



4-1-2021

## Arab-American Identity

Hannah Mesouani  
*The Immigration Project*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/odi\\_events](https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/odi_events)



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mesouani, Hannah, "Arab-American Identity" (2021). *Events*. 12.  
[https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/odi\\_events/12](https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/odi_events/12)

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

# Arab-American Identity

HANNAH MESOUANI

# Who am I?

- 
- Doctoral Student at University of San Diego  
- PhD in Education for Social Justice

- Focus on intercultural communication and  
racial development

- Most importantly - I'm Arab!

# The Arab World

## The Greater Maghreb:

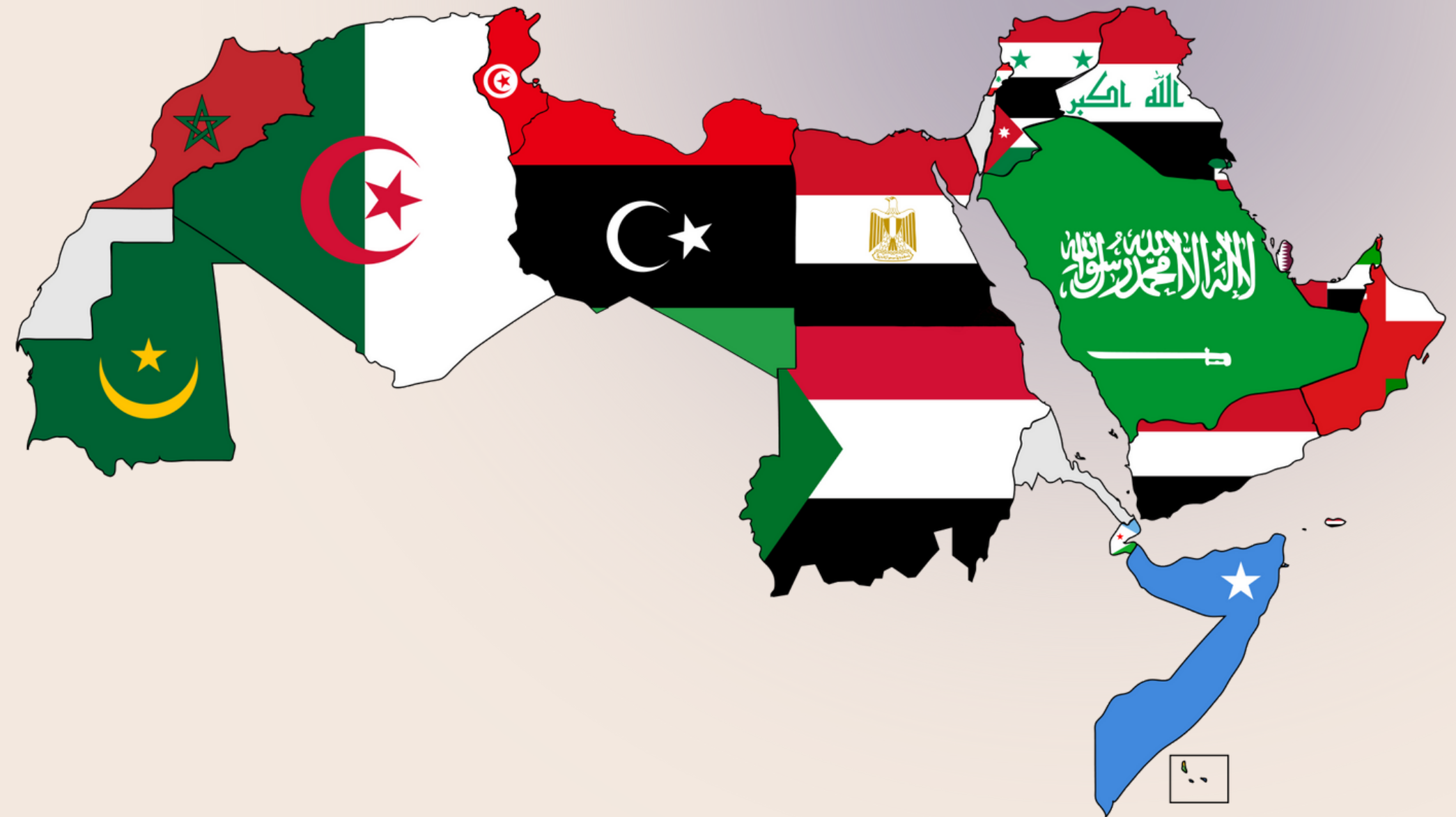
Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.

## The Fertile Crescent:

Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq and Jordan.

## The Arabian Peninsula:

Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen.





# Who is Arab?

Anyone from the MENA region - Middle East & North Africa

Arabs are religiously and politically diverse.

There's 300 million of us!

Most Muslim are not Arab.

Arab lineage is important, often tribal in heritage.



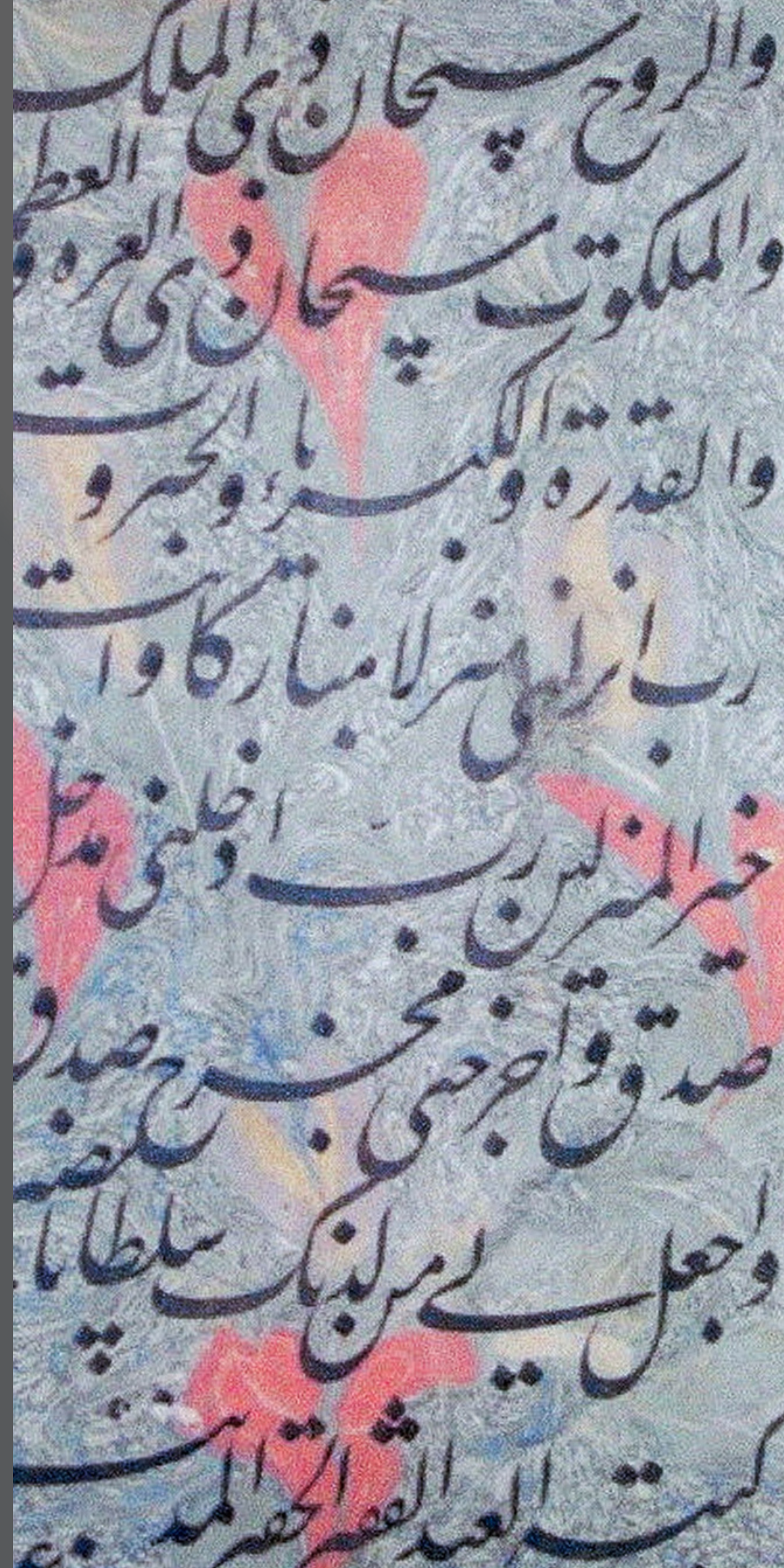


# Who isn't Arab?

Arabic - an adjective reserved for objects  
Or, the Semitic language most Arabs speak

Arabian - an adjective reserved for the  
Arabian peninsula or horses

Islamic - an adjective reserved for objects  
related to or derived from the Muslim  
faith.



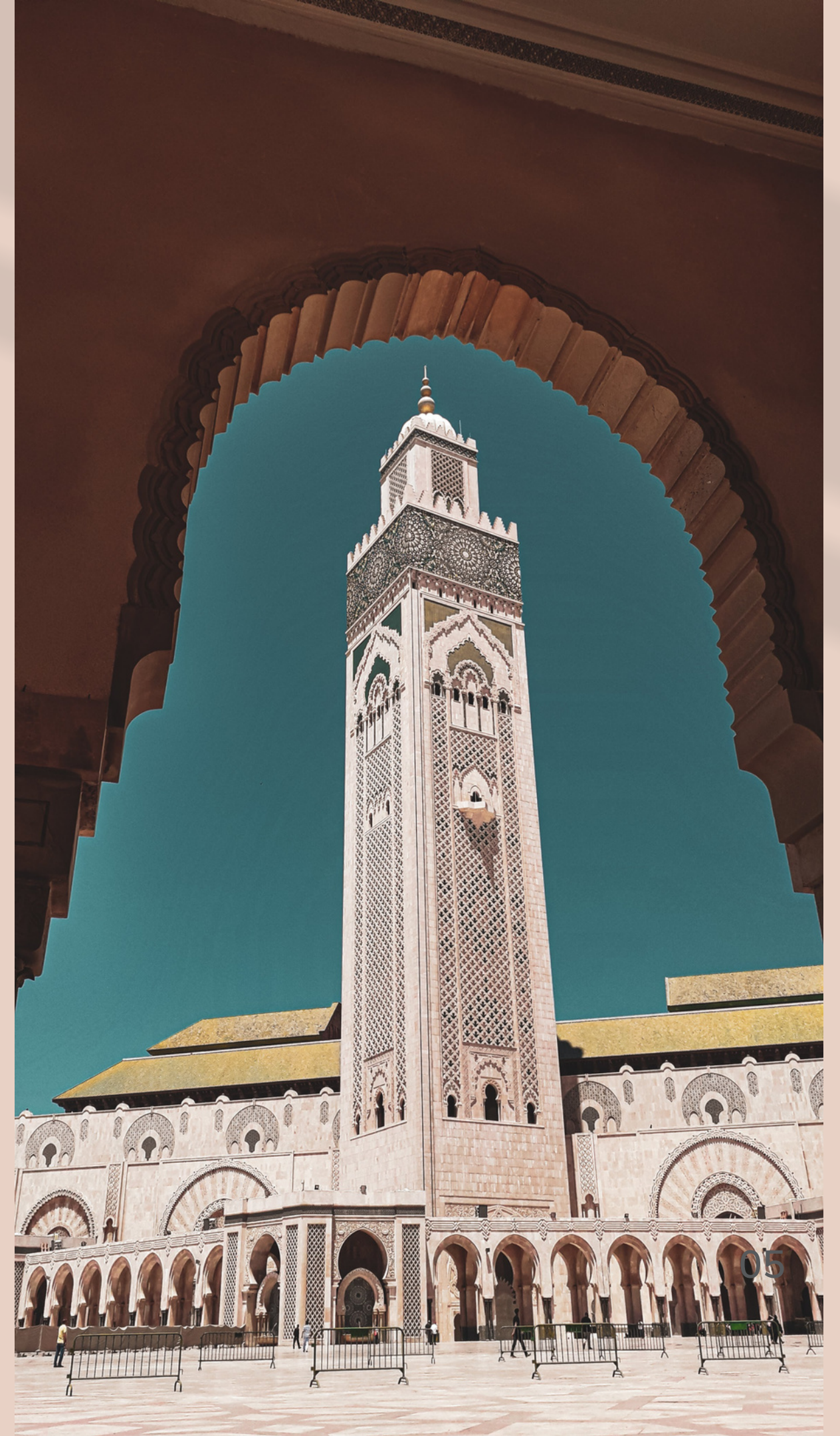


# Who teaches you about your race?

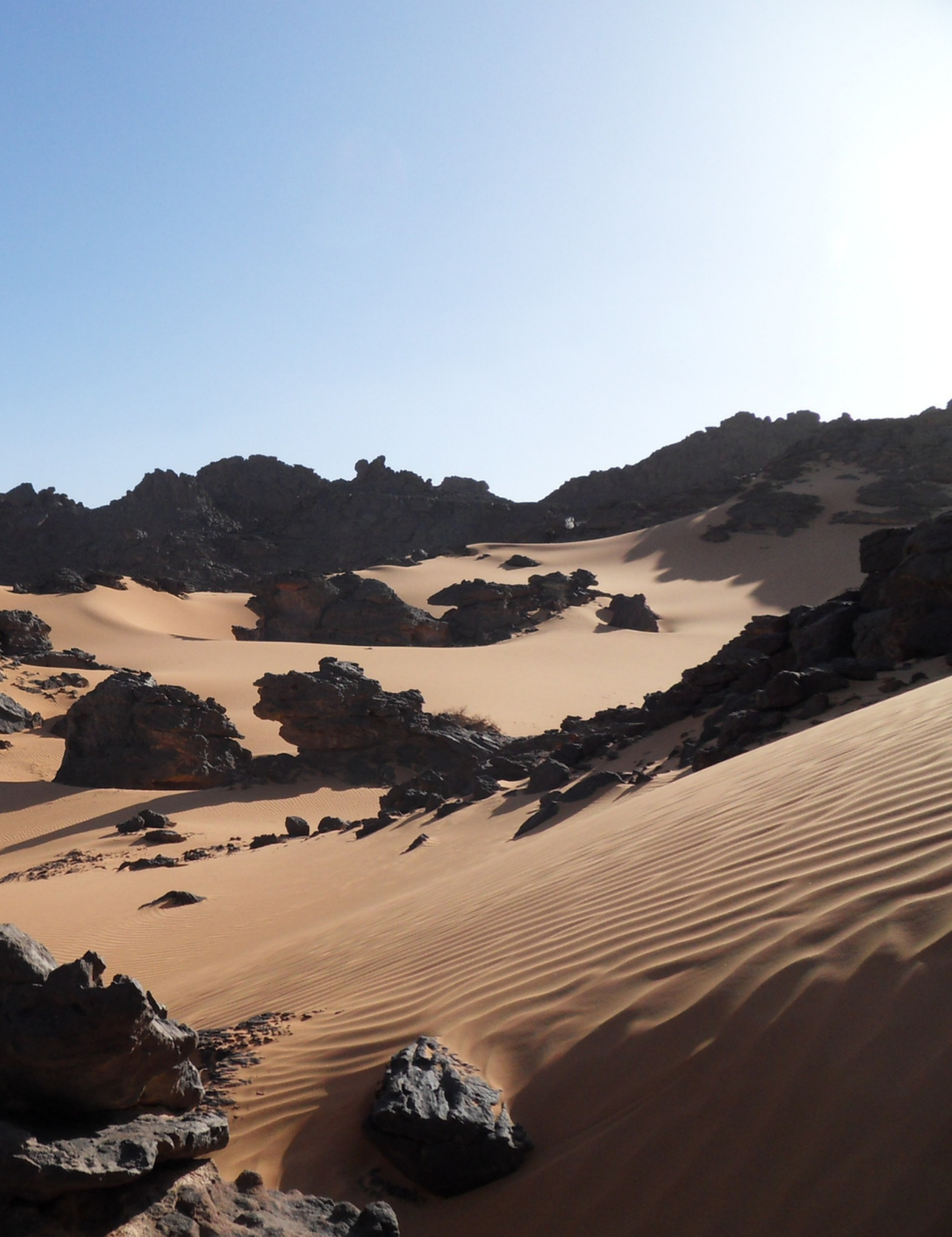
Race and ethnicity, like culture and values, are communicated both horizontally and vertically.

Race and racialized behaviour is normed through repeated social interactions and observations.

Race is both very real and an absolute social construct.







# What is the difference between race & ethnicity?

## Race

Race is an arbitrary classification of modern humans, based on any or a combination of various physical characteristics, as skin colour, hair, facial form, or eye shape.

## Ethnicity

Ethnicity is generally used in reference to a person's cultural markers, not their physical - bodily - appearance. An ethnicity is a social group that shares a common and distinctive culture, religion, or language. It also refers to a person's ethnic traits, background, allegiance, or association.

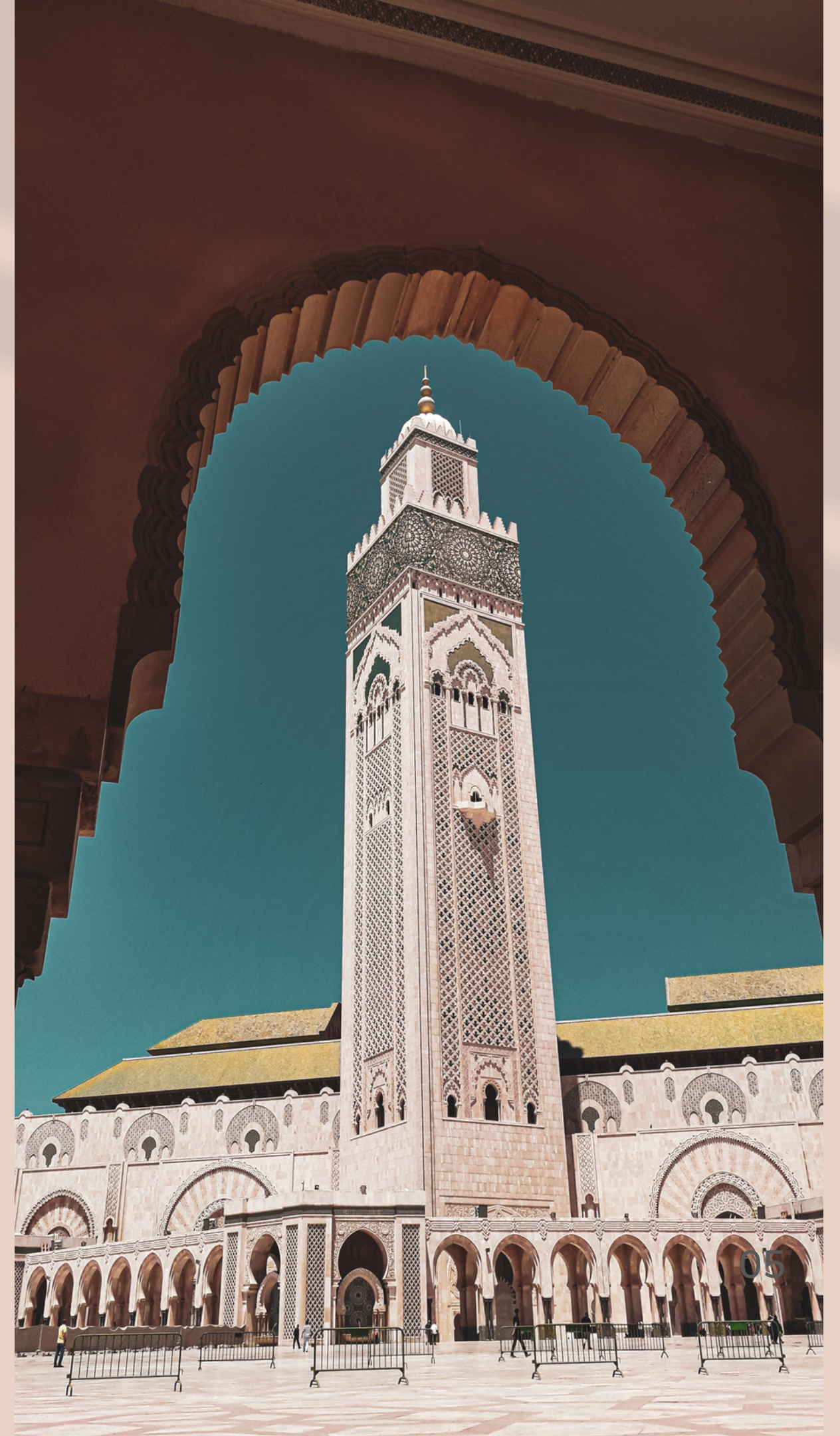


# Who decides your race?

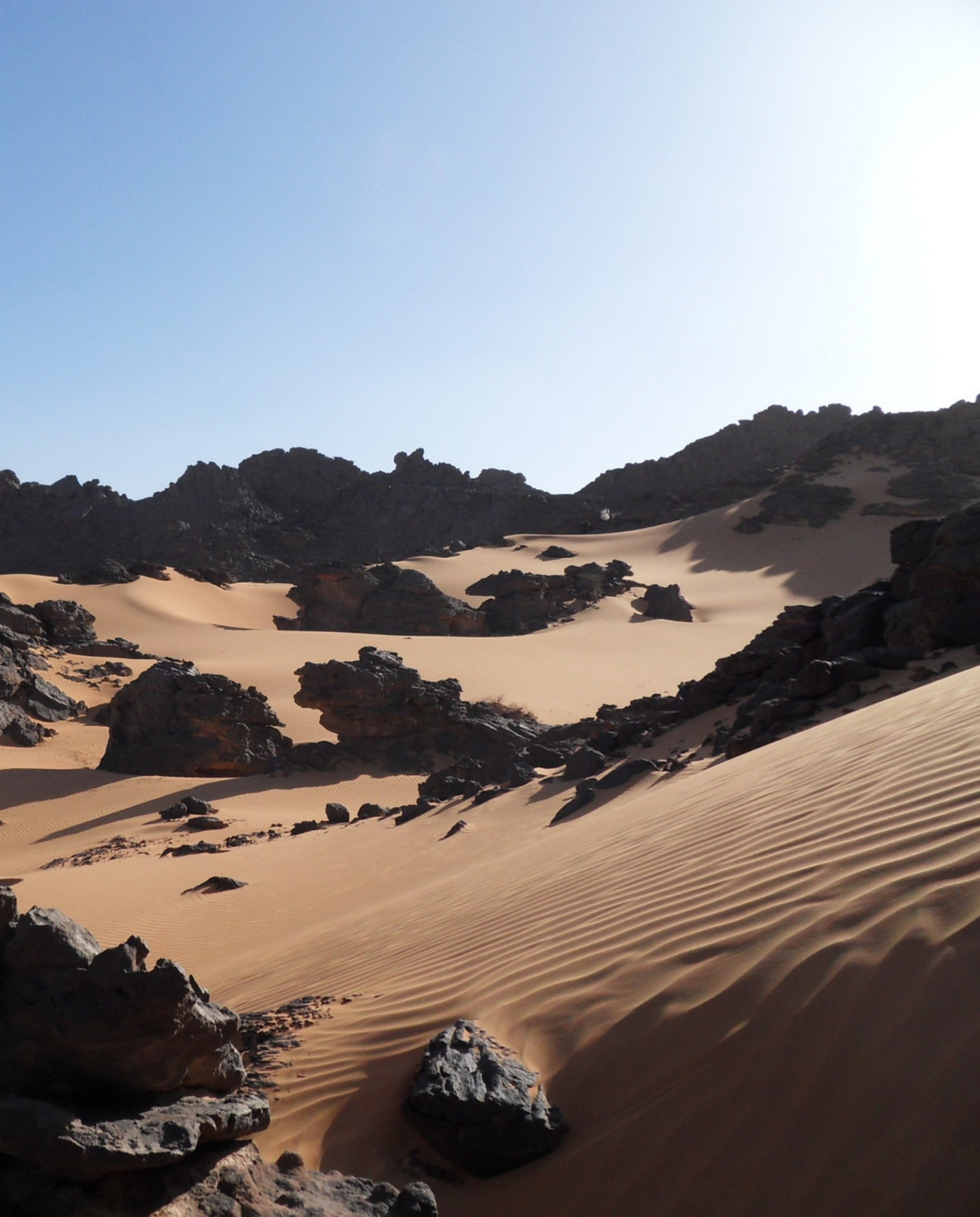
## The U.S. Census

defines race\* as “a person’s self-identification with one or more social groups.”

\*Self-identification only became an option in 1960.







# Racial schemas

## USA

\*The categories of race have changed throughout the years, often in a reflection of current politics, science, pseudo-science, and public attitudes.

## MENA

Identification and categorisation is both deeply informal and important - it's innate.

Themes of colourism and tribal lineage.



# What happens when you're the Other?

## Labeling Race

The Census considers all MENA individuals and communities to be white.

## Living Race

While many Arabs and MENA folx are white-presenting, they do not always benefit from white privilege.





A row of ornate, gold-embossed Arabic books on a dark shelf. The spines of the books are decorated with intricate geometric and floral patterns in gold and blue. The text on the spines is in Arabic script. The lighting is warm, highlighting the texture of the books and the metallic sheen of the gold.

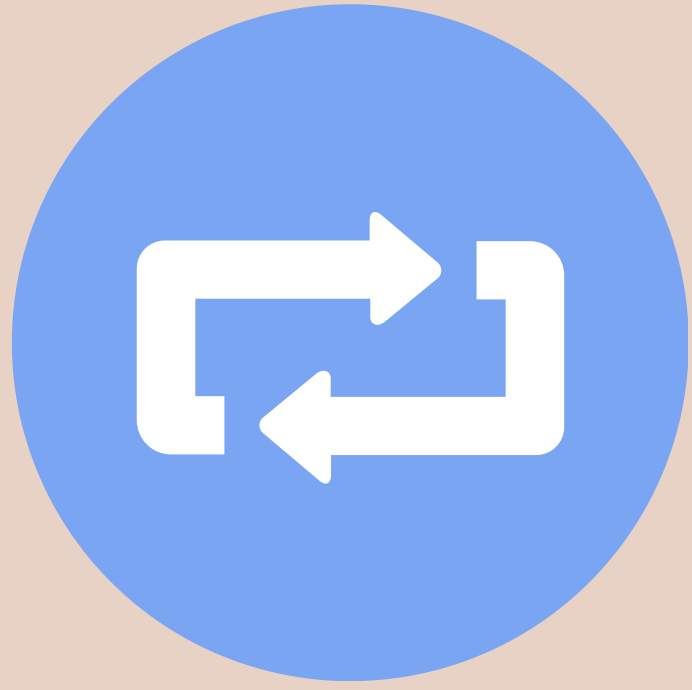
# A racism without race

Consideration of Arab individuals as white restricts access to affirmative action opportunities afforded to other groups.

Arab individuals can be subject to the model minority myth and their oppression and vilification is often ignored.

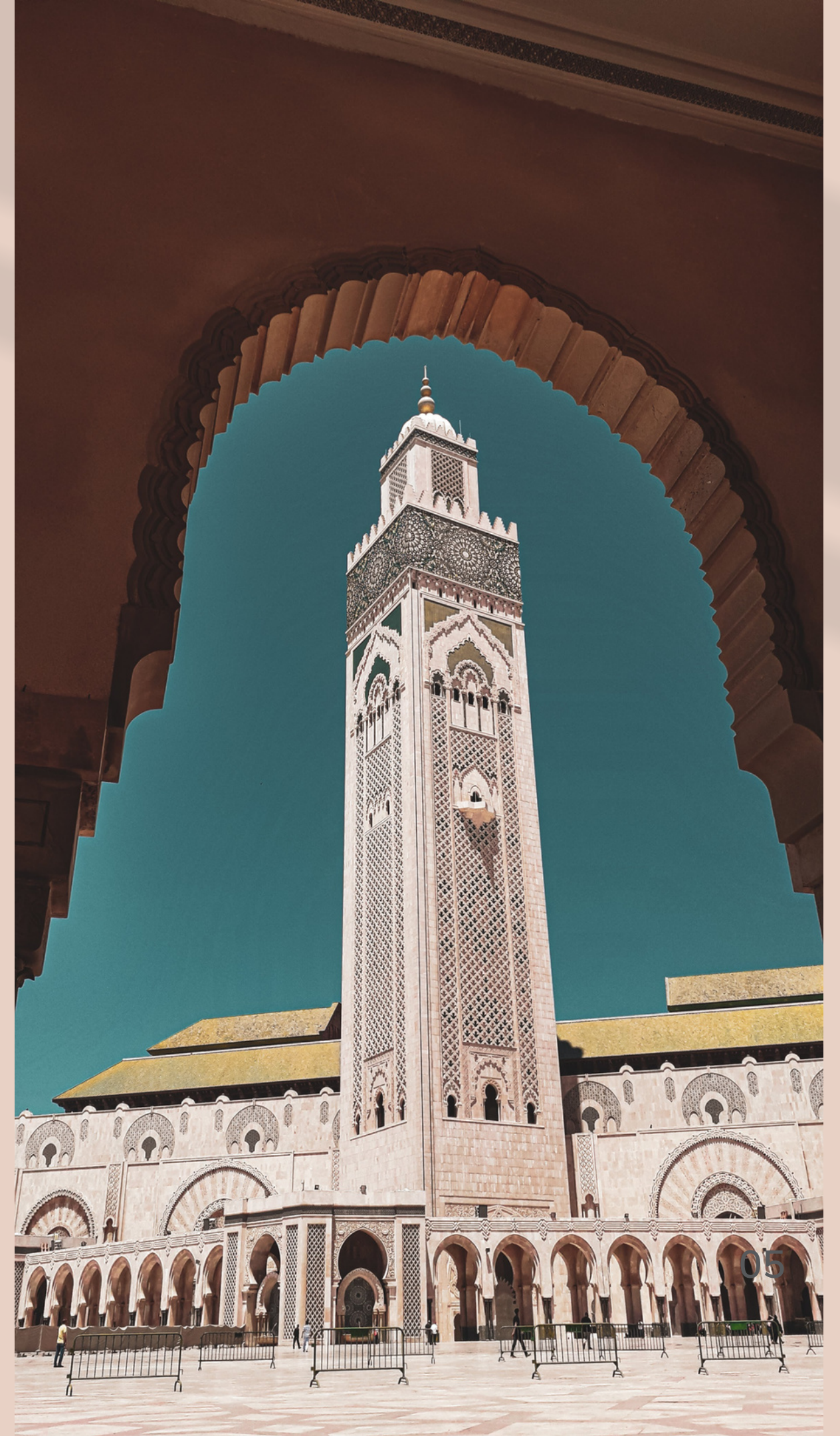
It is important to note that white-washing Arabs erases sacred traditions and cultural values, stripping communities of their uniqueness and heritage.





# Who teaches you about your race?

Popular - rather, unpopular - beliefs and stereotypes about races change over time and are directly and indirectly impacted by sociopolitical events.



# Timeline of Seminal Events Impacting Arab-American Identity\*



\*there are, of course, countless individual and interactional events that have impacted MENA folx



# The Other

## XENOPHOBIA

To echo W. E. B. Dubois, what follows is a  
"double consciousness" for  
Arab-Americans.

They do not see themselves reflected in  
their American-ness and are perpetually  
other-ed and framed as less-than.







# Other-ed & Ignored

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

Dubois, 1897



# Arab-Americans: Framed as an Oxymoron

## Racialization of Religion

Arabs are often presumed to be Muslim.

## Politicization of Religion

Islam is positioned as anti-American by the conservative Right.

## Politicization of Race

Therefore, Arabs are seen as inherently contradictory to American values.





# Erasure vs Earned Whiteness

## Conditional Labeling

You're white.\*

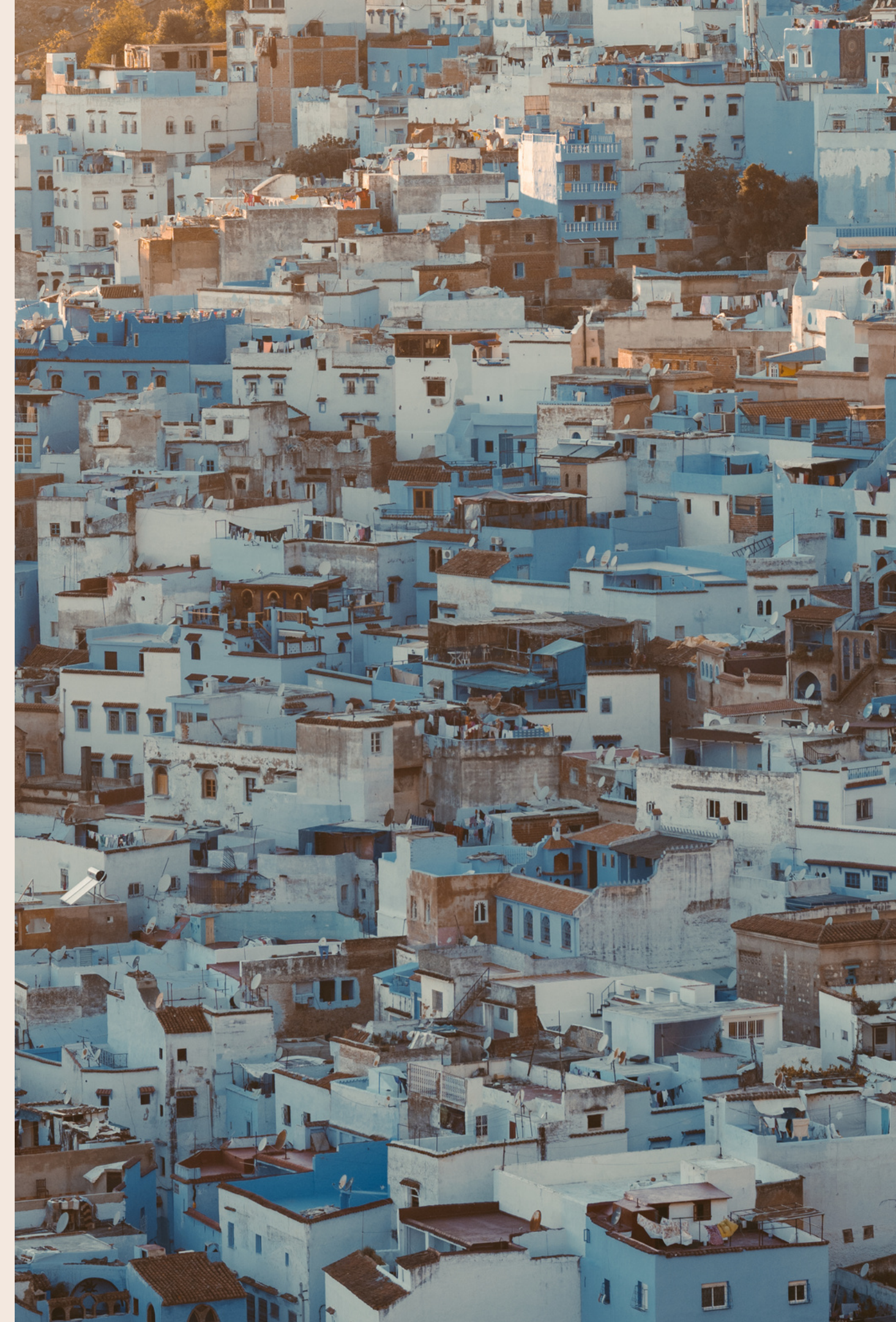
*\*Terms and Conditions  
Apply.*

## Generational Identification

Older generations prefer to self-identify as white instead of MENA or "some other race."

Older immigrants and Arab Americans work within the notion of aspirational whiteness.

For younger folx, whiteness feels further way.







# Boxes or Borders

Arab-Americans are not a monolith.

Not all Arabs identify as white though some do. Often this is generational and dependent on how one defines and values whiteness.

By claiming their box, Arab activists hope to proudly state their worth while acknowledging the xenophobic borders cast upon them.

Arab-Americans want what all other hyphenated identity groups want, to live their truth without fear of violence or defamation.



# Arab-American Advocacy

## Representation

The Trump administration rejected Obama-era petition to include MENA category in Census in 2018 citing the need for "more research and testing."

## Representation

Increased air time for Arab-American creators and positive media portrayals.

Sheehan (2003) documented that only 5% of Arab roles in Hollywood were not reductive, terrorist tropes.

## Representation

Increased advocacy and attention to Arab-American activist organisations and initiatives that have stemmed from frustration at the years of hate.



A decorative circular frame made of watercolor washes in shades of light orange and beige, surrounding the central text.

Questions?