



Language Access Panel Presentation  
for the  
Middle Eastern Community in California

Presentation by:  
Nahla Kayali, Founder & Executive Director



## OVERVIEW OF MIDDLE EASTERN & NORTH AFRICAN COMMUNITIES (MENA)

- MENA stands for Middle Eastern & North African
- MENA represents a very ethnically and racially diverse group of communities who originally come from countries including but not limited to: Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, Sudan, Somalia, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan





## OVERVIEW OF MIDDLE EASTERN & NORTH AFRICAN COMMUNITIES (MENA)

- The MENA region is one of the linguistically most diverse regions with more than 60 languages being spoken throughout.
- Arabic is the most widely spoken language in many of the MENA countries. Other languages include but are not limited to: Turkish, Farsi, Dari, Pashto, Hebrew, Somali, Armenian, French
- MENA communities mainly practice the Abrahamic religions which incorporates: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism



## MENA VERSUS ARAB

- It's important to highlight the differences between Middle Eastern and North African (MENA), Arab, and Muslim
- MENA communities come from the MENA region – meaning they can be from diverse countries from that region. A person could be Arab, North African, Persian/Iranian, or Turkish. This is not just ONE ethnicity
- Arab communities are from the MENA region and are united by sharing the same language of Classical Arabic – which is the appropriate version for translation and is utilized for reading and writing
- Arab communities may also be very diverse and come from 22 different countries who speak different Arabic dialects. For example, Egyptian Arabic uses different words and phrases than Syrian Arabic or Moroccan Arabic



## MENA & ARAB VERSUS MUSLIM

- It's important to remember that MUSLIM is not an ethnicity or race. To be Muslim is to be someone who practices/follows the faith of Islam. Muslim is synonymous with Christian and Jewish
- Muslims follow one faith but represent many different ethnicities/races. Not all Arabs are Muslims and not all Muslims are Arabs
- Muslims represent worldwide ethnicities, including but not limited to: Arab, South Asian, Asian, Hispanic
- Muslims speak hundreds of different languages and follow different cultures according to their countries of origin



## MENA & MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN CALIFORNIA

- There's an estimated 800,000 individuals of MENA origin in California according to the Arab American Institute (AAI)
- There's an estimated 400,000 Muslims in California
- There's a variety of languages spoken by the MENA communities in California including but not limited to:
  - Arabic
  - Pashto
  - Armenian
  - Kurdish
  - Farsi/Persian
  - Dari
  - Somali
  - Hebrew
  - Turkish
  - Berber



## MENA COMMUNITIES AND LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

- Limited English proficiency varies across the MENA communities depending on different factors
- Level of English depends on their educational background/professional background/socio-economic status
- MENA communities come to the United States as immigrants or refugees or they are 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation
- MENA communities who come in as immigrants are either coming to work, study, or be re-united with family. For those who are coming for work or study, they in general would have strong English proficiency
- MENA communities who have been arriving as refugees (heavily decreased during the current administration at The White House) – their English level also varies as there are refugees who are very proficient or there are refugees who must learn upon arrival
- It's important to not generalize as each individual/family is different depending on their circumstances in their home country



## BARRIERS TO ENGAGE/PARTICIPATE

- All MENA and Muslim individuals/families differ in their circumstances, however these are the common barriers that have historically prevented underserved MENA and/or Muslim community members to participate (this does not apply to all MENA community members):
  - Language, literacy, cultural barriers: unaware of the opportunities available to participate or may also be embarrassed due to limited English
  - Lack of knowledge about local processes and issues: may make people feel unqualified to participate
  - Lingering fear/mistrust of government: Some may have experienced trauma as a result of speaking during public/government meetings in their home countries





## BARRIERS TO ENGAGE/PARTICIPATE

- To little time and too little resources: attending meetings is hard especially for those who work long hours with low paying jobs – civic participation is not considered a priority
- Lack of awareness of opportunities for involvement: not knowing about opportunities to participate
- Fear of deportation/political repression: if they participate they will worry they will be sent back home because they spoke up in a public meeting
- Gender roles: in some families is not deemed appropriate for women to participate



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASED ACCESS/PARTICIPATION

- Build relationships with trusted messengers/community leaders/community-based organizations (ex. AccessCal) from the MENA community to help with increased participation
- Collaborate with faith-based institutions but keep in mind that MENA community members are not necessarily religious. Also look at cultural venues/festivals
- Reach out to the MENA population in their primary language to help build the relationship
- Collaborate with and educate the MENA population about the redistricting process to encourage participation by creating educational materials in MENA languages
- Collaborate with MENA media outlets to announce opportunities through their channels



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASED ACCESS/PARTICIPATION

- Motivate MENA community members to attend commission redistricting meetings to learn more about the process
- Encourage Commissioners to visit venues/spaces where there is a high concentration of MENA community members to educate them about redistricting that will break potential feelings of mistrust
- Educate MENA communities on what redistricting will mean for them – make the issues relatable and of their interest



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASED ACCESS/PARTICIPATION

- Develop and host training opportunities for MENA community members to feel empowered to learn how to participate in redistricting and collaborate with organizations such as AccessCal to develop these materials
- Appoint MENA community members to the CA Redistricting Commission so MENA community members are more encouraged to participate as the commission will be more reflective of all communities served



## THE ROLE OF ACCESSCAL

- AccessCal, established in 1998, is a trusted messenger in the MENA community and has been for over 22 years. AccessCal delivers wrap-around health and human services and is an advocate
- AccessCal works on a daily basis to help ensure the MENA and Muslim population are included at the table and equally receive resources and services
- AccessCal works at the federal, state, county, and city levels to be a voice for the MENA community and California has been doing a commendable job in helping ensure inclusiveness and diversity
- Thank you to the CA Redistricting Commission for including AccessCal in this dialogue and working towards ensuring the MENA population is included



For further questions, please contact me at:  
Nahla Kayali, Email: [nkayali@accesscal.org](mailto:nkayali@accesscal.org)  
Phone Number: 714-917-0440 Ext. 222

# Thank You!