

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051
MINORITY (202) 225-5074
<https://oversight.house.gov>

June 14, 2022

The Honorable Shalanda Young
Director
Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20503

The Honorable Robert Santos
Director
U.S. Census Bureau
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Director Young and Director Santos:

We write to ask that you end the longstanding erasure of a group of our fellow Americans by adding the Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) response category to the decennial census and the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) standards for federal data on race and ethnicity. This long-overdue action would reverse a baseless decision by the Trump Administration—which overruled the Census Bureau's recommendation to add a MENA category—and would ensure that this vibrant American community can receive crucial federal resources and support. We also ask that the inclusion of a MENA category be paired with a commensurate increase in funding for programs serving the needs of communities of color across the country, since members of the Middle Eastern and North African community were previously excluded from these programs.

OMB has not addressed a MENA classification within federal data on race and ethnicity in 25 years. In 1997, the agency decided not to add a category for Arab or Middle Eastern individuals, but acknowledged that several public comments were received in support of the category. OMB determined “that further research should be done to determine the best way to improve data on this population group” and “that more research was needed on the issue.”¹

OMB's 1997 revised federal standards mandate that all demographic data collected across the federal government on individuals from the MENA region be reported as aggregate

¹ Office of Management and Budget, *Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity*, 62 Fed. Reg. 210 (Oct. 30, 1997).

within its “White” reference category.² Since members of the MENA community trace their roots to either the Middle East or North Africa, OMB’s standards fail to capture the lived experience of many community members.³

For over a century, Americans of Middle Eastern or North African descent have been making valuable contributions to every aspect of American society—through the labor of workers, the innovations of scientists, the ingenuity of small business owners, and the creativity of artists.⁴ Many individuals in the MENA community have strong social bonds, forming a coherent social group within American society that shares many communal values regarding family and religion, moral values such as honor, hospitality, and humility, and common experiences of emigration and acculturation.

As you are aware, federal standards for the classification of data on race and ethnicity impact far more than population totals in the decennial census. OMB standards determine how our political institutions distribute material resources, political representation, and research funding. These resources are vital components of growth and development for any minority community, particularly those who experience historical barriers to meeting basic needs and accessing support.

Current Census Bureau and OMB policy excludes the MENA community from resources and services to address their needs and social conditions. OMB’s current statistical policies effectively prevent federal agencies from considering and meeting the specific needs of the MENA community.

Over the past two decades, the possibility of including a MENA category in our national statistical system has been thoroughly studied, and the benefits have become clear. In 2010, the Census Bureau conducted the Race and Hispanic Origin Alternative Questionnaire Experiment. The Bureau reported that study participants felt that existing categories were “wrong” or “inaccurate,” and that several participants recommended “that there be a separate racial category for those who would identify as Middle Eastern, North African, or Arab.”⁵

In 2015, the Census Bureau tested a MENA category for the 2020 Census. The category went into the field as part of the 2015 National Content Test. The results of the 2015 test showed that adding a distinct MENA category “appears to produce more accurate data” and “worked well to identify groups that self-identify as Middle Eastern or North African.” In February 2017, the Bureau concluded, “The results of this research indicate that it is optimal to use a dedicated ‘Middle Eastern or North African’ response category.” The Bureau recommended that a MENA

² *Id.*

³ Germine H. Awad et al., *Lack of Arab or Middle Eastern and North African Health Data Undermines Assessment of Health Disparities*, American Journal of Public Health (Feb. 2022) (online at <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306590>).

⁴ H. Res. 353.

⁵ Census Bureau, *2010 Census Race and Hispanic Origin Alternative Questionnaire Experiment Final Report* (Feb. 28, 2013) (online at www.census.gov/2010census/pdf/2010_Census_Race_HO_AQE.pdf).

category be added to the 2020 Census but noted that this “will ultimately be OMB’s decision.”⁶ Despite support from expert statisticians within the Census Bureau and the American public, the Trump Administration unilaterally and unjustifiably decided to exclude a MENA category from the 2020 Census.

Congress has repeatedly recognized that the MENA community should be considered an underserved minority group under federal law. In September 2021, the Committee on Education and Labor highlighted “that Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) communities,” among other groups, “have been excluded from the definition of ‘culturally specific’ in other federal programs for domestic violence and sexual assault victims.” The Education and Labor Committee recommended that the Department of Health and Human Services include organizations serving the MENA community within its “grants for culturally specific services for racial and ethnic minority populations.”⁷ Similarly, on January 13, 2022, Senators Gary Peters and Alex Padilla introduced a bill to authorize the Federal Emergency Management Agency to treat the MENA community as an underserved community for the purposes of addressing disaster resilience vulnerabilities.⁸

Federal demographic data does not reflect the realities of MENA individuals and community-based organizations, which makes it increasingly difficult for advocates, researchers, agency officials, and policymakers to communicate, understand, and address community needs. As a result, federal policymaking and program implementation rarely address the lived experiences of members of the MENA community.

To better understand the health outcomes, socioeconomic conditions, political representation, and life changes of Americans of Middle Eastern or North African descent—many of whom arrived in this country as refugees, members of protected status groups, or asylees—we strongly urge the Census Bureau to follow through on the President’s promise to “support the creation of a new Middle East North Africa (MENA) category” on the decennial census and other federal surveys.⁹ We also urge the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs within OMB to propose a rule to change the federal standards for Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 to add a dedicated “Middle Eastern or North African” category. Doing so would demonstrate the full extent of our collective commitment to racial equity in policymaking and support the growth and development of a burgeoning, and distinctly American, social group.

⁶ Census Bureau, *2015 National Content Test Race and Ethnicity Analysis Report* (Feb. 28, 2017) (online at www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/final-analysis-reports/2015nct-race-ethnicity-analysis.pdf).

⁷ Committee on Education and Labor, *Family Violence Prevention and Services Act* (Sept. 23, 2021) (H. Rept. 117-126) (online at www.congress.gov/congressional-report/117th-congress/house-report/126).

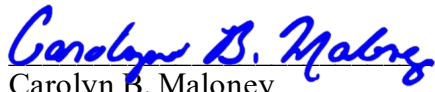
⁸ S. 3502.

⁹ Democratic National Committee, *Joe Biden and the Arab American Community: A Plan for Partnership* (online at <https://joebiden.com/joe-biden-and-the-arab-american-community-a-plan-for-partnership/>) (accessed Jan. 21, 2022).

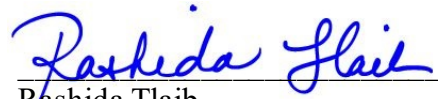
The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X. In addition, the Committee has jurisdiction over “[p]opulation and demography generally, including the Census.”¹⁰ If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Committee staff at (202) 225-5051.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

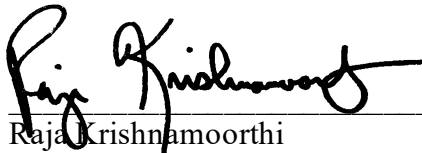
Sincerely,



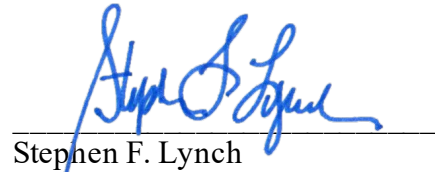
Carolyn B. Maloney
Chairwoman
Committee on Oversight and Reform



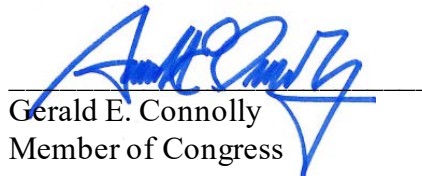
Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress



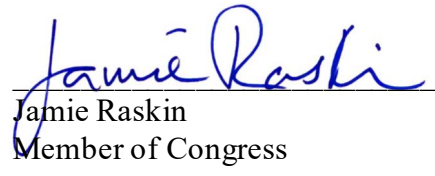
Raja Krishnamoorthi
Member of Congress



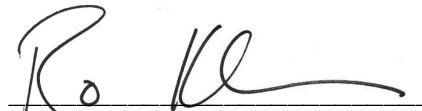
Stephen F. Lynch
Member of Congress




Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress



Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress



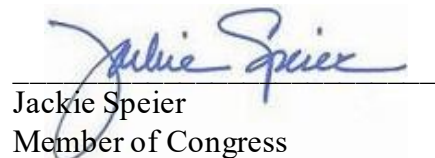
Ro Khanna
Member of Congress



Brenda Lawrence
Member of Congress




Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

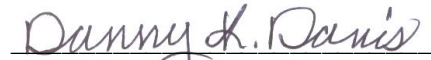


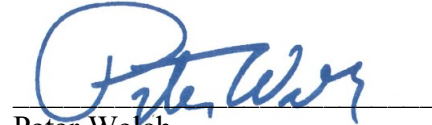
Jackie Speier
Member of Congress

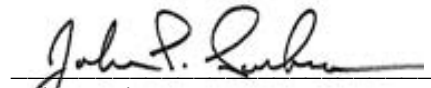
¹⁰ House rule X, clause 1(n)(8).

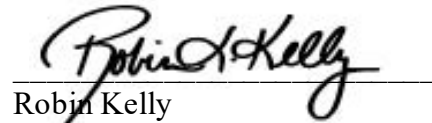

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress

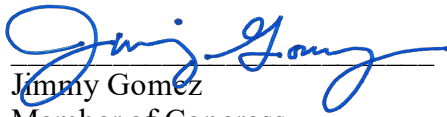

Katie Porter
Member of Congress



Danny K. Davis
Member of Congress


Peter Welch
Member of Congress


John Sarbanes
Member of Congress


Robin Kelly
Member of Congress


Jimmy Gomez
Member of Congress


Cori Bush
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable James Comer, Ranking Member
Oversight and Reform Committee