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MENACrit: A Theoretical Framework to Understand Middle Eastern and North African International Student Experiences

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ABSTRACT: *The United States has a centuries-long history of restricting immigration policies in response to perceived threats from global communities of color. Much like the Irish and Chinese were socially vilified and legally persecuted throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the global MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) community faces discriminatory processes and deep-seated suspicion as they engage with the United States. International students from the MENA region are particularly vulnerable to these practices as they come to a new country to pursue an education that promises a financially secure future, often not just for them but for their loved ones back home. Without due consideration, international MENA students' experiences with the double standards of their conditional whiteness are neither examined nor prioritized in scholarship or university processes and procedures. This conceptual paper proposes MENACrit, an emergent branch of CRT, that scholars, administrators, and policymakers can employ to better understand the ever-hostile and often contradictory messages that shape international MENA student identities and experiences in U.S. institutions of higher education.*

Keywords: CRT, MENA identity, Muslim identity, immigration, international students
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INTRODUCTION

For over 30 years, the United States has been the top destination for global education, hosting over 1.2 million global students in 2024, and at one point receiving over one quarter of all students who travelled internationally for college (Batalova, 2025; IIE Open Doors, 2024). U.S. institutions of higher education have long been regarded as the gold standard, consistently ranking first in global education (GBM, 2025; Khan, 2024; World Population Review, 2025). Even so, the United States has also been home to rampant, legalized Islamophobia and anti-MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) xenophobia, which has been codified into policies such as NSEERS, the Muslim Ban, and the revocation of over 1,000 student visas due to their advocacy against the ongoing genocide of Palestinians (Al Jazeera, 2025). 9/11 and the so-called War on Terror brought legalized suspicion and surveillance of Muslims, and both of President Trump’s presidencies saw stark increases in travel bans as well as anti-Muslim and anti-Arab hate crimes across the country, in part due to the administration's consistent conflation of Islam and people of MENA descent with “terrorism” (FBI, 2025; White House, 2025). In just the ten days following Trump’s first inauguration, the Southern Poverty Law Center documented 867 anti-Muslim and anti-MENA hate crimes against people who were or were presumed to be Muslim or of MENA heritage. However, despite anti-MENA sentiment being woven into the fabric of American national identity, MENA communities are racially coded as “white” in U.S. jurisprudence. The combination of the lure of U.S. education and anti-MENA ideology and violence places international students from the MENA in the contradictory crosshairs of pursuing their academic dreams in a country that simultaneously surveils them while legally stripping them of their heritage and connection to other communities of color.

U.S. cultural norms are often presumed to be universally accepted and understood with little consideration of global diversity. Given the United States’ standing as an educationally elite superpower and the conditions in which international students are legally subject to U.S. laws and processes during their stay, there is an expectation of presumed deference to all things American, including assessments of their core identities. The implications of hateful rhetoric, discriminatory immigration procedures, and the lack of representative racial identifiers render international MENA students’ safety and self-concept vulnerable to geopolitical grandstanding and the whims of white Christian nationalism. While recent scholarship has examined Arab and MENA experiences as distinct from those of European descent, increased attention to international MENA students is required to assess the harm they face when they leave home and invest tens of thousands of dollars to risk their safety in pursuit of an American education.

METHOD

The following framework was developed through the application of grounded theory, rooted in qualitative, thematic analysis of extant scholarship on MENA identity in the United States. Firstly, the author conducted a search of interdisciplinary scholarly journals published within five years of this article’s publication, then read, thematically coded, and re-coded each by hand to understand the landscape of the representation and treatment of international MENA students at U.S. colleges. These studies highlighted that the U.S. conflation of Islam with the MENA region and violence is not new (Allison, 2014); for

example, in the 18th century, European Christians held both a "lurid interest in, and a 'paranoic repugnance'" for Muslims and Arabs whom they overtly called savage (Kidd, 2009, p. 2). In 1790, Benjamin Franklin penned a satirical speech claiming the pro-slavery politicians were behaving like barbaric "Algerines," accusing them of abandoning Christ to follow the Qu'ran, which he claimed permitted slavery (Franklin, 1790). The absence of positive representation of either MENA or Muslim identity in American culture or education only furthers the same binary rhetoric that inspired John McCain, during his presidential campaign in 2008, to reassure a concerned voter that Obama was not an Arab, but a "decent family man, a citizen" (Segarra, 2018, online). The author then conducted a mixed-methods study that examined the racial identity development of 58 MENA undergraduate students. This included a quantitative examination of MENA students' self-identification through a survey tool and the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). The survey provided opportunities for individual text responses that were qualitatively coded, and hour-long one-on-one interviews were conducted with participants. Descriptive statistical analysis of survey responses was used to examine international MENA students' relationships with their racial identities as they adapted to life and learning in the United States.

DISCUSSION

Racist and anti-Muslim stereotypes have been popular in the Global West for well over a millennium (Said, 1978) and in U.S. media for over a century (Ali, 2013). Secretary of Education McMahon has equated not only support for Palestine but simply *being* Muslim with anti-semitism and ill will towards U.S. democracy (Heavey, 2025; McMahon, 2025). At the time of this writing, President Trump is ten months into his second term; after only his first presidency, increased suicidality and depression were reported (Meyer et. al., 2024; Mohamed & Zaghouani, 2024), with suicide attempts of Muslims reaching double those of all other faith groups (Awaad et al., 2021; Singer, 2021). These reports are directly related to the U.S. public's increasingly prejudiced perceptions of foreign-born students: 41% of Americans feared that international students threatened U.S. security, 42% believed that international students stole their seats from citizens, and up to 52% suspected that international enrollment was directly related to "illicit agreements with foreign entities" and potentially harmful "gifts or funding from foreign governments" (American Council on Education, 2021). Despite universities' best efforts, on a macro and micro level, anti-immigrant sentiment is endemic. To understand the impact that the layers of historical and present-day xenophobia and anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudice have on international MENA students, educators, administrators, and policymakers must recognize the unique circumstances of being MENA in America. This necessitates an examination of the intersections of race, culture, faith, and geopolitics in the creation of (mis)representations of Islam and the MENA region.

MENACrit: A CRT-inspired Approach to Understanding MENA Identity

Throughout the history of legal and academic activism, scholars have developed theories to name and change systemic biases across various identity lines. Critical Race Theory (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. The creation of supportive frameworks for historically and presently oppressed communities requires the naming of that community. Without being given a name, silenced people cannot be given a voice. CRT affirms the prevalence of racism in the United States and the need for intersectional approaches to challenging dominant ideologies, centering counternarratives, and reimagining an equitable society for people of color, free of systems of oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2020; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As LatCrit, TribalCrit, and DisCrit have blossomed from CRT, MENACrit is an emergent theoretical framework for understanding the nuanced, overlapping, and contradictory facets of MENA identity in the United States may be understood.

Just as Ladson-Billings (2014) advocated for the need to "remix" 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 privilege it affords (Lindsey & Lindsey, 2016; Paris, 2012). It is by rejecting the whitewashing of Arab identity that educator activists can increase cultural, social, and academic support systems for MENA students through an asset-based lens instead of one that either views Arabs as deficient or simply does not see Arab identity at all. MENACrit would allow for an in-depth understanding of the unique positionality of MENA peoples. The tenets of MENACrit, outlined in Table 1, serve to structure thoughtful examination of and empathy toward MENA communities who live and learn in the United States.

Anti-Essentialism

As Bhabha (2011) wrote, identity is not a fixed concept that can casually be assigned to others, however, despite U.S. principles of freedom and representation, Said (1988) shared, "it is quite common to hear high officials in Washington and elsewhere speak of changing the map of the Middle East, as if ancient societies and myriad peoples can be shaken up like so many peanuts in a jar." In a nation founded on principles of freedom, representation, and self-expression, MENA communities are socially, legally, and ideologically "taxed" without being accurately represented. For generations, MENA identity has consistently been flattened into a caricature of violent, radicalized bearded men and veiled, oppressed, voiceless women (Beydoun, 2018; McQueeney, 2014; Shaheen, 2003). Said (1978) described Western views of the Middle East as "a European invention," a land of "exotic beings [and] haunting memories" (p. 9) manufactured to meet Western political and military motives by creating a dangerous Other. This denigrative conflation and creation of identity is not limited to popular media but has instead repeatedly seeped into the White House and served as foundational to anti-MENA legislation, creating an ouroboros of xenophobic racism.

During his pronouncements of Executive Order 13769 and Proclamation 9645, Trump used variations of the word "terrorist" 20 and 40 times, respectively (Trump, 2017). Not only did Trump consistently intermingle mentions of Muslim groups from different countries and points in time as they were interchangeable and linked, Trump also hired notoriously anti-Muslim politicians like Steve Bannon to his cabinet and welcomed anti-

Muslim extremists like Brigitte Gabriel, founder of America's largest anti-Muslim hate group, Act for America, to the White House to share a meal (Owen, 2024; Walsh, 2020). With sweeping statements built upon hyperbolic fearmongering and paranoid conjecture, Trump executed three efforts at banning Muslims and MENA people from entering the United States: Executive Order 13769, or the Muslim Ban 1.0, which targeted MENA countries Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (Trump, 2017). Secondly, he then issued Executive Order 13780, or the Muslim Ban 2.0, which similarly prohibited entry from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (Trump, 2017). Thirdly, Executive Order 14161 prohibited the entry of citizens from 12 countries, eight of which are MENA: Afghanistan, Chad, Eritrea, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen (Trump, 2025).

While such anti-MENA sentiment could easily be framed as unique to the Trump administration, it has long been a pervasive force in immigration policy. In 1909, George Shishim, a Syrian Christian resident of Los Angeles, was ruled white in the eyes of the law. It was only after proving that he was not Muslim that he was granted sufficient "whiteness" to be naturalized, thus legally equating Muslim-ness as antithetical to American-ness (Beydoun, 2018). Definitions of whiteness and its access to citizenship continued and continue to morph, eventually permitting Ahmed Hassan, a *Muslim* Yemeni man, was able to secure the legal standing and privileges of whiteness and citizenship in 1942 (Haney-Lopez, 1995). 1984 brought with it the United States' "first official nationwide international tracking project" to locate and fingerprint every Libyan student because members of the federal government suspected that Muammar Gaddafi was plotting an assassination on U.S. soil (Allen & Bista, 2021, p. 181). This spawned the student visa law that now requires the annual renewal of international students' I-20s, only existing as an Islamophobic security response post-9/11, one that codes all incoming Muslim students as suspected terrorists. The very nature of student screening presumes suspicion, which, though receptive to unilateral bipartisan support, is antithetical to the U.S. belief that individuals are innocent until proven guilty; for international students, the burden is on the students to prove their innocence, not on the government to prove guilt. Given the aforementioned anti-Muslim immigrant legislation, this is especially true for international students from the MENA region.

Racialization of Religion

The U.S. ideological landscape is one adjacent to fundamentalism, where popularized ideas are portrayed as fixed inevitabilities that cannot be questioned. This colonization, conflation, and bastardization of MENA and Muslim identities is evident in U.S. Department of Education Secretary McMahon's (2025) remarks that, amid global calls for an end to the genocide in Palestine and the documentation of over 500 instances of Israeli incitement to genocide (Law For Palestine, 2024), American campuses are "overrun by anti-Western teachings," "violent antisemitism," and Middle Eastern studies curricula that are egregiously biased in favor of Arabs and Muslims when no such curricula exist. This process of political "factualization" has rendered MENA identity a two-dimensional target for nationalism, Judeo-Christian supremacist vitriol. As there is no singular, universal MENA or Muslim experience, MENA students often report self-isolating from white spaces due to fear of tokenization and prejudice (Mesouani, 2023). Consistently, even

though less than a quarter of the MENA population identifies as Muslim, MENA and Muslim identities remain conflated and interchangeable in U.S. discourse and decision-making.

Anti-MENA discrimination is emboldened by what is framed as a "rationalized [...] fear of terrorism (a phenomenon now exclusive to the Arab World in corporate American media" (Salaita, 2006, p. 265). Schatz (2008) examined the exponentially increased security and surveillance measures of MENA and Muslim, and *presumed* MENA and Muslim, students on college campuses, discovering a notable emergence of anti-Muslim feelings among staff as well as students. Harkening back to Bush's infamous words after the Towers fell, Schatz (2008), through a postcolonial lens, uncovered that identity was innately constructed as "U.S. and/vs. Them." The equation of terrorism with Islam was a core tenet of shows like Homeland and inspired, in a mere matter of months in 2007, garnered twenty-eight million views of comedian Jeff Dunham's viral puppet caricature "Achmed the Dead Terrorist" (Lewis, 2011): Islamophobia has become a national pastime where white Americans proudly don attire or tattoos that say, "kafr," Arabic of "infidel." U.S. national identity is celebrated in opposition to the (projected) values and faith of the MENA region. In order to "pass" as American, MENA students must outwardly assimilate to Western norms while negotiating their ongoing relationships with their respective backgrounds.

Hybridity

MENA Americans often describe themselves as being "both" MENA/Arab and American and "neither" MENA/Arab and American, fighting the stigma of simultaneously being too Arab and not Arab enough, and both too American and not American enough (Glass, 2012; Green et al, 2024; Mesouani, 2023). This "paradoxical community" is indicative of the hybridity of identity that occurs from the cultural formation of interacting communities that codes MENA peoples as at once citizen and alien" (Bhabha, 2011, p. 2).

This results in a triple consciousness, akin to and modeled after Du Bois' (1903) concept of double consciousness or "double life" in which Black folks must disidentify from their black selves to be safe through the performance of a palatable "Blackness" for white consumption. For MENA people, this consciousness occurs in triplicate: not only are they aware of their inner selves, whom they must mask and edit for others, they are also aware of how they are coded by non-MENA Americans and MENA community members who are socially framed as oppositional. MENA students' self-conceptions are impacted by the self-doubt and possible self-loathing that results from the absorption of anti-Muslim stereotypes and mimicry, or the desire of the ideologically colonized to become the same as the colonizer through acculturation (Bhabha, 1994). Assimilation to American beliefs or behaviors would be coded as MENA students favoring U.S. culture over their own, harkening back to the idea of the United States as the ideological and cultural gold standard.

Yet, even the most assimilative habits would not prevent Muslim and MENA identities from being hypersurveilled through programs such as NSEERS and the policing and punishment of pro-Palestinian supporters (AlSultany, 2022). This monitoring results in international MENA students occupying an outsider status on U.S. soil, just as MENA family members' scrutinize first- and second-generation MENA youth acculturation causes students to feel ill at ease at home as they adapt to and are impacted by their time in U.S.

classrooms (Amarneh & Viana, 2025; Amer, 2014; Mesouani, 2023). MENA students' sense of belonging is thus balanced on a knife-edge of acceptable behaviors that might offer them the belonging of conditional whiteness and familial recognition, resulting in the tightrope of identifiability.

Tightrope of Identifiability

International students from across the world experience low psychological well-being due to the stressors of discrimination, homesickness, financial anxieties, and the pressure to maintain an adequately high GPA or face the revocation of their legal status (AlKhalaf et al., 2023; Chaliawala et al., 2025; Mesouani, 2023; Mostafa, 2025). Core to international students developing resilience is the presence of university resources, access to culturally sustaining supports, and positive peer engagement through academic and social interactions with U.S. classmates, all of which are made less accessible to international MENA students due to the pervasiveness of social and politicized prejudice (Singh, 2021; Tinto, 1993). One may presume that for international MENA students, assimilation is the path of least resistance. However, as Rudra (2025) discovered, there is a "paradoxical relationship between acculturation and self-stigma, [...] that increased cultural integration does not necessarily equate to reduced internalized shame" (p. 131). In fact, it often increased feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt.

In an analysis of international undergraduate MENA student experiences, Mesouani (2023) spoke to a participant, Rabab, who was considering a babysitting job for a professor, was instructed by a well-intentioned friend, "Don't tell them you're Lebanese; tell them you're French, like concentrate on your French accent, because they—so they accept you as a babysitter." This created feelings of both indignation and confusion in Rabab, who said, "Oh, my God, I'm just gonna, like, lie about my identity to go like, take care of pooping babies? Like I *want* to do this?" (p. 137). Similarly, Anderson (2020) interviewed participants who shared that they had positive campus experiences until their peers learned that they were Saudi Arabian and Lebanese. This liminal belonging is akin to the process that LGBTQIA+ people undergo when we "come out," knowing that once information about one's identity is disclosed, their safety is subject to the opinions and biases of the people to whom they open up.

A core feature of the tightrope of identifiability is each student's phenotype and any external or behavioral indicators of a religious affiliation. Both Anderson (2020) and Mesouani (2023) had several Muslim participants voice trepidation about being "caught" praying because they were aware that their acts of worship would likely be interpreted as markers of danger to U.S. peers. These stark inconsistencies between self-perception and external presumptions go back to the triple consciousness that international MENA students constantly navigate. While these students internally experience consistent ethnic identities despite exposure to U.S. opinion (Anderson, 2020), those opinions carry the weight of academic and social success as well as the threat of physical danger, such as the reported violence and hostility of border agents, even after the Muslim Ban was stymied (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). As a former international MENA student from Morocco, I have long half-joked that I would only identify as white when I could "be white" in an airport. Despite my Western dress and fair complexion, the conditional whiteness and subsequent privileges that I enjoy are immediately revoked upon my

presentation of my passport and its Arabic script.

Importance of Self-Identification

As U.S. schemas of race are both geographically contingent and socially constructed, they do not translate across global borders or generations. As Huddy (2001) stated, identity formation cannot be solely explained or satisfied by group designation; simply put, life is more nuanced than the five choices the Census Bureau offers, and it is not fixed throughout time. This was true of Latinx populations who generationally had different attitudes towards whiteness, which was previously considered aspirational and is presently viewed as assimilative, and whose absorption is to be rejected (Mora, 2014). This is also true for MENA peoples, whose older generations are what Bonilla-Silva (2010) calls "honorary whites" and ascribe to whiteness because they believe "racial divisions of past generations have been curtailed or overcome [and] race-thinking and race-based policies are no longer necessary" (Costa, 2016, p. 499). The aforementioned activism from Latinx and MENA populations indicates a seismic cultural shift: MENA people are calling for recognition of their roots.

International students of all backgrounds have shared that U.S. racial identity development frameworks and legal categorizations do not adequately or accurately represent their experiences (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Mesouani, 2023). The legal whitewashing of international MENA 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. It does not allow for solidarity that is respected outside of MENA spaces where Arabs and non-Israeli Semites have a history of being violently Othered (Beydoun, 2018; Shaheen, 2003, nor does it allow MENA students inclusion in conversations and spaces geared towards students of color. Beyond these structural challenges, forcing whiteness upon international MENA students causes internal strife to students who recognize the precarious nature of their proximities to whiteness. To expect that MENA students comfortably fit under the blanket of whiteness of a foreign nation is to dismiss their entire sociocultural heritage and the dignity of allowing self-identification.

Amid the racial gaslighting of being legally categorized as white while being racially coded as Other, international MENA students are particularly vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt (Elmaghraby et al., 2022; Meyer et. al., 2024; Mohamed & Zaghouani, 2024). In Mesouani's (2023) study of 58 international MENA students at undergraduate institutions in the United States, participants were asked to identify themselves within a U.S. Census context and using their own, non-restricted language. Within the Census framework, over 70% of participants identified as Black, not white. When permitted to self-identify more freely, 42% of participants selected new categories like North African, Middle Eastern, Arab, and Amazigh, that are not presently offered in the current U.S. taxonomy. When permitted to self-identify without restriction, white was, by far, the least selected category. Further, respondents who self-identified under the MENA umbrella displayed the least negative feelings toward their identities, the least desire to change their race, and the most understanding about the role their racial and ethnic identities played in their lives. MENA communities are legally assigned "whiteness," despite not racially not identifying as white, and are not afforded the sociocultural,

political, legal, and ideological benefits of belonging as citizens.

Interest Divergence

Sealey Ruiz (2023) wrote, “when people construct things they have a purpose in mind” (Kantawala, 2023, p. 59). Since the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 to the aforementioned shifting immigration policies, MENA identity has been defined by white Westerners. Their definition of and attitude towards MENA inclusion and exclusion are dictated by interest divergence, which occurs when the interests of MENA peoples do not align with white institutional or political goals. As a primary trade partner of the United States, Saudi Arabia was not impacted by the so-called Muslim Bans. However, nations with higher refugee populations, such as Syria, were prohibited from U.S. entry to support anti-immigrant rhetoric about guarding economic resources from non-citizens. Other than these neoliberal motivations, there is very little perceived difference between the two countries in mainstream Americans’ perceptions. Amid fears of what the Far Right has named the “Great Replacement Theory,” one must wonder if MENA inclusion in legal categories of race is a numbers game or linked to a desire to prevent MENA access to what remains of affirmative action. It also occurs on the macro level as their identity can be destabilized by U.S. geopolitical events.

Knowledge Creation and Preservation

Al-Krenawi (2025) wrote that, “Western pedagogical styles prioritize independent learning and critical inquiry and can differ significantly from educational practices in many Muslim-majority countries” (p. 2). The combined stressors of academic adaptation and social adjustment that international MENA students face have been discussed in prior research that highlights the important role of structural supports and social peer and respectful professorial relationships to student success (Aliari, 2025; Chaliawala et al., 2025; Mostafa, 2025; Nguyen & McGregor, 2025). Such relationships necessitate cross-cultural understanding to be truly reciprocal and affirming to all parties. This understanding of MENA identity is made nearly impossible to achieve for domestic students and educators alike due to the overwhelming negative representation that floods every corner of American society.

Critically, U.S. primary and secondary education is almost devoid of positive MENA representation aside from whitewashed discussions of the Egyptian pyramids. In U.S. classrooms, students are far more likely to learn of famous historical figures such as Abū Ja’far Muhammad Ibn Mūsā Al-Khwārizmī and Abū ‘Alī al-Husayn Ibn ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Sīnā by their Europeanized names “Alghorismus” and “Avicenna.” Academic representation matters as the lessons we learn as children, coupled with what we hear on the news, shape our opinions of others. It is therefore vital for educators and administrators to examine the sociopolitical atmosphere and policies that shape U.S. understandings and treatment of international students (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). For any host community to positively engage with international students, members of that host culture must look beyond harsh xenophobic policies that are rooted in fear and suspicion to truly understand their international MENA peers.

CONCLUSION

Poet Lena Khalaf Tuffaha (2024) wrote that, "silence is the first casualty." A lack of positive representation for international students of color during their core years of identity formation is both silencing and shaming. Across his three presidential campaigns, Trump spent $1,052,473,741 on media alone. Not only have intentionally anti-Muslim strategies been promoted in political spheres, but significant capital has been dedicated to these efforts (Open Secrets, n.d.).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Example Tenets of MENACrit

Tenet	Description.
Anti-Essentialism	Rigid categorizations of race and fixity of identity must be challenged as reductive and inaccurate. Constructs of race are contextual and vary both culturally and geographically.
Racialization of Religion	U.S. rhetoric conflates the MENA and Arab regions with reductive views of Islam, claiming both to be violent and antithetical to notions of American democracy. Religious assimilation is coded as whiter/more American.
Hybridity	MENA identity in the United States occupies a Third Space due to ideological colonization and the fluid nature of a post-colonial context. This results in MENA individuals experiencing a *triple consciousness* of their heritage.
Tightrope of Identifiability	Depending on how they are phenotypically, culturally, and religiously perceived, MENA people occupy a space that spans hypervisibility and invisibility. They must assess the risks of *coming out* as MENA or being mis-coded as white, Black, or Latiné, either choosing or foregoing the privilege of *conditional whiteness*.
Importance of Self-Identification	Due to the U.S. Census's racial erasure of MENA communities through their legal standing as "white," MENA students must be free to freely realize their self-conception or risk increased self-stigma and poorer mental health outcomes.
Interest Divergence	MENA identity has been shaped not by opportunities of interest convergence, but the interest divergence of white nationalism and the West's pursuit of cultural and geopolitical gains against the so-called Other/enemy.
Knowledge Creation and Preservation	Counternarratives and the preservation and resurrection of MENA histories are essential to MENA self-determination and increasing accurate and positive representations of MENA identity.

MENA identity exists in the crosshairs of immigration policy, interpersonal bigotry, political dogma, and longstanding geopolitical tensions. Without the application of critical examination, international MENA students risk blatant discrimination and covert efforts to destabilize MENA credibility, both socially and in U.S. policymaking. MENACrit serves as a theoretical framework through which interdisciplinary critical race scholars can examine how existing systems and Christian nationalist and white supremacist ideologies shape the individual, interpersonal, and structural experiences of international MENA students as they attend U.S. colleges and universities.

Note: In the preparation of this manuscript, I did not use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for content creation

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