Educator Brief

Series
IMMIGRATION INITIATIVE

Understanding & Supporting MENA & Muslim Students

By Shaza Jendi, Andrena Mason, Bisma Nasir, and Carola Suárez-Orozco

Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) and Muslim families and their children have long been part of our school communities. They oscillate, however, between being either invisible or hyper-visible depending upon socio-political events (like 9/11 or the more recent Israel-Gaza war). In the spirit of ***culturally responsive pedagogy,*** [1] understanding the students and families we serve is essential for good practice to optimally engage and educate our students, to foster excellent identity safe classrooms,[2] and to ensure optimal classroom climates.[3]

In this Immigration Initiative at Harvard *Educator Brief*, we provide an overview of who these families and students are, offering insight into their complexity and internal diversity. We point to the strengths of the MENA and Muslim community as well as to the undertow of Islamophobia in American classrooms and provide some guidelines for culturally responsive practice.

Inside

> **Beginning with Understanding: What should educators know about the MENA and Muslim communities?**

> **How to support MENA & Muslim students**

> **Recommendations**

HARVARD
GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF EDUCATION

Immigration
Initiative
AT HARVARD

Beginning With Understanding: What Should Educators Know About the MENA and Muslim Communities?

As several terms and groups are often confounded in the public imaginary, we begin by clarifying and defining terms. While they may overlap, they are not identical.

- **MENA:** The Middle Eastern and North African region. There is no standard definition of the countries included within this rubric. For example, the UNCHR includes 18 countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen) while the World Bank encompasses 24 countries including countries in South Asia like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan as well as Turkey and Israel.

- **ARAB WORLD:** A synonymous but not precisely equivalent term to MENA, this region stretches from Morocco to North Africa to the Persian Gulf. Arabic is the dominant language and while Islam is the dominant religion of the region, these countries are religiously and culturally diverse including individuals of Judaic, Christian, and Islamic backgrounds. Within the U.S. Census data, individuals of Arab origins have historically been classified as White and many identify as Christian.[4]

- **ISLAM:** One of the world's monotheistic faiths. (Others include Judaism and Christianity). Followers of Islam are called Muslims. There are an estimated 1.8 billion Muslims in the world accounting for nearly 24% of the world's population. This group of people are highly diverse and includes seven sects, with Sunni and Shia as the largest groups. The Muslim identity includes overlapping cultural, religious, and (as with most known religions) sometimes includes political dimensions. Also, as within all religious categories, Muslims span the range of religious practice from highly devout to non-observing.

Overlapping Communities: MENA and Muslim Communities in the United States
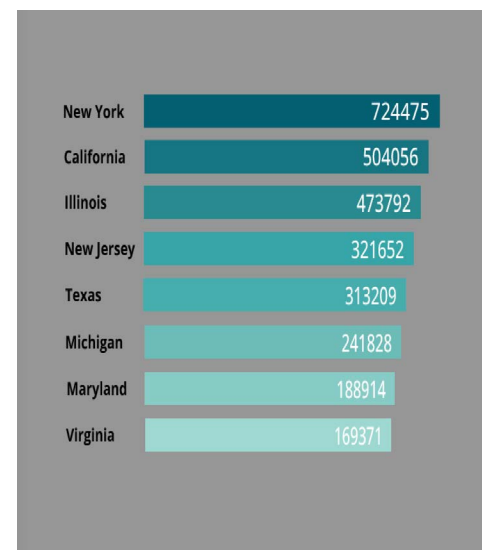
The U.S. MENA Population

Notably, data on the MENA community in the United States is only recently emerging as they have historically been largely subsumed in census data under White, Asian, or Black. More recently, it has been suggested that (like Hispanics/Latines) the MENA population has unique experiences that warrant separate data collection moving forward.[7]

- Today, there are an estimated 3.85 million individuals of Middle Eastern and North African origins in the United States; of that number, about 1.35 million are children.

- Individuals of MENA origins have been coming to the U.S. since the 1880s and have continued to migrate for a variety of reasons including the pursuit of educational and professional opportunities, family reunification, and political instabilities.

- 48.2 percent of all MENA immigrants hold at least a Bachelor's degree; MENA immigrants in the United States frequently opt for higher education in areas like engineering, medicine, business, and computer science.

- One in five MENA immigrants are entrepreneurs.[8]

- Approximately 68 percent of MENA immigrants are from the Middle East and another 32 percent are from Northern Africa.

- Iraq and Egypt are the top countries of origin for MENA immigrants, followed by Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan

- Close to 30 percent of MENA immigrants live in Michigan and California.

- Many in the MENA community may be a part of the Islamic, Judaic, or Christian faith.

- Notably, individuals who identify as Christian Arabs, Jewish Arabs, or Muslim

> **"** *While in the public imaginary, the Arab, MENA, and Muslim communities are often intertwined and undifferentiated, these communities are complex and highly diverse."*

- Individuals of Muslim origin make up approximately 1.1 percent of the U.S. population.

- On average, Muslim Americans are considerably younger than the overall U.S. population. [9]

- The states who have the largest Muslim populations are New York, California, Illinois, New Jersey, and Texas. (*See the table below.*)

- Three-quarters of the Muslim community in the United States are immigrants or the children of immigrants and originate from around the world including from South Asia and the Arab World.[10]

| State	Population
New York	724475
California	504056
Illinois	473792
New Jersey	321652
Texas	313209
Michigan	241828
Maryland	188914
Virginia	169371

Arabs may experience distinct forms of identity-based hostilities as religious and cultural background can play a significant role in shaping social dynamics and social reception.

The U.S. Muslim Population

• Muslim Americans are a diverse and growing population, currently estimated at 3.45 million people of all ages, including 2.15 million adults.

• Approximately a quarter of Muslims in the United States are Black Americans (and not of recent immigrant origins). An estimated 15 to 20% of enslaved Black people from the continent of Africa were Muslims. While many White slave owners in America attempted to forcibly convert Black Muslims to Christianity, after the Emancipation Proclamation, Islam re-emerged as a powerful form of resistance and positive identity for some in the Black American community and has continued as such.[11]

• Muslims in the United States are a highly diverse community. American Muslims are one of the most *racially diverse religious groups* in the United States; 25% identify as Black, 24% identify as White, 18% identify as South Asian, 18% identify as Arab, 7% identify as mixed race, and 5% identify as Hispanic.

The Overarching Challenge—Xenophobia, Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Attitudes

Various forms of identity-based hostilities - xenophobia, racial discrimination, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia - among others exert a harmful influence on communities by targeting individuals, fostering division, disrupting social unity, and undermining trust and wellbeing. The diminishing recognition and adherence to democratic principles leads to an increase in various forms of hatred across different levels of society including bias, discrimination, erasure, and violence. There are also well established negative psychological and health effects related to being subjected to identity-based hostilities.[12]
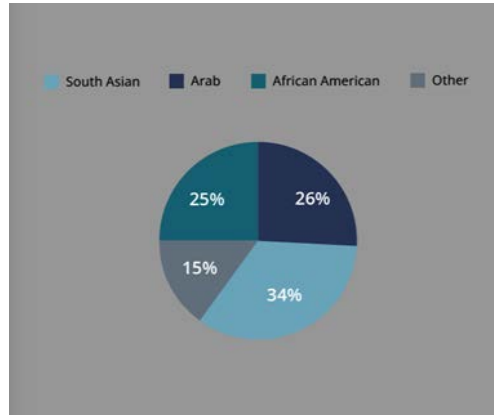
" American Muslims are one of the most racially diverse religious groups in the United States; 25% identify as Black, 24% identify as White, 18% identify as South Asian, 18% identify as Arab, 7% identify as mixed race, and 5% identify as Hispanic."

Islamophobia[13] refers to "an extreme fear of and hostility toward Islam and Muslims which often leads to hate speech, hate crimes, as well as social and political discrimination." [14] Islamophobia can be evident in both public and private domains, where Muslims become regarded with suspicion and are made to feel unwelcome. In the media, it becomes evident in the portrayal of Muslims as violent, misogynistic, and untrustworthy. At local, state, and national levels, it becomes apparent when instances of violence attributed to extremist groups are used as justification for intrusive surveillance of domestic Muslim communities. In the workplace, discrimination may extend to hiring or accommodation practices as when praying is not accommodated or headscarves are prohibited. In schools, Muslim students
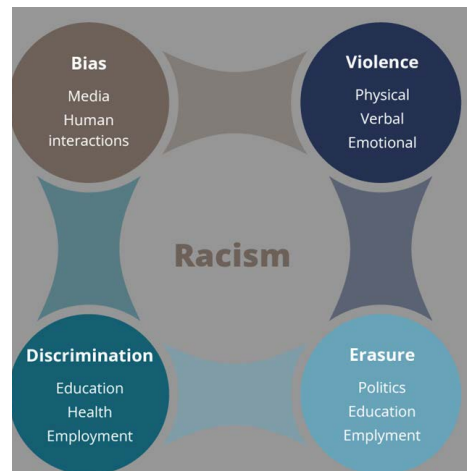
report bullying at double the national rate.[15] Thus, the impact of Islamophobia is profound, particularly for individuals who are visibly identified as Muslims—such as women who wear headscarves.

When political inflammatory events unfold, Muslims, or those potentially perceived as originating from the MENA region, routinely become targets of Islamophobic rhetoric, verbal assaults, and violence. The stigmatization of individuals of the Muslim faith has led to threats of physical and verbal violence normalized in the lives of Muslim immigrants (or anyone perceived as Muslim) in the U.S. and persist in negative social attitudes over time.[17]

Islamophobia in Schools

Ecological theory teaches us that world, national, and local events trickle into schools and classrooms.[18] Studies have shown that Muslims experience bullying at a rate double the national average.[19] As such, there is a pressing need for better preparedness among school administrators and teachers to handle this challenge effectively. Furthermore, Muslim students feel anxious to reach out to their teachers or school administration regarding the issue. Insufficient awareness among teachers and school administrators regarding Islamophobic behaviors exacerbates the targeting and discrimination of Muslim students.

HARVARD
GRADUATE SCHOOL of EDUCATION

Immigration Initiative AT HARVARD

A 2021 study concerning the experience of Muslim students across California schools, researchers found that amongst 701 survey participants aged 11–18 years old attending public school, 55% reported feeling unsafe, unwelcome, or uncomfortable at school because of their Muslim identity.[20] Additionally, almost a quarter of the respondents said that a teacher, administrator, or other adult at their school made disrespectful remarks about Islam or Muslims, adding to the student's sense of alienation and estrangement. A 17-year-old student reported: "One teacher said that we are a religion of blood and war and that all we want is the end of all humans," while another 14-year-old was told by his teacher that his "type" likes to fly planes into buildings.

Educators play an important role in the trajectory of their students' personal and academic growth including in fostering students' sense of belonging.[21] Perceived religious and ethnic discrimination from teachers has been linked to a lowered sense of academic competence and diminished school belonging. Conversely, positive teacher-student relationships are linked to academic success and the positive self-esteem of their students. Lamentably, however, teachers too often hold low academic expectations for Muslim students in large part fueled by limited understanding of these students.[22]

How to Support MENA & Muslim Students

It is important not just to acknowledge growing demographic shifts, but also to respond to them. Administrators, teachers, schools, can do this by creating environments that welcome and reflect a learning culture that seeks to relate the curriculum to each student in the school population. A responsive and relevent curriculum should inspire teachers, staff and administrators

to learn more about the unique challenges that Muslim students face and it should help school teams develop a culture of practice that allows them to reflect on their own perceptions of students. It is important to continuously evaluate and improve the way in which schools work in partnership with all students, families, and communities.Two principles should always frame practice with any diverse population - *culturally responsive practice* and *cultural humility*. *Culturally responsive practice (CRP)* [23] is intended to create student-centered learning environments that:

- affirm cultural identities and elevate historically marginalized voices

- foster positive academic outcomes and student engagement through the cultivation of critical thinking

- develop students' abilities to connect across differences

- empower students as agents of social change

The tenets of CRP suggest that educators must begin by understanding the students and families they serve. Secondly, fostering a welcoming, inclusive, and affirming class and school climates is central. Maintaining high expectations for all students and providing and engaging an inclusive curriculum is a third tenet of CRP. Lastly, ongoing professional development is essential as learning is a life-long process.

Relatedly, a stance of *cultural humility* [24] is a complementary and useful frame in that it recognizes that learning about culturally responsive practice is a lifelong journey. One never "achieves" full cultural knowledge: but rather it is an ongoing process. Learning with cultural humility requires suspending judgement as well as approaching learning with openness and curiosity, compassion, and respect.

Taking this stance, school staff, administrators, and educators, take the opportunity to work together to develop a collective professional identity. [25] When school teams work together to

learn more about their student population with cultural humility and openess, they create opportunities to cultivate meaningful symbiotic relationships with Muslim students for the better.

The more administrators, staff, and teachers work to become students of their student population, the more responsive the school will be to students and families who walk through their doors.[26] In Canada, for example, a team of school administrators worked to provide Arabic classes for their students to affirm the immigrant Muslim population in their school. School teams also should regularly connect to people, families, human resources, and organizations who can provide professional development opportunities for all school staff.[27] Learning about the needs of Muslim students, and their individual cultural identity as immigrants, is key to becoming a more knowledgeable school environment. [28]

Recommendations

With these principles in mind, we make the following recommendations to support MENA and Muslim students:

Become Culturally Humble Lifelong Learners

- Get to know the unique and rich diversity of your school population. Where are your students from? What are the specific demographics of your school? What languages are spoken in family homes? What unique challenges do the students in your school face that may be hidden or unseen?

Provide and Engage in Professional Development

- Identify school staff knowledge gaps and use professional development to get the school teams themselves to come up with collective ways to respond to their school population in a responsive manner. Providing professional development as the school grows in their responsiveness to Muslim students, honors the profession of education.

- Find professional development partners in the local community to provide workshops for

HARVARD
GRADUATE SCHOOL
of EDUCATION

Immigration
Initiative
AT HARVARD

for administrators, school staff, and educators, so that the entire school community develops processes together to properly respond to the rhythms of their own unique students.

• Provide educators with the skills and information needed to develop cultural and religious literacy. Host workshops for teachers led by specialists about Islamic religious practices and beliefs.

Foster Cultural and Religious Literacy by Recognizing Cultural and Religious Practices

Educators should strive towards cultural and religious literacy by developing basic understanding of different cultural practices and religions. This requires the ability to understand others' religious attitudes, experiences, and beliefs with an empathetic and open mindset in order to develop a genuine understanding of students' diverse backgrounds and beliefs. Enacting religious literacy requires a multi-tiered approach. For Muslim students, consider the following:

Prayer — Practicing Muslims must pray five times a day at various times throughout the day. The noon prayer (zuhr) and afternoon prayer (asr) might overlap with a school's schedule depending on the time of the year. Students might need to step out of class to perform their ablution and prayers, which can last from 10 to 20 minutes. Teachers should not only allow students to engage in this practice but also empower them to practice their faith in a public setting by providing them space in the classroom to pray if they feel comfortable doing so.

Hijab — Students of the Islamic faith may adhere to highly stringent clothing regulations. Female students might wear a hijab (headscarf) and modest clothing in all settings, including gym classes and in hot weather. Other Muslim students might question this practice or engage in bullying. Teachers should be vigilant about this particular vulnerability and make the classroom a safe space. One way this could be done is by reading books that feature characters wearing the hijab for younger students or showcasing the experience of hijabi students at a higher education level through creative projects that are centered around identity.

Dietary Restrictions — Muslim students are not allowed to consume anything with pork or alcohol, and some might refrain from eating any meat that is not halal. Gelatin or gelatine, a common ingredient in various food and non-food products, is a matter of concern for many Muslims due to its uncertain halal status, and it is found in such foods as marshmallows, Rice Krispies Treats, and gummy bears. Administrators, staff, and teachers should reach out directly to parents to see if their children have any dietary restrictions. The school should ensure that Muslim students have suitable food options available to them during breakfast, lunch, in offices and during classroom functions.

Holidays — Eid is the most important holiday in the Islamic faith, and it is

is four-days-long, is known as the "Greater Eid." Most public schools do not acknowledge the holiday, but students might have family prayers and activities they are required to participate in. It is a time of celebration and family. Just as Christmas and Hanukkah are often celebrated in the classroom, teachers should enact a similar recognition of Eid that could engage marginalized Muslim students. This can be done by conducting activities and reading stories reflecting on the holidays.

Fasting — Muslim students might observe fasting for the month of Ramadan, which is based on the lunar calendar and changes dates each year. Students might refrain from eating and drinking from sunrise to sunset, affecting their energy levels and overall participation. Teachers should be cognizant of fasting students and try to be flexible with assignment deadlines and participation demands during this time.

Foster Safe Schools and Classrooms

• Keep up with contemporary issues regarding Muslims, particularly anti-immigrant rhetoric, and stand ready to support difficult conversations.

• Demonstrate vigilance in protecting Muslim students from bullying from peers and supporting Muslim students by engaging with their faith in the classroom.

• Celebrate and highlight Muslim faith traditions and holidays.

• Provide educators with self-evaluation techniques to determine whether they are creating inclusive classroom climates.

Reflect Your Diverse Students in Your Curriculum and Learning Spaces

• Intentionally work to create curricular, aesthetic, and linguistic safe spaces that are inclusive of Muslim students.

• Have signs that welcome students in their original language.

• Make sure the curriculum and the school aesthetic reflects the student population in staff, books, and pictures to recognize all walks of life within the school community.

TO LEARN MORE

- **Ethnoracial Identity of MENA Americans Podcast (2022, March 14)** https://www.pnas.org/post/podcast/ethnoracial-identity-mena-americans

- **Imam, J. (2016) "I am you": American Muslims on Faith—and Fear. CNN** https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/18/us/muslims-in-america-irpt/index.html

- **African American Muslims. (2018). Harvard Divinity School** https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/home

- **Runnymede Trust (1997). Islamophobia: A Challenge to Us All** https://assets-global.website-files.

REFERENCES

1. Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. Journal of Teacher Education, 53(2), 106-116.

2. Hernández, L. E., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2022). Creating Identity-Safe Schools and Classrooms. Learning Policy Institute.

3. Suárez-Orozco, C. & Madden, K. (2023). School Climate and Immigrant Students. Immigration Initiative at Harvard. https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/resources/#educator-briefs

4. Minority Rights Group International (n.d.) https://minorityrights.org/minorities/arab-and-other-middle-eastern-americans/.

5. Pew Research Center (2018). Muslims in America: Immigrants and those born in America see life differently in many ways. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/04/14/muslims-in-america-immigrants-and-those-born-in-u-s-see-life-differently-in-many-ways/

6. Harjanto, L. & Batalova, J. (2022). Middle Eastern and North African Immigrants in the United States. Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/middle-eastern-and-north-african-immigrants-united-states

7. Forrester, A.C. (2023). Middle Eastern or North African in U.S. Government Surveys: A Preview of MENA Demographics (September 27) https://www.cato.org/briefing-paper/middle-eastern-or-north-african-us-government-surveys-preview-mena-demographics#background

8. New American Economy (2019). The Power of the Purse. https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/MENA-Report.pdf

9. Pew Research Foundation (2017). Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/

10. Pew Research Foundation (2017).

11. African American Muslims. (2018). Harvard Divinity School https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/religion-context/case-studies/minority-america/african-american-muslims

12. Szaflarski, M., & Bauldry, S. (2019). The effects of perceived discrimination on immigrant and refugee physical and mental health. In Immigration and Health, 73-204.

13. Runnymede Trust (1997). Islamophobia: A Challenge to Us All https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/islamophobia-a-challenge-for-us-all.

14. What Is Islamophobia?" Bridge Initiative, January 17, 2023. https://bridge.georgetown.edu/about-us/what-is-islamophobia/.

15. Ansary, N. (2023). Religious-based bullying. Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. https://www.ispu.org/religious-based-bullying-insights-on-research-and-evidence-based-best-practices-from-the-national-interfaith-anti-bullying-summit-2/

16. New America (2018). Anti-Muslim Activities in the United States 2012-2018. New America https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/anti-muslim-activity/

17. Mohamehd, B. (2021). Muslims are a growing presence in U.S., but still face negative views from the public. Pew Research Center. Views of Muslims in the U.S., 20 years after 9/11 | Pew Research Center

18. Suárez-Orozco, C., Motti-Stefanidi, F., Marks, A., & Katsiaficas, D. (2018). An integrative risk and resilience model for understanding the adaptation of immigrant-origin children and youth. American Psychologist, 73(6), 781.

19. Ansary, N. (2023).

20. CAIR. (2021)). Examining Islamophobia in California School. https://www.cair.com/press_releases/new-cair-ca-report-shows-highest-ever-percentage-of-muslim-students-55-feeling-unsafe-in-school/

21. Schachner, M. K., Juang, L., Moffitt, U., & van de Vijver, F. J. (2018). Schools as acculturative and developmental Contexts for Youth of immigrant and refugee background. European Psychologist, 23(1), 44–56. https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000312

22. Sirin, S. R., Ryce, P., & Mir, M. (2009). How teachers' values affect their evaluation of children of immigrants: Findings from Islamic and Public Schools. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 24(4), 463–473. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2009.07.003

23. Gay, G. (2015). The what, why, and how of culturally responsive teaching: International mandates, challenges, and opportunities. Multicultural Education Review, 7(3), 123-139. https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2015.1072079

24. Lekas, H. M., Pahl, K., & Fuller Lewis, C. (2020). Rethinking cultural competence: Shifting to cultural humility. Health Services Insights, 13, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7756036/#:~:text=Cultural%20humility%20means%20admitting%20that,that,that%20cultivates%20person%2Dcentered%20care.

25. Akaba, S., Peters, L.E., Liang, E. et al. Pre-K teachers' professional identity development at community-based organizations during universal Pre-K expansion in New York City. ICEP 16, 6 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-022-00099-9

26. York-Barr, Jennifer, William A. Sommers, Gail S. Ghere, and Jo Montie. Reflective Practice for Renewing Schools: An Action Guide for Educators. Third Edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2016. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506350530.

27. Candace Schlein & Elaine Chan (2010) Supporting Muslim Students in Secular Public Schools, Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education, 4:4, 253-267, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15595692.2010.51323528. (1995) The Needs of Muslim Children in Public Schools, Religion & Education, 22:2, 90-94, https://hollis.harvard.edu/permalink/f/1mdq5o5/TN_cdi_crossref_primary_10_1080_15507394_1995_11000814

29. Wittmann, Paula, and Nancy Fisher-Allison. 2020. Intentionally creating a safe space for all: THE SCHOOL LIBRARY AS REFUGE. Knowledge Quest 48, (3) (Jan): 40-49, http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/scholarly-journals/intentionally-creating-safe-space-all-school/docview/2333934396/se-2?accountid=11311 (accessed October 28, 2023).

About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH)

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid- response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.