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Introduction: Reframing the MENA Identity at a Critical Time

As Chapman University prepares to recruit its first-ever [Director for Middle Eastern and North African \(MENA\) Achievement](#) within the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), this initiative represents a pivotal moment for reflecting on what it means to be of Middle Eastern and North African descent in today's world. This aligns with the transformative addition of the [MENA category in the 2030 U.S. Census](#)—a milestone recognized in [Forbes' campaign](#) celebrating Arab American Heritage, where I was honored to be featured.

The inclusion of this category marks a shift in how identity is recognized and valued in America. For too long, the complexities of MENA identities have been oversimplified or reduced to harmful stereotypes. In 2015, after moderating a Q&A session for [Michael Singh's](#) award winning documentary [Valentino's Ghost: Why We Hate Arabs and Muslims](#) at the [SikhLens Art and Film Festival](#), the deep-rooted media portrayals of the community as terrorists, extremists, or backward societies became even more evident. The film's raw honesty and exploration of how Western politics in the Middle East shape these narratives inspired me to write an article for the Huffington Post titled [What Nobody Tells You About Muslims and Arabs](#), where I expressed my frustration as an Arab American and from the Middle Eastern and North African community with these distorted portrayals. Despite the ongoing efforts to fight these misconceptions, the media's influence remains a powerful barrier to reshaping the narrative.

This frustration gave birth to my [#changethenarrative](#) campaign, a proactive movement dedicated to reclaiming the rich, multifaceted identities of the region. Through this campaign, I've focused on uniting storytelling, proactive engagement, and highlighting the cultural, intellectual, and geopolitical contributions that have been overshadowed by dominant narratives. I've always been surprised, not only by the questions directed at me as a Muslim woman—a subject I addressed in my 2016 TEDx talk, [Feeling Welcome and Empowered](#)—but also by how unaware people are of the diverse richness of the Middle

East. The narrative often fails to extend beyond a singular political perspective, missing the complexity of cultures, subcultures, and sub-subcultures that define the region.

Coining a New Term: Middle Eastern Privilege

But then a deeper question emerged—what if, instead of solely focusing on challenging stereotypes, we could also highlight the **profound privileges** inherent in being rooted in the MENA region? This reflection led me to coin a brand new term: ***Middle Eastern Privilege***. This concept seeks to redefine what it means to come from the Middle East and North Africa by emphasizing the richness of cultural, linguistic, religious, and geopolitical heritage alongside an openness to diverse perspectives. It challenges the dominance of Western privilege in global discourse and celebrates the advantages that this community brings to the table.

The Richness of Language, Culture, Religion, and Subcultures

1. **Linguistic Diversity:** The Middle East is home to a myriad of languages and dialects, each carrying centuries of history and tradition. This linguistic diversity not only enriches communication but also provides a profound understanding of cultural nuances and historical contexts.
2. **Cultural Heritage:** From ancient civilizations to contemporary innovations, the Middle East holds a cultural heritage that spans millennia. The region's contributions to science, philosophy, and the arts continue to shape global culture today. The connection to such a rich past is not a burden; it is a privilege that fosters a strong sense of identity and belonging.
3. **Religious Diversity:** The Middle East is a cradle of multiple religious traditions, including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and other faiths. This diversity, often overlooked in global narratives, adds layers of spiritual richness and cross-cultural understanding, positioning the region as a beacon of interfaith dialogue.
4. **Subcultures and Sub-Subcultures:** Beyond the overarching narratives, the Middle East is a mosaic of cultures, subcultures, and sub-subcultures. From Bedouin traditions to urbanized cosmopolitan hubs, the layers of identity in this region are intricate and diverse. Understanding these complexities reveals a rich tapestry of interconnected communities that go far beyond simplistic generalizations.

Geopolitical Understanding and Global Awareness

1. **Geopolitical Savvy:** Growing up in a region marked by significant geopolitical shifts, individuals from the Middle East develop a nuanced understanding of global politics. This awareness equips them to navigate and interpret complex

international relations, a skill that is increasingly valuable in an interconnected world.

2. **Openness to the World:** Contrary to the often insular perceptions associated with Western privilege, Middle Easterners are inherently more open to diverse cultures due to their geographical and historical position as a crossroads of civilizations. This openness fosters empathy, adaptability, and a broader worldview.

The Evolving Middle East: A New Era of Resilience and Global Influence

The narrative of the Middle East is undergoing a [dynamic transformation](#), driven by ambitious vision plans and strategic investments. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE are redefining the region's future with bold initiatives. [Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030](#), for instance, is a high-stakes mission to diversify its economy and position the Kingdom as a global hub for investment and tourism. Have you read the latest article titled [Saudi Arabia Is on a High-Stakes Mission to Buy the World](#) on Business Insider? The country's Public Investment Fund is investing in everything from Uber and Blackstone to Heathrow and LIV Golf. Similarly, [Egypt's development of a new administrative capital](#) and the [North Coast's emergence as a leader in sustainable tourism](#) signal a major shift toward modernization and global integration.

The UAE continues to push boundaries with initiatives like Dubai's [Museum of the Future](#) and Abu Dhabi's [Abrahamic Family House](#), an interfaith complex housing a mosque, church, and synagogue. These projects are emblematic of the region's forward-thinking and inclusive approach to culture and spirituality. Did you ever think you would consider Saudi Arabia as a tourism destination? The recent New York Times article, [Saudi Arabia Tourism: Surprising, Unsettling, Surreal](#), explores just that.

Moreover, the artistic and cultural landscape of the Middle East is vibrant and innovative. The [Barjeel Art Foundation](#), founded by [Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi](#) in 2010, holds one of the most extensive collections of art from the region. The art collection explores four themes that define Arab art and showcases the creative brilliance and cultural depth of the region. It is these kinds of collaborations and initiatives—where history, art, and modern narratives intersect—that are reshaping how the Middle East is perceived globally.

Amid these advancements, one cannot ignore the political tensions that remain on everyone's mind, tensions that have divided communities for decades. True progress lies in fostering dialogue, understanding, and ultimately, coexistence.

Humanizing a Region

The concept of Middle Eastern privilege is not about asserting superiority but about redefining the global narrative for how people view the MENA region and those who come from there, live, work, create art, contribute to the world, and raise families. It seeks to humanize these individuals to a level that has rarely been achieved before, moving beyond the superficial portrayals often seen in media and political narratives. By highlighting the richness and complexity of the MENA experience, this concept invites a more inclusive and respectful perspective on what it truly means to come from the Middle East.

Perhaps if more people truly understand the complexity and multifaceted layers of being from the MENA region—its stories, cultures, and subcultures—can we move closer to real conversations and lasting peace? If the richness of these narratives is better understood, will it make a difference? Will it matter more when people see that there's far more than a single narrative or political lens?

Challenging and Redefining Narratives: Toward a More Inclusive Understanding

To redefine the narrative of privilege, it is essential to highlight the strengths and advantages inherent in Middle Eastern identity. This shift challenges the dominant notion that Western privilege is the only form of privilege and instead celebrates the unique position the Middle Eastern and North African community holds in the world. Empowering this voice involves actively showcasing contributions to global culture, politics, and society, fostering a sense of pride and recognition.

However, in advocating for Middle Eastern privilege, it is important to emphasize that the goal is not to elevate one identity over another. As someone deeply committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), I believe that privilege should not be a tool for division but a pathway to understanding. The concept of Middle Eastern privilege is intended to open new dialogues—ones that hopefully allow us to get along better, appreciate our differences, and celebrate our shared humanity.

What's Next?

The Middle East is a region of rich complexity and incredible potential. As the global narrative evolves, the question remains: what does it mean to be privileged when coming from the MENA region? Can this concept help bridge gaps and foster deeper connections? The hope is that by reframing privilege in a more inclusive and nuanced way, we can create a narrative that not only honors the region's contributions but also paves the way for more meaningful global engagement.

What do you think when you hear the word: Middle East?

Do you feel privileged coming from the MENA region?

Does this definition resonate?

If you're intrigued, I invite you to collaborate with me on this bigger picture project—let's redefine what it means to come from the Middle East and create a new narrative for the world.

#MiddleEasternPrivilege #Humanizingthemiddleeast #MENA #HumanizingaRegion