



Old Astoria Neighborhood Association (OANA)  
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### **Op-Ed: How did the MENA community become classified as “White”**

The Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) communities are celebrating the recent passage of the MENA Bill, which mandates that every state agency, board, department, or commission that collects demographic data regarding ancestry or ethnic origin must separate Middle Eastern or North African populations from the White demographic. This bill also requires the collection of separate data on each major Middle Eastern or North African group.

This community has long been deprived of the advantages that distinct minority groups such as Black/African American and Hispanic communities enjoy in our society, including various incentives related to jobs, employment, and financial stability. But how did this distinct ethnic group come to be classified as white? It is a fascinating story.

The Supreme Court decision in *Dow v. United States* (1915) to designate Syrian and Middle Eastern immigrants as "white" for the purposes of naturalization is a landmark moment in our nation's history. This ruling, which allowed these individuals to become U.S. citizens, corrected a long-standing injustice rooted in outdated and discriminatory immigration laws.

Historically, the Naturalization Act of 1790 restricted citizenship to "free white persons," a term that was narrowly interpreted to exclude many non-European immigrants. This exclusion was particularly harsh on Asian immigrants, including those from China, who were explicitly barred from naturalization. However, the law's broad language also ensnared immigrants from the Middle East, who found themselves in a legal limbo.

The case of George Dow, a Syrian immigrant, exemplifies the struggles faced by Middle Eastern immigrants. Dow's application for naturalization was initially denied on the grounds that he was not a "free white person" due to his Asiatic birth. It took a prolonged legal battle for the courts to recognize that Syrians, and by extension other Middle Easterners, should be classified as white and thus eligible for citizenship.

This decision was not just a victory for Syrian and Middle Eastern immigrants; it was a reaffirmation of the principles of equality and justice that underpin our nation. By acknowledging the racial diversity within the category of "white," the Supreme Court took a significant step towards dismantling the racial hierarchies that had long plagued our immigration system.

However, it is important to recognize that the environment has changed since this decision. The MENA bill is a positive move, as it acknowledges the unique challenges faced by Middle



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Eastern communities in today's society. By recognizing Middle Easterners as a distinct minority group, we can ensure they receive the support and opportunities they deserve.

In conclusion, the Supreme Court's decision to classify Syrian and Middle Eastern immigrants as white for naturalization purposes was a triumph of justice over prejudice in the last century. However, the recent bill creating a separate category for Middle Eastern and North African individuals is a necessary step forward. It honors the contributions of these communities to our nation's fabric and paves the way for a more inclusive future. Let us continue to advocate for policies that uphold the values of opportunity and equality for all.

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President of the Old Astoria Neighborhood Association, seeking to promote economic growth, quality of life, and cultural health in the Astoria.