New Member Spotlight: Neda Maghbouleh on Improving the U.S. Census

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“Bringing our federal ethnic and racial categories in closer alignment with how ordinary people see race is a powerful way to overcome inequalities faced by ‘hidden’ groups. The bottom line is clear: It is time to have a MENA box on the U.S. Census.” - Neda Maghbouleh, René D. Flores, &
For this new member spotlight, SSN is excited to highlight Professor Neda Maghbouleh and her work to ensure that Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Americans are fully represented on the U.S. Census and other surveys.

For her membership contribution, Maghbouleh published an OpEd in Newsweek with fellow SSN members René D. Flores and Ariela Schachter on the need for a MENA-specific box on the Census. According to Maghbouleh and her co-authors, the inclusion of a MENA identity category on the Census would allow researchers to better examine the social, economic, and health status of this population, while also aligning more closely with how members of this group understand their own identity and are seen by others. The OpEd draws on the findings of a research collaboration between its authors: *Middle Eastern and North African Americans may not be perceived, nor perceive themselves, to be White*.

In the OpEd, Maghbouleh and her co-authors show that many MENA Americans currently select “White” or “Some Other Race” on the Census. In their study, the researchers found that 80% of MENA respondents chose “White” and 15% chose “Some Other Race” when no MENA option was offered, yet when a MENA identity category was added, 88% of the respondents chose this option. At the same time, their experiments found that everyday people clearly "see" MENA Americans as a distinct group, suggesting that MENA Americans may not be perceived, nor perceive themselves to be white.

Highlighting the importance of a MENA identity category for understanding the challenges and inequalities faced by the estimated three million MENA Americans, the authors wrote:

“The U.S. is nearly alone in counting MENAs as white. Just north of our border, Canada recognizes MENAs as visible minorities and offers them a census box. Analyzing this data, researchers have found that MENA Canadians have some of the highest infection and hospitalization rates for COVID-19 in Toronto, Canada’s most populous city. First-generation MENA immigrants also experience the largest earnings gap among all ethnic and racial groups in Canada, earning 67 cents for every dollar their non-minority counterparts earn. Unfortunately, because MENA Americans are counted as white in the U.S., it is impossible to do similar population-level
Following the publication of their OpEd, the researchers were contacted by NPR's Hansli Lo Wang for a reported story focused on their findings. Looking forward, Dr. Maghbouleh is working to understand the COVID-related disparities experienced by MENA Canadians with a focus on what these disparities may suggest for what she calls “invisibilized” MENA Americans.

**Neda Maghbouleh**

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Dr. Maghbouleh is currently on leave from the University of Toronto where she is the Canada Research Chair in Migration, Race, and Identity and an Associate Professor of Sociology. Her research focuses on the racialization of immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the United States and Canada. Overarching themes in Maghbouleh's writings include migration, borders, xenophobia, culture, and politics.