

February 2, 2013

Ms. Jennifer Jessup
Department of Commerce
Room 6616
14th and Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Ms. Jessup:

On behalf of the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA), I am writing to express our strong support for the Census Bureau's plan to test a Middle East and North Africa (MENA) category as part of its 2015 research for content improvements to the 2020 Census.

As you are aware, there is currently no ethnic category for Americans of Iranian descent on the U.S. Census. This has led to a significant undercount of the Iranian American community. The creation of a MENA category in the U.S. Census will have a significant and enduring impact on the treatment and services available to the Iranian American community.

In order to obtain the most precise count of the various MENA communities, we encourage the Census Bureau to use a comprehensive geographic definition of the MENA region. We further advise the Census Bureau to revise the examples it provides in the notice in order to represent the diverse communities from the MENA region in a more equitable manner. Both of the above recommendations were submitted to the Department of Commerce by the Arab American Institute in a letter dated January 28, 2015.

Finally, we would also like to voice our support for the inclusion of the category on the form as a distinct question on ethnicity and national origin as opposed to a combined question on ethnicity and race. We maintain that persons from the MENA region, much like those of Hispanic origin, identify with many racial backgrounds and that ethnicity and national origin is the appropriate approach to this new category.

PAAIA supports the importance of testing a category for a growing American ethnic populations that are mostly invisible in federal statistics and reports. A MENA category in the 2020 Census will increase the accuracy of ethnicity reporting as well as better reflect self-identity of respondents. Inclusive data collection on the MENA population will inform policymakers, federal and local officials, service organizations, and the public on the status of these communities, their needs, and the assets they bring to local, national, and international issues.

We look forward to continuing our activities in collaboration with the U.S. Census Bureau throughout the MENA testing process. We are confident that our collaborative efforts will result in a more accurate count of the Iranian American and other MENA communities.

Respectfully yours,

Leila G. Austin
Executive Director