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Racism Without Race: The Racialization of Muslim Middle Eastern and North African International Students at U.S. College

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ABSTRACT

By utilizing foundational texts on critical race theory, scholarships on Muslim Americans, and the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS), this mixed methods study examines Muslim Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) racial identity development amid America's tense history with Islam and the MENA world. The findings revealed that participants were 53% more likely to identify as Black within the U.S. census schema, and when self-identifying, 42% of participants chose new identity terminology such as Arab or Middle Eastern. The participants felt most comfortable with other Muslim international students and Black and Muslim U.S. peers and reported self-isolation from white spaces. The participants who identified as MENA experienced more pride in their heritage than those who identified as white. These findings illuminate the need for increased MENA and Muslim representation and offer recommendations at the governmental, educational, and individual levels to combat the weaponization of whiteness that downplays the dangers of Islamophobia.

Keywords: international students, Muslim students, Islamophobia, racial identity, MENA, critical race theory

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of which countries are consistently considered to constitute the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Kiprop, 2019). The MENA region has a rich history of Amazigh, Arab, Kurdish, and Chaldean cultures; however, it has historically been and is presently colonized by Eurocentric globalization. The term "Middle East" was coined in 1901 by a White U.S. military strategist, Admiral Mahan, who neither spoke Arabic nor lived in these regions (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016). This colonial history blurs the boundaries between nations and overlooks countless landmark historical events

and sociopolitical and academic achievements from this region. The blurred lines of MENA geography and the amorphousness of its definition have allowed gross generalizations and sweeping stereotypes to run awry without solid affirmations of who MENA communities are and why they matter. Nowhere is this truer than in North America.

The United States and Canada are praised for their higher education systems, which are held as the global standard, yet they are nations whose histories have targeted Muslims, MENA, and other minoritized communities as backward threats to democracy; this is especially true of the United States. Arab American scholars and activist groups have advocated for increased consideration of the Muslim cause amid Islamophobic rhetoric on news platforms, from Fox News (Folkenflik, 2019) to the country's 45th president. This rhetoric, though inexcusable, is inescapable in U.S. culture and influences how students and educators do or do not welcome MENA students into shared academic spaces.

Despite growing bodies of literature on the mental health concerns of students and alumni of color and Muslim Americans, there remains little discussion on the well-being of Muslim international students and alumni who have grown up with formative, cultural exposure to Islam (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009; Ajrouch & Antonucci, 2018; Amer & Hovey, 2012). This study examined how international Muslim MENA students are impacted by their time in the U.S. amid the potential for social exclusion and acculturation, experiences common to international students in a new land (Gao & Wesley, 2024). Awareness has increased with respect to the emotional vulnerability this population might face, as the MENA identity has been both vilified and ignored in popular culture (Brondolo et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2012). Muslim students, regardless of their country of origin, are harassed in multiple ways at twice the national rate of students of other faith groups (Singer, 2021). This paper explores the landscape where international MENA students and alumni live and learn and how their school, professional, or personal settings affect them by providing a brief overview of U.S. attitudes toward MENA and Muslim communities, which are often perceived as synonymous. International students arrive at what are clearly labeled temporary-stay visas. Despite the short-term nature of students' legal standing, the rhetoric around college life is very much one of a second home in which students are told that they will make lifelong friends and memories. Although there is substantive research, such as that of international student adjustment, there is a gap in the extant research considering foreign-born Muslim students who land in a country with a complicated political history with the MENA and Muslim worlds (Freeman & Li, 2019; Fries-Britt et al., 2014).

A National Narrative of Misnomers

Throughout its centuries, the U.S. Census Bureau has not provided a specific classification for persons from the MENA region. As a result, data on Arab or MENA populations in a U.S. context that has been federally created are not publicly available. Given the lack of a consistent definition of the MENA region,

official U.S. population figures of the community range from just over 1 million to 3.5 million people of MENA heritage (Arab American Institute Foundation, n.d.; Wang, 2013). Since the U.S. Census Bureau's genesis in 1790, there has been no specific categorization for North Africans or Middle Easterners other than "Some Other Race" or "White," which is currently defined as "a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022, para. 7). Approximately 80% of the U.S. MENA population are first- and second-generation immigrants, the first of whom were Syrian Christians who escaped the Ottoman Empire in the 1870s and after World War 1 (Haiek, 2022; Naff, 1985). The remaining 20% received green cards or student or work visas after 2010 (Cumoletti, 2021).

Available data indicate that the MENA population in the United States is younger than their Black, Latinx, and white/European peers, both in terms of mean age and in terms of their length of residence on U.S. soil (Cumoletti, 2021; Haiek, 2022; Naff, 1985). As a result, international students from the MENA region enter a country where they do not see themselves represented in U.S. culture as much as other ethnic and cultural groups do. As a younger population with fewer generations of residency in the United States, the Arab American community is underrepresented in both popular culture and political influence. What little representation they receive is overwhelmingly negative (Beydoun, 2018; Shaheen, 2003). Although Arabs are not the only recent arrivals to the U.S. cultural landscape, Arabs and Muslims are disproportionately portrayed as terrorists and violent rapists in as much as 95% of U.S. mass media (Shaheen, 2003). Much of this negative representation stems from the persistent politicized racialization of Islam (Beydoun, 2018).

The exclusion of appropriate racial identifiers in the U.S. Census has not hindered ubiquitous prejudice against Muslims. This practice has fueled discriminatory policies against MENA communities, most recently since the Trump administration issued Executive Order 13769, also known as the Muslim Ban. The ban was a policy doppelgänger for the post-9/11 National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), which registered, profiled, and monitored young immigrant men from every MENA country (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.; Singer, 2021). Between 2016 and 2020, 60–62% of Muslims reported experiencing faith-based discrimination and violence (Ikramullah, 2020). In the 2017–2018 academic year, one year after Trump implemented his Muslim Ban, undergraduate enrollments from the MENA region declined by 9% (Bollag, 2017; Fox, 2018). The Muslim ban served as a clear signal to Muslims and people from Muslim countries that the United States would not welcome them. The U.S. reputation as a global melting pot of diversity did not and did not extend to those from the Muslim-majority Arab world (Bollag, 2017). As a result, international students from the MENA region study in a country that legally polices their presence on the basis of stereotyped characteristics coded as profoundly contradictory to the ideas of U.S. democracy. This U.S. conflation of a demonized religion and the nebulousness of the MENA region has resulted in double-bind confused stereotypes and xenophobia that international students encounter upon entering U.S. campus life.

Without sufficient data, care, or support, international students from the MENA region, particularly those who are Muslim, are subject to discrimination without representation in demographic data. Any discrimination these students face is statistically silenced without accurately representing the racial and sociocultural truths of MENA. The whitewashing of international MENA and Muslim students does not allow them to share their heritage, celebrate their successes, and address the challenges they endure amid the systemic racism and rising nationalism of the United States. There is a crucial need to examine MENA students' identity development amid the landscape of U.S. higher education. Current scholarship practices on race and its intersections with education systems do not explore the experiences of international students of color who are not represented in U.S. racial schemas. Although U.S. government demographers do not categorize MENA individuals as people of color, the pervasiveness of U.S. systemic and sociocultural racism and xenophobia is not as apparent as manifested through Islamophobia (Beutel, 2014; Beydoun, 2015; McQueeney, 2014; Shaheen et al., 2006). There is no doubt that such vitriolic xenophobia harms many; this study focused on how international MENA students are impacted ~~as~~ they adapt to the dominant culture.

Currently, there are no public-facing governmental systems that collect data on MENA communities. The Arab American Institute Foundation (AAIF), a national civil rights organization, sought to bolster the civic engagement of 3.7 million U.S.-based Arab American community members. The AAIF launched the "Check It Right, You Ain't White" campaign to urge Arab Americans to write the label "Arab" on the 2010 Census as a step toward advocacy and self-affirmation (Blake, 2010; Kahn, 2019). Although the Trump administration largely ignored this campaign, the movement indicated a growing awareness of MENA identity as separate and distinct from U.S. connotations of whiteness. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) is a research and advocacy organization focused on Muslim inclusion in the United States. Their work spans Muslim communities of all races, although they do not disaggregate Arab identity from whiteness in a U.S. context. ISPU's research on anti-Muslim bigotry depicts how such marginalization is inextricably linked to all forms of exclusion that racial and ethnic minority communities experience (Beutel & Khan, 2014). The ISPU noted that U.S. legislative actions coded as anti-Muslim or "anti-sharia[1]" also disproportionately target Black and Latino communities. Their research amplified how Muslim identity is conflated with those of racially minoritized groups in ways that have social and legislative implications, suggesting that MENA identity

[1] The term "sharia" is the Arabic word for law, particularly the religious and cultural canons of the Qu'ran and the Muslim hadiths. Although the word refers to everything from daily prayers and the importance of charity and supporting orphans, U.S. mainstream media has co-opted the term from its true meaning of Islamic democracy to refer to extremist ideologies that threaten the United States and its people.

can no longer be a silenced target for politicized xenophobia at the expense of students' well-being.

Mental Health Implications

Past studies have reported that international students experience increased depression on their college campuses (Montgomery, 2017; Rice et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2007). Victims of racism also suffer from adverse mental health after experiencing verbal, social, or physical abuse (Brondolo et al., 2016; Fernando, 1984; Samari, 2016). Recent scholarship has further indicated that religious discrimination and social isolation result in Muslims attempting suicide at double the rate of other religious groups in the United States (Awaad et al., 2021; Samari, 2016; Singer, 2021). Islam is the most prevalent religion in the MENA region, and students—such as those from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, countries that offer full scholarships to their students—are either Muslim or have been raised in a Muslim-majority culture. Because of the normalization of Islamophobia in the United States, MENA students may be particularly at risk of depression and anxiety, as they acclimate to campuses due to the continued increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009; Ajrouch & Antonucci, 2018; Amer & Hovey, 2012). Black students experienced increased symptoms of depression and anxiety amid the increased anti-blackness of 2020 (Mental Health America, n.d.); although no research has confirmed a connection, the same may be true for Muslim students (Carter & Reynolds, 2011). In the post-9/11 United States, Muslim Americans' rates of suicide and depression increased alongside Islamophobic sociopolitical rhetoric (Abu-Ras, 2015; Amer & Hobey, 2012; Naser, 2020). College campuses are not immune to the ideological violence of their surrounding cultural landscape and often serve as places where this rhetoric is concentrated and examined more openly than it is in other settings.

Abdulrahim and Baker (2009) reported that Arab Americans who have acculturated report a higher quality of health than their peers who speak more Arabic and are more immersed in U.S.-based Arab subcultures. Abu-Ras (2015) reinforced these findings in his research that Arab Americans experience increased stigma around accessing mental health services. Conversely, Suleiman et al. (2021) reported that although Arab Americans reported poorer health than non-Latinx whites did, Arab Americans experienced more positive health outcomes when they felt a greater connection to their heritage. These findings are consistent in both Arab American and Black communities, which enjoy intimate, immersive connections within their ethnic group (Abboud et al., 2019; Pickens, 2014). Ajrouch and Antonucci (2018) provided significant evidence that Arabs are 30% more likely to report depressive symptoms than their white peers are, and they advocated that MENA American social and health relations and disparities are distinct from the black/white binary renderings of the discourse around them.

Pickens (2014) expounded on this thought in her earlier statements that "hierarchies of whiteness, double consciousness, communally sanctioned silence around illness. . . are never divorced from circumstances that create them" (p. 13).

Although each of these aforementioned studies focused on Arab Americans, evidence suggests that a lack of citizenship status also increases anxiety and depression in immigrants (Abu-Ras, 2015; Adulrahim & Baker, 2009; Amick & Donato, 2005). Both Arab Americans and MENA citizens have consistently reported lower health outcomes than white Americans who are afforded white privileges; for this reason, healthcare advocates such as the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities have suggested that Arabs are designated "health disparity populations" (Abboud et al., 2019, p. 1581). To whitewash MENA identity is to assume a positivist approach that reduces Arab health to an outlier and an afterthought: the status quo is antithetical to social justice considerations of underrepresented communities deserving of their own narratives and access to sufficient, culturally responsive resources. To examine the well-being of international MENA students as they live and learn on U.S. campuses, this study employed a conceptual framework rooted in critical paradigms that prioritize student self-determination.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks of critical race theory (CRT) (bell, 1970; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2005) and culturally inclusive pedagogical practices, such as (a) culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2016; Paris, 2012; Villenas, 1996), (b) culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Paris, 2012; Sleeter, 2011), and (c) multicultural education (MCE) (Banks, 1995, 1996), honor the need for MENA students' self-determination and increased systems of support. At its core, CRT challenges the dominant perspective and uplifts experiential knowledge or counternarratives (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). This framework allowed for the disruption of the popular (mis)understandings of MENA identity. Using a critical framework provided an opportunity to dissect the significance of identity gaslighting, which is too common for this vulnerable student population. Exploring the first hand, the multifaceted experiences of Arab students defied the white-norm narrative.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To "invite multiple possibilities" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 42), a wide range of data was considered to best understand the social-emotional identity development and sense of wellness and belonging of international MENA students. The merits of both the quantitative and qualitative paradigms were applied to examine the international MENA student experience. The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design that begins with simultaneous qualitative interviews and the collection of quantitative survey data, followed by a comparative analysis of the complementary data on the same focus (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). The use of mixed-method instruments allowed for the incorporation of the broadest possible range of responses from diverse participants with different comfort levels around engaging in virtual research settings. Rooted in social justice, this inquiry sought

to uplift marginalized voices that have yet to be heard due to the whitewashing of MENA communities and the simultaneous Othering of Muslim peoples. The survey received 165 complete and partially complete responses, of which 58 were eligible and analyzed. Of these 58, 53 were considered explicitly for the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) instrument, which allows for racial self-identification by participants. The EIS includes tenets of Rosenberg's (1979) self-esteem scale to directly assess how identity formation impacts individuals' broader self-esteem and well-being.

Ten individual interviews were conducted and coded to analyze and identify themes and patterns (Creswell, 2009). Convergent parallel mixed methods enable the application of grounded theory, which allows for the interrelation of both inductive and deductive data. Mertens (2009) credited such concurrent transformative mixed methods for their ability to emphasize social justice and address the unique experiences of diverse groups. This approach was well suited to the MENA community, which faces Islamophobia and xenophobia within oppressive social structures (Mertens, 2003).

This study focused on the identity navigation of Muslim MENA students to center narrative research and in-depth interviews (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell, 2009; Kuntz, 2016). Given the extreme fear Islamophobic policymakers have instilled in Muslims, engaging students and nurturing an atmosphere of trust proved challenging in this study. Over 100,000 visas were revoked due to the Trump administration's Muslim ban (O'Hara, 2021). The approach to this research study was rooted in the development of grounded theory, which allowed for the open-ended examination of in-depth interviews to identify and formalize the qualitative analysis of student experiences. Zuberi (2001) wrote, "Race is a measure of a relationship – not an inalterable trait" (p. 110); participant conversations highlighted evolving, often situational, and surprising changes in perceptions when in different friend groups and cultural settings. This research was conducted as an act of resistance to reclaim the MENA narrative.

Students at this intersection live on a razor's edge of alienation and acculturation that has not yet been considered with the respect they deserve. The label of phantom whiteness inaccurately presents the diverse truths of MENA identity and the ways in which the racialization of Islam has impacted MENA peoples both historically and at present. This examination of the well-being, self-analysis, and self-worth of MENA students honors the tenets of the CRT. It breaks through the confines of the conservative categorization of the master narrative. Thus, this study relied on the following research questions developed through careful consideration of the literature:

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do international Muslim Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) students identify within the U.S. context?

- What terminology do MENA students use to identify themselves?
- Are these associations positive or negative?

Research Question 2: To whom do international Muslim MENA students most closely relate?

- Do they identify with/relate more to white peers, their fellow international peers, or U.S. classmates of color? Why?

FINDINGS

Throughout both the survey responses and the interviews, the participants emphasized their identities as Muslims and international MENA students. The participants used more language about their nationalities and their spiritual and cultural heritage than terminology about their respective races. Given the broad range of phenotypes across the MENA region and the fact that two of the 10 interview participants identified as biracial, participants did not consider their skin color to be their most salient trait; instead, religious and national pride were priorities. Even for participants such as Naseer, who identified as Black despite his skin color being what he described as "white in complexion," his Blackness and Muslimness spoke to his Otherness in a U.S. context. He spoke of his connection to Turkish culture, Islam, and the Middle East as core to his Blackness, which set him apart from U.S. whiteness.

Communicating the Self: Terminology

Given the opportunity to self-identify their race and ethnicity outside of the confines of the U.S. Census Bureau's limited categories, the overwhelming majority of international MENA students did not select "white," the label that the United States legally assigns to them. Within the context of the dominant U.S. racial schema, 77.6% of the 58 participants identified as Black, 10.3% identified as White, 6.9% identified as Asian, and 3.4% and 1.7% identified as Other and Biracial, respectively. When self-identifying in their own words, 20 fewer participants identified as Black, and 22 identified as MENA, using terminology including Arab, North African, Middle Eastern, African, and Amazigh, which are not included in the scope of U.S. racial groupings. These results highlight the need for more representative terminology, as explored in Dubow's (1994) and Seidman's (2019) assertions that race is a subjective context whose meanings and connotations shift from country to country.

The ability to self-identify was empowering to participants, as evidenced by the finding that those who self-identified as MENA felt more racial pride, positivity, and understanding than peers who identified as white. The participants spoke of their race and their faith as shared identities and did not draw clear distinctions between the two. This finding is significant because self-identification is closely tied to feelings of self-worth among minoritized communities (Alimahomed, 2011; Blake, 2010; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Kahn, 2019) and the idea that we do not parse apart our identities in the same ways that demographic-collecting systems might require. The findings reflected previous research that indicated that students of color at predominantly white institutions

(PWIs) identify more strongly with their race than with any other aspect of their identities (McGuire et al., 1978; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976), but for MENA Muslim students, this identification was not with their U.S.-governmentally assigned whiteness but with their religiously racialized identities as Middle Eastern and North African. The participants related most strongly with students of color, and their stories most aligned with those of other racially minoritized groups who did not fit into standard, Eurocentric constructs of whiteness and Americanness.

The racial affirmation and understanding of MENA participants more closely resembled those of their black peers than white peers did; this finding directly contradicts the current U.S. practice of categorizing MENA people as white instead of as a unique community of color. This was also true of Anas, who shared:

> I think, for my identity. I always had that sort of like, suffering that middle ground of not knowing what I identify with, because you know, to Black people and Africans, you know I'm not. . . I'm not like, you know, the typical. I'm not the typical, you know, Black person or the typical. . . you know, uh, image of an African person. In addition, to Arab people, you know, I'm not the Arab with the fair skin and the, you know, the soft hair, so it's always kind of like, [I've] been in the middle.

MENA students sought to belong with peers with whom there was a shared understanding of being part of the few Black, Brown, or Muslim students at their colleges. The participants often self-isolated not only from white peers but also from family back home due to feelings of depression, financial insecurity, and shame that they would be letting down or worrying their loved ones if they voiced their struggles. Through these challenges, some participants developed tenuous relationships with their own racial and cultural pride, either denigrating their home nations or rejecting the U.S. ideological supremacy that led them to seek academic opportunities in the United States that they and their families did not believe were achievable in their countries of origin.

Emotions and identification

Umaña-Taylor et al.'s (2004) EIS assesses three aspects of participants' racial and ethnic self-identification: exploration, resolution, and affirmation. Exploration refers to participants' levels of self-motivation in understanding their ethnicity, and resolution strives to understand how participants conceive of their identity's role in their lives. The second research question most closely examined participant affirmation or the positive or negative effect on participants associated with their identity. On the basis of their self-selected identities, the participants were divided into the categories "MENA or Arab," "Black," and "White." The following section responds to both research questions via *t* tests to examine the differences in participants' exploration, resolution, and affirmation of their racial and ethnic identification.

Participant Negative Feelings About Race and Ethnicity

A comparative analysis of each group's average responses to their negative sentiments toward their self-selected racial identities revealed the following: with an average positive response of 3.5 on a 4-point scale, MENA or Arab respondents displayed the least negative feelings toward their identities; participants who identified themselves as MENA or Arabs felt most positively about their heritage, followed closely by Black respondents, who averaged 3.13. The number of responses from white participants was almost a full point lower, averaging 2.6, which was indicative of more negative feelings about their race [0.003 ($p < .005$)]. Given that the current U.S. census policy prohibits MENA or Arab students from identifying as anything other than "white" or "other," this finding highlights the importance of allowing international MENA students to name and claim their identities on their terms. This finding harkens back to scholars who have examined the empowering effects of allowing people to name their truths instead of being labeled by others (Blake, 2010; Graham et al., 2020; Kahn, 2019; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). What follows is an examination of how participants' self-identification affects their understanding of their racial and ethnic identities.

Participants' Understanding of Their Racial and Ethnic Identities

Compared with MENA or Arab and Black students, participants who identified as white least understood their racial/ethnic identity, averaging 2.3 out of 4 on a scale of understanding, with values of 1.64 and 1.76, respectively. The results for the participants' understanding of their racial or ethnic identity were significant at 0.039 ($p < .005$). These data suggest that for international MENA or Arab students who select white or are labeled white, racial understanding may be harder to achieve. As social constructions, perceptions of race are geographically located and do not fluidly crossover from country to country (Dubow, 1994; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Leach, 1983; McAllester, 2024; Ogbu, 1998); in fact, the danger of presuming a universally understood meaning of whiteness lies. This is evident in the fact that white respondents presented the least variance in their responses compared with black and MENA or Arab participants, who reported higher levels of understanding of the role of race in their lives. What Feagin (2013) coined "the white racial frame" is located within a Western context that cannot be transposed or translated to the MENA region. For many international students who travel to the United States, access to financial, educational, and linguistic privileges back home places them in closer proximity to "whiteness" than they enjoy when they become the minority upon arrival in the United States. These results suggest similar lived experiences between Black and MENA or Arab respondents and the relative ease of identification that MENA students and alumni felt with Black communities. This finding shows a lack of identification with whiteness, which was experienced by 90% of the 53 participants. The lack of certainty a white-identified MENA or Arab student may feel when self-selecting their race prompts the question of whether these students feel pressured to ascribe themselves to whiteness by the U.S. status quo; this is reinforced by the fact that only five of the 58 participants independently selected white when U.S. policy would categorize all 58 as white.

Participants' desire to change race/ethnicity

There was a closer relationship between patterns of MENA or Arab and Black identification than white respondents did. Specifically, MENA or Arab participants least wanted to change their identity, with an average response of 3.25 out of 4 for not wanting to change their racial heritage. However, MENA and Arab participants are forced to identify as white in the U.S. census when they are the group that least wants to change their racial identity. The black respondents averaged a response of 2.83, indicating a preference not to change their race. In contrast, white respondents, who would also be legally labeled white, averaged a response of 2.3, suggesting that most wanted to change their race. Ironically, only white-identified participants are required to change their racial identity in the U.S. context. This result suggests that the group that would most like to change their identities is white, yet whiteness is the category enforced on each group once they enter the legalized racial schema of the United States.

These results show that MENA or Arab and Black participants have the least variance in their responses at 0.65 and 0.62, respectively, indicating a relatively consistent appreciation of their racial identities. This finding allows us to infer that, owing to their lower desire to change their identities, Black and MENA or Arab participants, who averaged 2.83 and 3.25, respectively, experience more pride in their respective racial/ethnic communities. These participants are forced to identify as white while completing paperwork for social security cards, visas, or identity-based scholarships.

Relationships

The participants were also asked about their relationships with their college peers and professors and how they did or did not continue communicating with friends and family back home. The purpose of this line of inquiry was to examine in which spaces MENA students felt most comfortable and to whom they felt most connected. Although MENA identity is coded as white, previous research has indicated that relationship building for MENA and Arab individuals most organically occurs with communities of color (Abdul-Jabbar, 2015; Ajrouch & Antonucci, 2018; Blake, 2010; Kahn, 2019). The development of close friendships and communities of trust is vital to international students' ability to thrive and influences the ways in which they outwardly and internally engage with their own racial, cultural, and religious identities (Alimahomed, 2011; Blake, 2010; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Kahn, 2019). Like other interviewees, a male participant from Morocco, Fadl, did not consciously dissect individuals' identities across a single axis of identity binaries such as black or not black or Muslim or not Muslim. He shared:

> You know, in a country that is discriminated against by the white, you know, the white American, . . . I enjoy when I see a Black, and I—especially Blacks that are Muslims, and most especially if I see any one of them who is a Moroccan or in the MENA countries.

Finding Home Abroad

Research Question 2 asked what relationships international MENA students experience in their U.S. college campuses and how they maintain connections with family and friends back home. Relationship building has significant consequences for the mental health of MENA Americans and Muslim Americans (Greenwood, 2020; Suleiman et al., 2021). This section reviews the ways in which participants approached long-distance relationship maintenance and nurtured new friendships on campus. This section then reviews the two dichotomous approaches of how some participants reach out to or disconnect from their parents and family members in their home countries.

Relationships and Esteem

The participants were asked how their relationships with others influenced their relationships with themselves and their roots. There was a slight discrepancy in how often MENA participants shared their national pride with peers and how often they felt that pride. Among the 58 participants, 50.6% reported always or often talking about their home countries while in the United States. However, 59.4% of the participants reported always or often feeling proud of their nationality and heritage. This finding indicated that MENA students might not always feel comfortable or appreciated enough to verbalize this pride, with almost 10% of participants feeling pride that they do not share with others. The participants voiced that this reluctance was most common in white spaces because they were very aware of the threat of racism in the United States, with some, such as Naseer, having been warned by loved ones prior to their arrival on campus. Naseer's father told him,

> "You should be careful of everything you see in America because you can get, um, discriminated. You're gonna get abused, and, you know, you're gonna hear so many things. In addition, I don't want you to—to feel very bad about it. You should know. People say a lot of things about us."

Another participant, Din, shared his hyperawareness of how white peers perceive him. He reported being cautious "in every social situation [and] distancing fellow Africans" for fear of how white peers might stereotype him. Din spoke of feeling most like himself when he was with black and more melanated African peers but that he still felt that "white eyes" were on him, which made him uncomfortable. Din was aware of how belonging to one group, his Black peers, came at the expense of fitting with white peers, who might judge him on the basis of his individual Blackness or his friendships with Black, African, and MENA peers. This hybrid belonging highlights how different aspects of international MENA student identity can become fractured: this is due to the ways in which whiteness or perceived whiteness and blackness or perceived blackness can be both loved and reviled depending on the social context. The proverbial elephant in the room of these experiences is Islamophobia and U.S. xenophobia against

MENA communities, which leads to MENA Muslims feeling as though they must choose sides of the racial divide.

Racialization of Islam—Participants Protested Assigned Whiteness

Abdulrahim and Baker (2009) reported that Arab Americans who assimilate whiteness and distance themselves from Arab culture and from speaking Arabic report better mental health than those who retain their cultural heritage. With international MENA students, the exact opposite is true. Students who self-identified as white experienced increased depression, cultural isolation, and loneliness. Unlike their MENA-American peers, international MENA students were less depressed the more they were able to connect with their MENA heritage. This finding aligns with existing research that highlights how black students experience more self-worth in black spaces than PWIs do (Abboud et al., 2019; Pickens, 2014). The loneliness and frustration that participants feel as the token Arab in a new culture is reminiscent of Ajrouch and Antonucci's (2018) scholarship, which revealed that Arabs report 30% higher rates of depression than their white peers do. The legal categorization of MENA identity as white cannot erase the lived experiences of MENA participants, who are not treated as equitably or inclusively as their white peers are.

Mental health concerns: "We Gaslight Ourselves"

International students of all backgrounds experience culture shock and the challenges of making friends from different cultures while learning in a new education system (Bailey, 2017; Chavez, 2016; Rodriguez & Parks, 2017; Chen & Zhou, 2019; Gao & Wesely, 2004; Rice et al., 2012). For international MENA students, these stressors are amplified by the dominant U.S. narratives against MENA and Muslim identities. Rice et al. (2012) reported that South Asian students who were presumed to be Muslim experienced similar levels of loneliness, tokenization, and vitriol as did the participants in this study. Although only one participant, Maheer, expressed coming close to experiencing suicidal thoughts during his time in the United States, the xenophobic treatment that participants receive speaks to the fact that American Muslims attempt suicide at twice the rate of other religious groups (Awaad et al., 2021; Namer, 2012; Naser, 2020; Samari, 2016; Singer, 2021). Most study participants could neither connect intimately nor in person with their spiritual communities, which amplified their feelings of loneliness, especially in instances such as those of Ruqsar, Naseer, Jada, and Rabab's Muslim boyfriend, who could not conveniently access halal food or prayer spaces.

Reduced social support and increased depression

The findings indicated increased feelings of social isolation, financial shame, and powerlessness compared with their white U.S. counterparts. Jada shared that despite a welcoming orientation program during her first week on campus, she felt that she had no one to talk to about her loneliness on campus and her money anxieties. Jawad was deeply aware of how his teachers treated him differently than his white peers, who received more time and attention in the

classroom than he did. Teranishi and Briscoe (2006) described how the ubiquitous negative stereotyping of minorized racial groups such as MENA students causes marginalized students to receive poor treatment in the classroom and feel as though their identities are invalidated by the educators' and administrators' lack of knowledge of their cultures given their roles as keepers of knowledge. Such treatment was experienced by every participant but Din, who uniquely felt that his culture was valued by one of his professors. This ideological and social loneliness was a heavy burden for participants. Every interviewee except Ruqsar felt that they could not talk to their family members back home about the racism or financial obstacles that they faced. The participants consumed media from their respective homelands to feel connected to their culture, and Naseer and Rabab turned inward to the healing practice of meditation in moments of emotional distress. Spirituality was also key, but the somewhat contested source of mental well-being, as some participants such as Anas feared becoming "too religious", whereas others such as Ruqsar wanted to connect with their Muslim community but did not have the opportunity to do so.

Diversity of Deen

Disparate views of faith are not exclusively encountered between Muslims and non-Muslims but also exist within shared faith groups. Although participants recalled seeking community with groups of people who look like them, believe like them, or have shared lived experiences with them, there were still in-group moments of tension when participants navigated colorism and different ways of practicing their respective faiths. Among the study's nine Muslim participants, there were different attitudes about how time in the United States either increased their connection to their faith or, conversely, alienated them from their religious community and traditions. Although each of the Muslim participants favorably spoke of their spirituality and shared that it was a key part of their identity, experiences in the United States caused participants' relationships with their religion to change. For participants who experienced belonging with other Muslims, their identity as Muslims was reinforced and remained positive. For those who witnessed or experienced a lack of belonging due to Islamophobia, their sense of self as Muslims became fractured.

Anas shared that his Muslim faith had always been important to him but that he grew more spiritually closed off the longer he witnessed how his older brother's time in the United States had soured his relationship with Islam. Anas' brother arrived in the United States in the 1990s and faced relentless racism and Islamophobia, which rendered his faith a source of bitterness and self-isolation as he clung to his religion for comfort. Anas feared becoming "serious" and "on the extreme side of Islam" as his older brother. Anas said,

> Let me tell you something, my brother [pause] I don't know what moving to America did to him. . . stay alone, and being secluded for a long time, truly changes a person, [he's] very moody, and like someone who's very, you know, radical in regard to religion. . . and he kind of like hyper fixated. So I—I truly, you know, the I think one of my biggest fears of moving here

> is losing myself and becoming an image of him, whether it be, you know, to the radical or being like radical, so like, you know, like Arab Muslim side.

Anas was aware that he was consciously distancing himself from his spirituality and heritage as he adjusted to life at PWI. While he felt internally conflicted about the role that his religion would play in his ability to adapt to life in America, he did not want to shun his spirituality completely. He continued,

> I don't want to lose all my culture and my traditions, becoming just like fully Americanized and just like losing everything. It's very sad. . .

Anas highlighted feeling tension between turning toward his faith or distancing himself from it. He valued this aspect of his identity but was aware that disclosure of his religion could lead to bias or persecution. While he voiced fear that his feelings of social loneliness could lead to radicalization, he held his faith in high regard and did not want to lose that part of himself. Similarly, Ruqsar, who is a proud Muslim, grew despondent when her Egyptian classmate, whom she knew from their shared high school years in Cairo, began to lose his connectedness with Islam. She shared:

> Therefore, my Egyptian friend came in as Muslim, and then toward the end of like—I, he—he's like, he didn't fast or pray, and he started to eat pork, so that was a little instance, I asked if he was still Muslim and he said he didn't truly see the point of having a religion. Therefore, I was like, "Okay, you do you," like—like I can't truly tell him anything. It's his choice. However, he sometimes tell [an atheist friend] like when [that atheist friend] asked me about religion, he would back him up and tell him something from his experience, like, "No I'm against Islam." So yeah. . . I didn't mind talking to [our atheist friend] but like with [my Muslim friend], I feel a little bit hurt—like because you were once a Muslim but then you suddenly left.

Ruqsar and Anas experienced emotional reactions to witnessing fellow Muslims either retreat toward or turn away from their religious upbringing. The theme of hybridity is present in the finding that participants simultaneously feel both a lack of belonging from fellow Muslims for both being too Muslim, such as Ruqsar with her friend, and not Muslim enough, such as Anas and his brother. Acknowledging the tensions between in-group diversity highlights the fact that there is no sole Muslim identity, just as there is no unique international identity. These differences lead to the second subtheme of hybridity, which causes students to exist in a space between belonging and othering. Some participants navigate this discomfort by choosing to play the proverbial game and assimilating it into typical patterns of U.S. socialization by downplaying aspects of their heritage to focus on their experiences as students in the U.S.

Implications and recommendations

The underresearching of MENA identity as a unique and valid racial identity has led to a deficit in scholarship, policy, practice, and consideration of the challenges and needs of international MENA students. As MENA and Arab people are coded as white, they are denied access to affirmative action support systems such as scholarships while simultaneously being told to identify themselves in the same category of whiteness as the majority white spaces and media platforms that vilify them. Only recently have scholars such as Abdulrahim and Baker (2009), Beydoun (2018) and Pickens (2014) focused on the racial identity and lived experiences of U.S. citizens of MENA heritage: with so little access to knowledge about this ethnic group, their stories are often untold, and their struggles are unsupported. As an undergraduate student, I was turned away from the campus multicultural center because I was "white," even though I had sought support after being the target of hate speech from a classmate. I felt echoes of this moment in Rabab's comments about PWI academics and student affairs, gaslighting her into feeling as though she was being dishonest about her identity. This worrying trend of self-doubt coupled with alienation from family and lack of representation and support leads me to offer the following recommendations for policymakers, future researchers, educators, student affairs administrators, and international MENA students.

Recommendations for Governmental Policy

Arab American campaigns such as "Yalla, Count me In!" petitioned the U.S. government in 2020 to develop an independent U.S. Census category for MENA identity; although the Trump administration did not make that change, activists such as the *New York Times* journalist Zraik continued to highlight the need for MENA representation in governmental policy and practice (Huddy, 2001; Zraik, 2022). This is a continuation of the research conducted under the Obama administration to examine the need for a "MENA box" in federal demographic collection processes (Zraik, 2022). As Bhabha (1994) noted, identity is not a fixed concept that can be assigned to others; it feels especially true in a nation founded on the principles of freedom and representation. At the time of this study, the U.S. Census Bureau plans to revise its standards by Summer 2024, which could lead to a significant change for Arab Americans and international MENA students, who must racially self-identify in the current system that white-washes their heritage. This study identified only five of the 58 participants as white, which could be a radical change that lessens the pressure of racial conformity in a country whose Islamophobic ideology makes Christian Americans 46% more likely to identify as white than their Muslim American peers (Shryock, 2008). Although scholars such as Beydoun (2015) have warned that a unique MENA racial category could streamline systems of racial profiling that target MENA individuals in legal and law enforcement protocols, both prior research and this study show that such profiling is already occurring in a system of discrimination without representation.

Recommendations for Future Research

CRT addresses the centrality of race and racism and how prejudice can oppress people of color in all areas of their lives (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado and Stefancic, 2012; Tate, 1997). CRT also prioritizes experiential knowledge and the importance of allowing minoritized peoples to tell their own stories; these stories, or counternarratives, often contradict the white supremacist status quo and are undermined as a result. This has been the case with the development of Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit), which was developed as a framework that stands against the persistent subordination of Latinx communities (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). I propose the creation of MENACrit, which gives MENA identity similar consideration to the overlapping legal, ideological, and interpersonal oppressions they face in the United States. This study highlights that international MENA students do not identify with whiteness and experience racism and xenophobia across the lines of U.S. nationalism, anti-blackness, and Islamophobia. As with Latinidad, I argue that MENA identity is a cultural ethnicity that transcends phenotypes and deserves increased recognition and scholarly consideration.

Recommendations for Educators

A rich body of research has revealed that educators who are aware of and work to incorporate the tenets of CRT in their classrooms create more successful and inclusive learning spaces for students of color (Sablan, 2019; Schwarzenthal et al., 2020; Torres-Arends & Jacobsen, 2024). Research further suggests that such cultural awareness is especially important for international student well-being (Heleta & Chasi, 2024; Montgomery, 2017; Rice et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2007). Given the lived experiences of international MENA students who face a range of discriminations, educators must acknowledge that their MENA students do not benefit from white privilege in an educational system that has historically and currently centered on Western whiteness (Freire, 1970; Feagin, 2013; Lynn et al., 2013). Lived whiteness and its privileges are synonymous with American-ness and citizenship status, neither of which international MENA students enjoy (Devos & Sadler, 2019). The patterns of Islam as discordant with U.S. democracy are evident in the varying proximities that Muslim and non-Muslim Arab Americans feel toward whiteness. Like Ladson-Billings (2014), who advocated "remixing" pedagogical practices to uplift multiethnic traditions and diverse identities, I advocate that care be given to understanding MENA identity as distinct from European whiteness and the cultural and political privileges it affords (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2016; Paris, 2012). It is by rejecting the white washing of MENA identity that educators can increase cultural, social, and academic support systems and representation for their MENA students through an asset-based lens instead of one that views Muslims and MENA peoples either as deficient or simply as not seeing MENA and Muslim identities at all. This approach would also allow for student affairs staff, particularly those who support international students, to better support this community.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Administrators

The first recommendation is for higher education administrators to make a concerted effort to learn more about Muslim and MENA identities and stay abreast of U.S. diplomatic relationships with the MENA world. This recommendation does not presume that every administrator will become an expert in religion or international geopolitical affairs, but just as staff should stay informed of current events that politicize Blackness and immigration status in the United States, they should be aware of U.S. treatment of MENA and Muslim identities. Every interview participant shared that they did not feel they could approach college personnel because staff "don't understand." Jada shared, "We are trying to adapt to a new environment. Guidance is needed. We need protection. and we need to be assured that we are in good hands." For participants to receive appropriate mentorship and support, college administrators need to be informed about the rich diversity of Muslim MENA identities in the United States.

Second, administrators charged with orientation programs, particularly those for international students, should incorporate training and conversations concerning how race and racism are constructed and enacted in U.S. culture. Only one of the 10 interview participants noted that race and racism were addressed in their orientation programs, which occurred at the start of their college careers. These programs, which, as Jada and Jawad shared, are often upbeat and focused on college resources and social amenities, should allow international Muslim MENA students the chance to understand their host culture and engage in honest conversations about how to manage tense situations and loneliness. Although racism is both permanent and pervasive, race is not a fixed concept, nor is it universally defined or experienced across the globe (Bhabha, 1994; Bell, 1993; Dubow, 1994; Seidman, 2019). Orientation programming should provide an overview of the role that race plays in U.S. society, examples of appropriate and inappropriate language around diverse identities, and specific resources for those who are profiled or stereotyped. Administrators and educators should strive to engage in cultural reciprocity as part of their duty of care to students and investigate their own cultural values and potential biases to avoid teaching and leading from a monocultural norm (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). Staff, particularly international student offices, should strive to nurture culturally informed conversations to destigmatize depression, mental health, and financial insecurities, all of which are topics that participants voiced hesitation in discussing with family.

Finally, college campuses often celebrate diverse cultural identities of other groups through events such as black history month galas and lunar New Year celebrations. Events that not only celebrate traditions such as Ramadan and Eid al'Adha should be honored, although there also needs to be open discussion about the prejudices that MENA students, such as their peers of color, face in nationalist, white supremacist learning spaces (Bell, 1993; Miguel & Valencia, 1998; Films Media Group, 2000; Wollenberg, 1975; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). It is vital for international MENA students to see themselves as honored and valued given that longer immersion in U.S. host cultures often leads to acculturation, and the devaluing of their heritage as U.S. identity is not only coded as normal but

esteemed (Oberg, 1960; Pedersen, 1991.) Considering MENA identity could prevent the internalization of idealized whiteness such that many international students absorb color during their time at U.S. campuses (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). "Cultural proficiency is an individual's or a group's belief system that holds students' cultural backgrounds of language, race, gender, and socioeconomic as assets on which we are to construct their educational experiences" (Quezada, et al., 2012 p. 6). Therefore, professional development for all staff, students, and faculty should pay attention to MENA identity and Islamophobia and incorporate language that is asset-based and inclusive.

Recommendations for MENA International Students

To my international MENA peers, in the words of Rabab, "If someone's racist to you, it's their problem." Do not let other people's opinions become true. We are sponges for the messaging around us and allowed to protect ourselves from the relentless media stereotyping about aspects of our culture or faith that we value most. This study revealed that participants who identified as white, such as U.S. governmental policy, experienced more unhappiness and less certainty about their race. There is no shame in your culture; as Rabab shared, we get to embrace our identities on our own terms. Knowledge of oneself and one's culture are integral to one's well-being (Almaawali, 2024). Only you get to decide who you are and what fits language best to describe yourself.

Do not be afraid to take up space. The participants expressed the most comfort and belonging with people of color: you do not need to be boxed into whiteness unless that is where *you* feel you belong. Reach out to your campus multicultural centers, offices of inclusion, and international student support staff. Know your resources and do not be afraid to use them or your voice. Every participant spoke about protecting their mental health and avoiding sources of frustration in some capacity; you are allowed to walk away from the people and situations that drain and devalue you. Sometimes those people will look different than you do, but sometimes they will be fellow Muslims or peers from the MENA region; there is no single way to be MENA or Muslim, and you are allowed to nurture the relationships that affirm you most. You deserve to be in the United States as much as anyone else does, and you deserve to do so without sacrificing your well-being or your sense of self. As an ummah[2], "we are like one body; when any limb aches, the entire body feels pain" (Sahīh al-Bukhārī, 6011). Find your people and do not be afraid or ashamed to share any challenges you face with family, friends, and other loved ones.

Conclusion and Significance of the Study

Owing to the absence of an operational definition of the MENA region, current research on international students does not represent the more than 90,000 MENA students currently enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (IIE, 2021).

[2] Ummah refers to a community, in a Muslim context, this refers to all Muslim people.

The lack of discourse on MENA identity has created a void of research and resources for these young adults trapped in the crosshairs of weaponized xenophobic global politics against Muslims and the Middle East. An increased understanding of how MENA students do and do not integrate on U.S. campuses will increase investment in developing strategies to protect their well-being.

Muslim students, regardless of their country of origin, are harassed in multiple ways at twice the national rate of students of other faith groups (Singer, 2021). The Nonprofit One Voice Canada (2021) issued a plea to the Canadian government after publishing a concerning report about a rise in suicide rates among international students. The study revealed elevated stress due to struggling with the compounding effects of financial and academic concerns in addition to social isolation caused by both culture shock and the pandemic. However, no such call to action has been issued in the United States despite having a darker history of political tension around immigration and the MENA community than Canada does. Generations of anti-MENA xenophobia and Islamophobia have festered due to U.S. reactions to everything from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil embargo in the 1970s and the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979 to the so-called War on Terror after 9/11 and fear of the Arab Spring radicalizing Muslims abroad. The Southern Poverty Law Center (n.d.) reported an increase in anti-Muslim hate groups in 2020 and an increased membership in ACT for America, the country's largest anti-Muslim group that initially went under the moniker of the "American Congress for Truth" (Smith & Tau, 2004). ACT for America has consistently lobbied to dismantle the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) through its heavy use of right-wing Islamophobic rhetoric (Hodson, 2020).

This study highlights that 91% of the international MENA student participants do not identify as white, although that is their legal categorization in the U.S. Of the 58 surveyed participants, 22 identified as Black, and 22 chose new terminology that fit under the MENA umbrella. Their identification as Arab, North African, Middle Eastern, or Amazigh highlights the need for more representative terminology in U.S. policy. Their self-selected terminology also speaks to the internal and social distance that participants feel from whiteness. The participants felt most comfortable with Black and MENA peers and in spaces where they did not have to deflect inappropriate questions or commentary about their Muslim or presumed Muslim faith. As participants navigated through their new lives at U.S. colleges, they experienced moments of belonging with peers of color, and they nurtured their resilience, as they strived to maintain both their well-being and the requisite 2.5 GPAs they needed to stay in good legal standing as international students. However, participants faced moments of deep loneliness, self-doubt, prejudice, and confusion about their identities, as they faced ubiquitous xenophobic Islamophobia in predominantly white communities.

The application of CRT and a convergent parallel mixed-methods process allowed Muslim international MENA participants to share their experiences of living in the liminal space of being both racially invisible and racially hypervisible. Their stories of hiding their challenges from their home cultures as well as their social isolation on campus speak to a pressing need for more

awareness of their experiences as well as increased support systems so that they may thrive on an equitable playing field with their white peers. The current coding of MENA individuals as white creates an ideological distance between them and their black and brown peers, who experience similar prejudices while living and learning in the U.S. I stand with those movements that, at the time of this writing, were lobbying for a distinct MENA category to be recognized by the U.S. government. I offer this study a chance to uplift the ignored, white-washed stories of a vulnerable population that are deserving of fair treatment and belonging both in and out of the classroom.

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