



Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

Although not an ideal term, MENA (Middle East and North Africa) is the most-used name for the region that commonly comprises: Afghanistan, Algeria, Armenia, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen. “Middle East” is a colonial designation and, like “MENA,” reduces an immensely diverse region of cultures, races, ethnicities*, languages*, and religions* to a single, homogeneous label. The list of countries can vary and might also be referred to as the “Near East” or SWANA (South West Asia and North Africa).

HERE'S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Constant inaccurate depictions reduce millions of MENA people to a feared monolith, disregard centuries of contributions to humanity, and ignore ongoing colonization and imperialism's significant impact on the region. Also, by falsely showing them as only violent Muslims (primarily Arab*), Hollywood dehumanizes and erases huge swaths of people. This provokes negative perceptions, stokes conflict, and drives near-constant military intervention in the MENA region and harmful U.S. government policies (e.g., profiling, immigration bans, census exclusion). Thus, MENA American people are denied access to policymaking decisions and resources specific to their communities, which fuels discriminatory practices and hate crimes against the diaspora.

MIDDLE EASTERN & NORTH AFRICAN PEOPLE

OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

- **Violent:** MENA characters as terrorists and anti-Semitic; and governments as poised for nuclear war. This drives the falsehood that “MENA” equals “violent.”
- **Unstable Governments:** Instability shown as if *inherent* to MENA countries. This discounts violent, destabilizing interference by outside nations (e.g., U.S., former USSR, Europe) that has driven many of MENA's current struggles. It falsely shows conflict overshadowing all MENA life, ignoring thriving cities, farming villages, etc.
- **“Exceptional Hero”:** Characters only as *tokenized* law officers fighting MENA terrorists. This creates the illusion of balanced stories but actually justifies painting MENA characters as terrorists.
- **Identity Crisis:** Characters *only* confused about, *never* enjoying, or *always* rebelling against their cultures or religions; portrayed through Western values as constantly seeking “superior” secular lives (e.g., youth seeing immigrant parents as barriers to modernity, marrying white Americans, becoming artists).
- **White/Western Savior:** White/western protagonists rescuing MENA people from oppressive governments, culture, or family, and freeing women (often fetishized as “exotic”) from falsely depicted domineering, lascivious men, and/or violent practices.
- **Brown Foreign “Other”:** Newly arrived, dangerous outsider or only capable of broken English and low-skilled labor. The reality is: generations of immigration and contributions to all society's sectors.
- **Toxic Masculinity:** Men as sexist, polygamist, homophobic, bloodthirsty, emotionally closed, and abusive. This misrepresents these traits as unique to MENA men, rather than a global gender issue.
- **Extreme Rich or Poor:** Over-sexed oil sheiks and/or thieving, filthy desert-trekking camel riders.

THINGS WE'D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

- **Reframed POV:** MENA protagonists' personal, social, career, romantic, and cultural stories told via their POVs, not a Western lens; and not used solely in geopolitical storylines.
- **Varied Identities:** Characters reflecting the many distinct cultures, races, religions, ethnicities, languages, and dialects; across class, education, and geographic regions. And LGBTQIA+ characters.
- **Truth About Conflicts:** Accurately shown regional/geopolitical issues (e.g., brutal toll of Armenian Genocide* and U.S. sanctions on Iranians* and Syrians, human cost on both sides of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, political and ethnic nature of Turkish-Kurdish conflict).
- **Cultural Practices:** MENA people, including immigrants, engaged in their religious and secular lives, and cultures of origin (e.g., music, art, clothing, food).
- **Global Contributions:** MENA people shown as integral to defining U.S. history and world culture (e.g., STEM, entertainment, philanthropy).
- **Nuanced Women & Men:** Muslim *and* non-Muslim women with agency; in leadership roles, as professionals, social, and generally out in the world. Men with a wide range of emotions, in close relationships, socializing, with hobbies, education, and professional ambitions.
- **Religious Middle Ground:** Varied religious observances between all-in and none (e.g., just as all communities vary). Depict the region's myriad religions (i.e., more than just Islam).
- **Unity:** Multi-faith, religiously observant or not, and mixed-race people living, working, and in relationships with one another.
- **Work:** Characters shown in wide-ranging jobs (e.g., bankers, construction workers, artists, teachers, lawyers, doctors).

*Denotes a term in the glossary

QUICK FACTS

➔ Though estimates vary, MENA Americans (~10 million) comprise close to 3% of the U.S. population; most live in CA, FL, MI, NY/NJ, TX, and VA, with large numbers in nearly each state; Southern CA, NYC, and Detroit are home to the largest MENA groups.

➔ ~3.56 million MENA Americans are Arab: 63% Christian, 24% Muslim.

➔ Most Arab Americans were born in the U.S.; 82% citizens; 75% English-speaking; yet Hollywood portrays most as heavily accented foreigners with strange customs.

➔ Berbers (self-named Amazigh) are from North Africa and live in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, and Tunisia.

➔ Kurds inhabit Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Armenia's borders; they're the Middle East's 4th-largest ethnic group (25-35 million) but don't have a permanent nation state.

➔ 92% of scripted TV shows have no MENA series regulars; 96% have at least one white series regular. 92 of the top 100 films in 2019 had no MENA women.

➔ Black people inhabit the entire MENA region; some are indigenous (e.g., Southern Egypt Nubians), some migrated, while others have been present for generations (e.g., Afro Turks, Afro Arabs, and Afro Iranians) due to trade routes and the region's history of enslavement.

ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- Al Jazeera: [“Why is there no MENA category on the 2020 U.S. Census?”](#)
- Arab America: [“Michigan”](#)
- Armenian National Committee of America: [“Armenian Genocide Overview”](#)
- The Daily Northwestern: [“Researchers discuss the state of Kurds in Turkey and their portrayal in U.S. media”](#)
- MENA Arts Advocacy Coalition: [“Terrorists & Tyrants: Middle Eastern and North African \(MENA\) Actors in Prime Time & Streaming Television”](#)
- Pew Research Center: [“Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world”](#)
- Refinery29: [“20 Inspiring Middle Eastern Influencers You Should Follow Right Now”](#)
- Study.com: [“Technological Developments & Contributions of the Middle East”](#)
- ThoughtCo.: [“Common Arab Stereotypes in TV and Film”](#)
- USC Annenberg: [“Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films”](#)
- Wilson Center: [“Women Driving Positive Change in the Middle East”](#)

April 2021

GLOSSARY

Arabs:

People who identify as being from one of the 22 Arab League Nations who share a common language, history, and culture.

Armenian Genocide:

The centrally planned and systematically executed deportation and murder of 2 million+ Christian Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians by the Ottoman Turkish government from 1915-1923.

Ethnicities, Languages, and Religions:

50+ ethnic groups in the region, the largest being Arabs, Persians, and Turks. Others include Amazigh, Armenians, Druze, Greeks, Jews, Nubians, Yazidis, etc. Within these groups, all races are represented. Arabic and Farsi are the most-spoken languages among 60+; there are multiple Arabic dialects, varying country to country, city to city. The MENA region is also the birthplace of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Many other religions are also practiced (e.g., Bahá'í Faith, Ishikism, Mandaeism, Samaritanism, Shabakism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and local African religions).

Iranian/Persian:

A person from Iran, with Iranian citizenship, and/or self-identifying as from or connected to the nation of Iran. For political, religious, and cultural reasons, some refer to themselves as Iranian, others as Persian. Those in the diaspora often use “Persian” whereas those in Iran often say “Iranian” since “Persian” is a very specific ethnicity (e.g., Iranian Persian, Iranian Kurd, Iranian Mazandarani, etc.). Iranians/Persians are not Arabs.

Please visit our [Expanded Glossary](#) for in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms: **Amazigh, The Arab League, Druze, Nubians, sheiks, U.S. Census, and Yazidi.**

This factsheet was made possible through the generous financial support of Storyline Partners.

In-kind support and materials for this factsheet were provided by the following partner organizations. Please contact them for additional information, story guidance, and in-room consultations.

Storyline|Partners|

StorylinePartners.com



Pass the Mic
Media

PassTheMicMedia.com

ADC
Advocate
Defend
Connect
American-Arab
Anti-Discrimination Committee

ADC.org



MenaArtsAdvocacy.com

NIAC
National Iranian American Council

NIACouncil.org



WGA.org

ttie
Think Tank
for Inclusion
& Equity

A list of the most up-to-date contact information for all of our partner organizations can be found on our website:
WriteInclusion.org/factsheets

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY:



Geena Davis Institute
on Gender in Media
If she can see it, she can be it.