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## **Terrorists and Tyrants: Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Actors in Prime Time Television**

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# TERRORISTS & TYRANTS

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Middle Eastern and North African (MENA)  
Actors in Prime Time & Streaming Television

**Presented by:**



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MENA Americans have origins in the Middle East and North Africa. Major groups include Arabs, Egyptians, Iranians, Syrians, Turks, Chaldeans, Armenians, and Israeli Jews (Mizrahi and Sephardic). The estimated population of MENAs in the United States is 10 million, which is approximately 3.2% of the U.S. population. Research shows that people tend to rely on characterizations from film and television to formulate beliefs about groups to which they do not belong and with whom they may be less familiar. Consequently, television representations of MENAs may impact the perception and treatment of MENA Americans in real life. This pioneer study examines representations of MENAs in Prime Time and Streaming Television.

# STUDY FINDINGS



### MISSING:

Overall, 92% of scripted TV shows have NO MENA series regulars. In contrast, 96% of TV shows have at least one White series regular.

#### Broken down by TV platforms:

- 90% of Broadcast Network TV shows have no MENA regulars
- 90% of Basic Cable TV shows have no MENA regulars
- 97% of Premium Cable TV shows have no MENA regulars
- 97% of Streaming TV shows have no MENA regulars



### TV SO WHITE:

Whites dominate the television landscape, making up nearly 70% of television series regulars, compared to MENA actors, who comprise only 1% of regular actors on TV. Only 20 shows in 2015-2016 featured MENA actors as regular cast members.



### TOKENS:

90% of TV shows featuring MENA series regulars feature only ONE, which increases the potential for tokenization within the show context. Furthermore, more than half of the actors are not playing identifiably MENA characters, which makes the onscreen representation of MENAs even lower.



### THREATS:

When MENA actors portray MENA characters, 67% appear on crime or geopolitical dramas. Most MENA characters (78%) are trained terrorists/agents/soldiers or tyrants, exacerbating the stereotype of MENA as threats.



### FOREIGNERS:

67% of the MENA characters speak with pronounced foreign accents, reinforcing the stereotype of MENAs as foreigners. The characterizations of MENAs as foreigners and threats can contribute to the rise of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments in U.S. society.

### EXEMPLARY:

Two MENA characters stand out in contrast to the terrorist/foreigner stereotypes. Delia Banai, portrayed by Iranian-American actor Necar Zadegan, is a smart and sexy divorce attorney on “Girlfriend's Guide to Divorce” (Bravo). Nash, portrayed by Turkish-American actor Ennis Esmer, is a hilarious tennis pro on “Red Oaks” (Amazon). Esmer describes his character: “His ethnicity doesn't define the role, and he gets to be a full person aside from that, and in fact, because of that. It's fun to play someone that's just a solid representation of your people.”





“Mr. Robot” boasts a complex lead character in Elliot Alderson, a cybersecurity engineer and hacker who has social anxiety disorder and clinical depression, played by Egyptian-American actor Rami Malek. In 2016, Malek won the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series, the first person of color to win in this category in 18 years. While Eliot Anderson is not identified as MENA, his portrayal illustrates that MENA performers are capable of a wide range of roles.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

In light of the recent landmark decision to uphold the Muslim Ban, accurate and fair portrayals of MENA characters are needed more than ever. The MENA region is a culturally diverse area which is home to Christianity, Judaism and Islam, but the entertainment industry continues to portray MENA people as one-dimensional, when they are portrayed at all. Here are our recommendations on how the industry can help usher in new narratives and imagery of MENA characters and talent.



Create storylines/characters and greenlight projects that avoid stereotypical depictions of MENA. Do not limit MENA representations to geopolitical and/or terrorist narratives.



With the newly recognized MENA category in the SAG-AFTRA AMPTP contracts, AMPTP should make clear to studios and producers to categorize MENA hires as “MENA,” not “Caucasian.”



Diversity efforts at studios and networks need to include the hiring and mentoring of MENA performers, writers, directors and executives.



Diversity and Inclusion leads in the entertainment community should advise and workshop with all stakeholders in the creative process to understand MENA region with writers, executives, and casting.



Contact MAAC, MPAC and American Muslims For Us All, who can direct you to experts and organizations.

- **Mena Arts Advocacy Coalition (MAAC):** Azita Ghanizada — [menainthearts@icloud.com](mailto:menainthearts@icloud.com)
- **Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC):** Sue Obeidi — [sue@mpac.org](mailto:sue@mpac.org)
- **American Muslims For Us All:** [info@am4usa.org](mailto:info@am4usa.org)

## MENA Characters portrayed by MENA Actors by Network, Show, Genre, Actor Name, Character Name and Character Occupation

Network	Show	Genre	Actor Name	Character Name	Character Occupation
ABC	Quantico	Crime Drama	Yasmine Al Massri	Nimah/Raina Amin (Twins)	Former Citizens Liberation Front (terrorist group)/FBI trainee/agent
CBS	Person of Interest	Crime Drama (Scifi)	Sarah Shahi	Sameen Shaw	Intelligence Support Activity (ISA) Assassin
NBC	Blacklist	Crime Drama	Mozhan Marno	Samar Navabi	Mossad and FBI Agent
FX	Tyrant	Political Drama	Cameron Gharaee	Ahmed Al-Fayeed	Son of Jamal
FX	Tyrant	Political Drama	Ashraf Barhom	Jamal Al-Fayeed	President of Abbudin
FX	Tyrant	Political Drama	Moran Atias	Leila Al-Fayeed	First Lady of Abbudin
Amazon	Red Oaks	Comedy	Ennis Esmer	Nash	Country Club Tennis Pro
A&E	Damien	Horror Drama	Omid Abtahi	Amani Golkar	Translator
Bravo	Girlfriend's Guide to Divorce	Dramedy	Necar Zadegan	Delia Banai	Divorce Lawyer



## All MENA Series Regulars by TV Type, Network, Show, Actor Name(s) & Character Name(s) (2015-2016 Season)

**Total: 23 MENA series regulars (11 women, 12 men, 12 monoracial, 11 multiracial)**

TV Type	Network	Show	Actor Name	Character Name
Broadcast	ABC	Quantico	Yasmine Al Massri	Nimah Amin
Broadcast	ABC	Uncle Buck	Sayed Shahidi	Miles Russell
Broadcast	ABC	Blackish	Yara Shahidi	Zoey Johnson
Broadcast	CBS	BrainDead	Tony Shalhoub	Senator Red Wheatus
Broadcast	CBS	Person of Interest	Sarah Shahi	Sameen Shaw
Broadcast	CW	Jane the Virgin	Jaime Camil	Rogelio
Broadcast	CW	The Vampire Diaries	Michael Malarkey	Lorenzo "Enzo" St. John
Broadcast	FOX	Scream Queens	Nasim Pedrad	Gigi Caldwell
Broadcast	FOX	Second Chance	Vanessa Lengies	Alexa
Broadcast	NBC	Blacklist	Mozhan Marno	Samar Navabi
Broadcast	NBC	Heartbeat	Don Hany	Dr. Jesse Shane
Basic Cable	A&E	Damien	Omid Abtahi	Amani Golkar
Basic Cable	A&E	Unforgettable	Kathy Najimy	Sandra Russo
Basic Cable	Bravo	Girlfriend's Guide to Divorce	Necar Zadegan	Delia Banai
Basic Cable	FX	Tyrant	Ashraf Barhom	Jamal Al-Fayeed
Basic Cable	FX	Tyrant	Moran Atias	Leila Al-Fayeed
Basic Cable	FX	Tyrant	Cameron Gharraee	Ahmed Al-Fayeed
Basic Cable	Hall	Good Witch	Catherine Bell	Cassie Nightingale
Basic Cable	Syfy	The Expanse	Shohreh Aghdashloo	Chrisjen Avasarala
Basic Cable	Syfy	The Expanse	Cas Anvar	Alex Kamal
Basic Cable	USA	Mr. Robot	Rami Malek	Elliot Alderson
Premium Cable	HBO	The Night Of	Payman Maadi	Salim Khan
Streaming	Amazon	Red Oaks	Ennis Esmer	Nash



# METHODS

Using quantitative and qualitative content analysis, we systematically investigated the presence and representation of MENA actors and characters on 242 prime time first-run scripted television and streaming programs airing between September 1, 2015 and August 31, 2016<sup>[1]</sup>.

Prime time shows on broadcast television, basic cable, and premium cable air from 8pm to 11pm. All streaming shows were treated as prime time and included in the study. Basic cable entertainment networks were selected based on top 25 highest ratings in 2015 and whether they featured first-run scripted programs<sup>[2]</sup>.

**We examined the following networks:**

TV Type	Network	TV Type	Network	TV Type	Network	TV Type	Network
Broadcast	ABC	Premium	Showtime	Basic Cable	Bravo	Basic Cable	Nick at Nite
Broadcast	CBS	Premium	Starz	Basic Cable	ComedyCentral	Basic Cable	OWN
Broadcast	CW	Streaming	Amazon	Basic Cable	Freeform	Basic Cable	Syfy
Broadcast	FOX	Streaming	Hulu	Basic Cable	FX	Basic Cable	TBS
Broadcast	NBC	Streaming	Netflix	Basic Cable	Hallmark	Basic Cable	TNT
Premium	Cinemax	Basic Cable	A&E	Basic Cable	History	Basic Cable	TV Land
Premium	HBO	Basic Cable	AMC	Basic Cable	Lifetime	Basic Cable	USA

We tabulated the racial, ethnic, and gender demographics for each of the 2052 series regulars, as well as the genre and geographic setting for all 242 shows in the sample. Broadcast, cable, and streaming TV websites were triangulated with commonly used internet databases such as IMDB and Wikipedia to determine the series regulars for each show and the racial and ethnic backgrounds of each actor. We further examined the character race/ethnicity, sexuality, occupation, name, and accent via TV websites and character wiki pages. Research assistants were trained by coding the same universal episode and supervised by principal investigators.

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## ABOUT MAAC:

**Mena Arts Advocacy Coalition (MAAC)**, was created in 2016 by actress Azita Ghanizada after she was informed she was considered a Caucasian hire during the 2015 Television Networks Primetime pilot season. She realized that in Hollywood's world of diversity and inclusion, an entire region of the world was being erased from the conversation. It became no longer palatable to exist in Hollywood without a coalition that advocated for MENA actors and the increasingly dangerous portrayals they were often being depicted in. She began reaching out to fellow MENA performers, Assaf Cohen, Amir Talai and Amin El-Gamal and together, they successfully lobbied SAG-AFTRA and the AMPTP for a new diversity category, MENA, in the 2017 TV theatrical contracts and successfully changed the Casting Data Report to now include a MENA category. Creating an entire new category for the first time in thirty seven years.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## RESEARCH TEAM

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[i] Specifically, we analyzed shows from five broadcast networks, 16 of the top 25 basic cable networks, four premium cable networks, and three streaming services (we excluded reality, animated, and children's shows).

[ii] Kissell, Rick. 2015. "Ratings: AMC, Discovery, Cartoon Network Are Cable Standouts of 2015." Variety. Retrieved January 8, 2016 (<http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/2015-cable-ratings-amc-discovery-cartoon-network-1201666316>).