable. The NIH utilized short video animations to explain each section of the informed consent process.

Community Partnership: Three Key Points

1. Building Lasting Relationships:

Building lasting relationships with a community requires long-term effort that demonstrates the researcher's good intentions. When researchers show up for community events, engage in ongoing conversations, and support initiatives outside the scope of their projects, they show respect and commitment.

By showing up outside of the research project activities, researchers can gain deeper insights into the community's priorities, culture, and challenges, and may even receive feedback on their work from community members.

While this type of involvement requires effort, it is worth the investment as it builds trust and rapport with communities, making them more likely to welcome collaborations when they see the researchers are invested in them beyond the times when their data or participation is needed in a project. In contrast, only contacting a community when you need something can promote feelings of tokenism. Transactional interactions and extractive research risks damaging trust and reinforcing historical patterns of exploitation in research.

Since many MENA communities feel that their histories and experiences are not fully understood by the general public (including academics and other researchers), showing up in their more informal settings can demonstrate more about a researcher's commitment than any support letter or project flyer ever could.

2. Utilize Advisory Boards & Steering Committees

An excellent way to engage in effective methodologies with the MENA community is to work with, or help to form, community advisory boards. Advisory boards and steering committees should be comprised of a group of individuals who are similar in demographics to the population under study, as well as diverse in their roles in the community in relation to the proposed research.

These boards can not only aid in project inception and reviewing project materials (such as flyers, interview guides, and questionnaires), but should be given decision-making power and co-leadership in research.

Partnering with a CBO to both help with creating the methodological tools for the study and provide the trusted, safe space to host interviews or conduct surveys can significantly increase participation. Many community members may feel more comfortable meeting researchers at a trusted place such as a local CBO.

3. Fair Compensation

Researchers must compensate their participants for their time and expertise. This can be done through creative incentives and is not limited to money or gift cards. Creative incentives can be important in academic environments in which funding is limited. For example, connecting people with existing resources (e.g., connecting ill participants with care takers, providing childcare, legal advice etc.). Overall, researchers must give incentives and accommodation based on anticipated or communicated community needs and/or desires. Incentives should be provided to CBOs or other people involved in data collection, not just participants. CBOs should be written into the initial budget, and the compensation should be relative to the amount of time and resources requested.

Data Collection: In-Person and Virtual

Creating tools for data collection (whether quantitative or qualitative) should be community-informed. Researchers can work with advisory boards or CBOs to ensure that their tools are effective. Even beyond translation (which is discussed in depth below), wording on surveys and focus group guides should be culturally competent.

For example, when asking MENA women questions about work or other forms of employment, include an option for "homemaker." There are some existing scales and "tools already used or adopted" for use with various MENA communities. A good literature review may produce these results.

In-person data collection can pose some unique challenges. Certain methods may not work well in many MENA communities. For instance, door-to-door collection could trigger fears of government surveillance and could also be intimidating depending on the gender of the researcher or data collector. Trusted third spaces should be utilized as often as possible.

Using third spaces for interviews or other qualitative data can potentially have a greater impact on participants than virtual means of data collection. Third spaces can include the office space of CBOs or places that community members recognize and would feel comfortable in, such as community centers and other prominent spaces.

Crowded public places are not only less ideal because of noise, but community members may feel exposed. Some participants may be uncomfortable inviting a researcher or research team into their homes, and transportation or parking issues may inhibit travel to university spaces.

For others, the home space may be the most comfortable depending on the relationship between the participant and researcher.

Using CBOs for third spaces can also allow CBO staff (with proper training and compensation) to be a part of the study. They can help conduct interviews and administer other tools, which can be valuable if finding culturally competent research staff proves difficult.

Regardless of chosen space, help ensure the data collection process is as accessible as possible by considering transportation, childcare options, incentives, and protecting privacy. Note that some Muslim MENA women may not attend a focus group or interview if it is not women-only due to religious/cultural factors. Some women may feel more comfortable in an interview setting to have a friend or family member present. Working with CBOs helps researchers best account for community-specific nuances.

Virtual interviews and focus groups can accommodate various participants and offer a chance to reach parts of the community that may feel uneasy about, or may have limitations to, meeting a researcher in-person. However, among other potential negative implications, there may be mistrust around being recorded, especially virtually. Make sure the proper consents are clearly communicated. If the only communication with the researcher is virtual, there may be a disconnect that would inhibit participants from being fully involved, and this may lead to inaccurate data.

Here are some additional general guidelines for data collection:

- Open-ended questions may yield better results than checkboxes or multiple choice.

- Starting with general questions may make the interviewee feel more comfortable before moving into specifics.
- Incentives matter. If current funding does not allow for appropriate incentives, consider thinking outside of the box and partnering with local businesses for some sort of service or goods for participants.
- Pilot test the interview guides (in all languages being used for collection) with consultants, community members or CBOs. Some of the questions or answer choices may need to be adjusted for specific communities.
- Let participants know if and how AI will be used at any point during the research (i.e. using AI for notetaking, transcription, or analysis).

Accessibility of Results

The research results should be made accessible to the community. Researchers should consider: publishing their results in the primary language of their participants; creating infographics or other social media content summarizing the results; and/or presenting the research to the CBOs or at community events. It would be a lost opportunity for researcher to build rapport with community members and collect data only for those community members to be unlikely to read the results.

Participant Recruitment

Best practices call for engaging early on with the community; particularly before recruitment flyers have been designed and approved by the IRB, as community advisory boards and local CBOs can help with the design and placement of any flyers. These partners can also help with adapting recruitment efforts for different demographic aspects of the community. The platforms used to distribute recruitment materials matter greatly. Each social media platform has its own niche audience in the MENA community.

For example, WhatsApp is very popular with immigrants. TikTok may recruit younger folks and help surveys be directly involved in current/relevant conversations. LinkedIn can recruit more professionals and academics. When distributing surveys or collection tools online, even if using a strong collaboration of CBOs, the data pool will likely come from people already in tune to research or that have higher education levels or awareness of various issues.[15]

It is also vital that researchers understand that recruitment efforts need to be continual. Do not expect a CBO to post a single flyer and recruit all of the desired participants. Follow-up is needed, as is developing community bonds by showing up to events and being present, as is presented earlier in this guide.

[15] For example, some recent national surveys that were primarily distributed online to the MENA community, yielded large percentage of participants with at least college degree. The results of the "SAHA" around COVID vaccination yielded 34.5% with college degrees among the 638 respondents (https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40615-021-01158-6/tables/1). A national online survey conducted by the Arab American Health Network Alliance (AAHNA), which was primarily distributed through CBOs, had more than 60% of respondents with a college degree (https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10900-024-01423-9/tables/1). Finally, the "Across Our Communities" survey conducted by CAN and NNAAC in 2024, and distributed by CBOs, found more than 70% of the 553 respondents with a college degree (https://www.arabnarratives.org/across-our-communities).

Researchers must be transparent with their community participants through open, culturally competent communication. If community members do not understand the consent language, work to ensure that materials and processes are translated using both their native language and in plain English. Many Arab and MENA community members are concerned with privacy, so transparency becomes even more vital. Overall, research should have the community's benefit as the goal. And, as a rule of thumb, successful recruitment begins at the design phase, so including community and CBOs at the design phase will yield better results.

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V. TRANSLATION

Big Picture

Researchers engaged with MENA populations should work with community-based organizations to ensure that any community-facing materials are accessible, accurate, representative culturally, and linguistically relevant. Collaboration with CBOs facilitates the project's ability to gain legitimacy as well as access to a community of linguistically and culturally diverse participants.

Through CBO collaboration, researchers can more clearly determine which materials to translate, train bilingual interviewers if necessary, and pilot translated data collection instruments. Given the vast linguistic and regional diversity within the MENA population, it is important to ensure translations are accessible to the range of dialects of the study population.

Translating vs. Over Translating

Using federal data sets, such as the American Community Survey (ACS) and its Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS), researchers can pull data on MENA language speakers (Arabic, Farsi, Somali, etc.) and/or English language proficiency in certain states or regions. Working with CBOs brings this data local; it helps contextualize local statistics, how to present materials in representative ways, and community translation needs at large.

Translation needs vary across communities and often within the same regional community for a variety of demographic factors such as age, immigration push/pull factors, refugee status, and socioeconomic status, to name a few.

Over translating assumes that the community, as a whole, has a limited English proficiency. Many Arabic speakers living in the U.S. have functional and even professional understanding or use of the English language. Understanding the audience and community prevents over translating or translating where translation is not necessary or counter productive. Examples of this are translating a document into Arabic when a particular community might speak Kurdish rather than Arabic. Or, using only written materials when segments of the study community are illiterate in their native language, despite speaking it fluently. A general rule of thumb is to simplify language while providing the necessary details participants and community members need to better understand the research rationale, aims, and processes.

This can be done by:

- Working with native and/or heritage speakers to translate more difficult terms, such as using layperson Arabic rather than technical formal language (these terms may vary by region)
- Including a diverse array of translations besides Arabic, such as French, Somali, Wolof, and other North African languages, depending on the population
- Keeping simpler, high frequency questions in the original language of the research material, such as name or other basic demographic questions

- Accounting for dialectic differences across subregions (Gulf, Levant, North Africa) and countries
- Translating differently across generational differences; for example, translating less for second-generation Arab Americans, since they are likely to speak English fluently
- Assigning priority to specific sections that must be translated, especially if the researcher has limited resources.

Translations should be included in materials beyond survey or interview questions. Creating recruitment materials with non-English languages can increase accessibility, and serve as a powerful means of representation, and diversify the research sample. Engaging with images of Arabic calligraphy, Persian script, or Wolof words can elicit emotional reactions from potential participants that draw them to the research project. For some, this can begin a process of trust-building since it implicitly communicates that the researcher understands the community deeper than surface-level knowledge.

Piloting Translations

Developing new, community-informed survey instruments requires that translated versions be piloted. Note that both original and translated versions should undergo a pilot phase. The piloting phase entails testing the intended methodology and troubleshooting any issues or inconsistencies. Sending a sample survey to partners or CBOS, or conducting a practice interview ensures that the research instrument or intended methodology is understood as it was designed and achieves the goals of the project.

The process should be repeated for every language translated with a sample reflective of the researcher's intended audience. For example, bilingual and monolingual speakers would have different experiences with the same survey tool or interview questionnaire.

Effective pilot trials account for real-life diversity amongst the participants. When translating materials, researchers should work with a translator who is not only fluent in the language but also attuned to the culture. It is important to give the translator the flexibility to suggest changes to the original English text if needed. This matters because a linguistically accurate phrase may not always be culturally appropriate.

In some cases, rephrasing the English source can lead to a translation that is both more accurate and culturally sensitive. Additionally, researchers should ensure that the formatting of the translated materials is correct. For example, in Arabic, individual letters connect to form scripted words. If a flyer is created with disconnected letters, it not only becomes incomprehensible but also signals to the community that the researcher has not taken the necessary care to provide high-quality, accessible materials.

Effective piloting includes multiple stakeholders reviewing the research tool to ensure the translation meets the needs that the source text attempts to address. After tools are piloted, it is best to add a disclaimer to translated documents that allows participants to communicate feedback, questions, comments, and concerns. This leaves room for improvement and can build trust and transparency.

If left unpiloted, translated tools risk:

- *Flawed statistical analysis*
- *Unsound scientific validity*
- *Problematic results due to translation errors*
- *Disconnect between the data collected and the data needed for the research.*

Training Bilingual Interviewers

Not all surveys, focus groups, and other data collection methods are self-administered. Sometimes researchers have to clarify questions for participants or directly aid them in completing surveys. Interviewers and other assistants trained by the research team are preferred over third-party translators, especially virtually. Collaborating with CBOs or other community consultants can help the researcher train interviewers.

Since surveyors may need translation of additional dialogue used to explain the survey or conduct an interview or focus group, training ensures that needed conversations do not sway the participant.

General rules of thumb for administering an interview, survey, or focus group are:

- Understand where to and where not to explain questions and answer choices to prevent bias
- Use culturally responsive ways to explain wording or questions, but do not deviate from the piloted and approved language of the question
- If more information is requested, decline to give more information without discouraging participants
- Adjust personal conduct and demeanor according to the participants' culture to build rapport and trust. This can include showing respect towards elders in speech, taking off shoes when entering a house, or offering some sort of food/drink.

There are several ways to implicitly and explicitly build trust. One way is to build familiarity and comfort between the researcher or surveyor and the participants. Another way is to increase transparency about the research. Participants may be wary of giving their information, so translations play a key role in communicating why the project matters.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Community Diversity and Heterogeneity

Because of 150 years of continuous immigration from Middle Eastern and North African countries, community members in the U.S. can be recent immigrants or even fifth generation Americans.

There is a broad range of religious practices, and community members may speak Arabic, Farsi, Armenian, Chaldean, Somali, among others.

Even within MENA community subgroups, such as Lebanese or Egyptian, there is heterogeneity across many variables, such as socioeconomic status, educational attainment, employment, and political affiliation.

Legacy of Imperialism: Impacts on Community

MENA communities in the U.S. are impacted by the centuries-long history of European and U.S. colonial and imperial interventions in their home or ancestral countries.

Many MENA community members experience the legacy of Orientalism and imperialism through surveillance, discrimination, and harmful stereotypes.

Legacy of Imperialism: Impacts on Research

Even though MENA individuals can experience racial discrimination, much of the community remains categorized as White in federal and state data.

Within academia, research on Palestinian, Arab, and MENA American experiences has sometimes been marginalized or treated with hostility.

Responsible scholarship requires acknowledging the histories, cultural practices, and lived experiences of MENA communities, while also recognizing that many MENA people might be reluctant to participate in research.

The MENA Box

In March 2024, the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) updated the race and ethnicity data collection standards to include a MENA box, among other changes.

Like all identity categories, the definition of MENA is very fluid, includes many countries and ethnicities, and is based on user response.

Due to historical issues of identity in the community, some members may not readily identify with the new MENA category or may need additional information. As MENA data is increasingly disaggregated from the White racial box, it is important to compare MENA experiences to other racial and ethnic communities.

Community Partnership

Researchers should move as close to true community partnership as possible. Partnership entails shared power, mutual accountability, and co- ownership of the methods and results.

Data Collection

Partnership with community-based organizations during the research design phase can help ensure more effective participant recruitment.

In-person data collection can pose some unique challenges. Door-to-door collection could trigger fears of government surveillance, so trusted third spaces should be utilized as often as possible.

Researchers must be transparent with participants through open, culturally competent communication. If community members do not understand the consent language, work to ensure that materials and processes are translated using both their native language and plain English.

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Translation vs. Over-translation

To determine translation needs, consider demographic factors of the community under study, such as age, immigration push/pull factors, refugee status, and socioeconomic status.

Over-translating assumes that the community, as a whole, has limited English proficiency. Many Arabic and Farsi speakers living in the U.S. have functional and even professional understanding or use of the English language.

CAN staff at the annual ACCESS Back to School Fair in Dearborn, MI

APPENDIX

Working with CBOs: An Example of How CAN Works with Researchers

The Center for Arab Narratives (CAN) began its life in 2015 as the ACCESS Research Team, a dedicated group of ACCESS staff that helped facilitate the many research requests from university-based researchers. As the largest Arab American community non-profit in the country, and with more than 50 years of providing services to the community, ACCESS was and is well-positioned to facilitate research projects of all sizes.

Because of converging events in the United States and many MENA community homelands in and around 2015, there was increased interest in conducting research with Arab and MENA communities, particularly recently arrived refugees from Iraq, Syria or Somalia. In an effort to lessen the burden on the community and ACCESS staff, the Research Team (now named the Community Research Review Board) convened monthly and aimed to centralize and review all external research requests. Today, the Community Research Review Board (CRRB) is an integral part of how CAN and ACCESS interface with researchers from all over the country.

In advance of the monthly CRRB meeting at ACCESS, prospective researchers are asked to complete a digital form that outlines their project as well as the nature of the request to ACCESS.

Are the researchers looking for assistance with direct recruitment of participants for surveys or focus groups? Or do they need an ACCESS staff member to review their research instruments? Or maybe translation and assistance with cultural competency? Whatever the ask, CRRB, comprised of staff from departments acrosss ACCESS, review all aspects of the proposed research project.

In many cases, researchers are invited to give a short presentation to CRRB so ACCESS staff can ask questions and offer feedback in real time. In other cases, questions and suggestions are submitted to the researchers following the monthly review meeting. In all cases, careful consideration is given to the research design and methods, the composition of the research team, and any potential burden or harm to ACCESS or the communities it serves. If CRRB decides to move forward with facilitating the proposed research project, a staff member is assigned to the project and an agreement letter is sent to the researcher or research team.

For CRRB members, the decision of whether to help facilitate a particular project is usually based on the following criteria:

- Is the project relevant to the communities that ACCESS serves?
- Will the results of the project benefit the community?
- Is there funding being offered to support ACCESS staff time as well as incentives for community participants?
- Is the project at a phase where ACCESS staff can offer constructive feedback?

- Will the methodology harm the community?
- Does ACCESS staff have capacity to assist?
- Is there adequate time to complete the work?
- Is the research team qualified to complete the work?

On their end, researchers can make the process more efficient by understanding that working with CBOs and community can take time—usually more time than researchers initially allot to their project timelines. Ideally, researchers approach CBOs during the project design phase and not only during the data collection phase. Getting CBO input on the development of survey instruments, recruitment flyers, and other research tools is vital and can prevent delays and complications during later phases of the project.

There are many avenues for researchers (students, professors, health professionals, etc.) to initially engage with ACCESS to conduct community-based research with the Arab and MENA community. Many research connections occur from cold emails or calls to ACCESS staff, particularly staff in social services or the ACCESS Community Health and Research Center (CHRC). Other facilitation requests come from networking relationships with other researchers, funders, providers, or CBOs that have worked with ACCESS in the past. In some cases, research collaborations stem from ACCESS staff searching for a Principal Investigator (PI) or collaborators to be part of a grant-funded project.

Although CAN and its parent organization ACCESS have formalized the research process, each CBO has different levels of interest and capacity to facilitate research. The best advice to researchers is to understand that community-based research can be slow and should be intentional. As part of the research timeline, ensure plenty of space to build relationships and trust with CBOs and the communities they serve.

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