## cs4af

## CALIFORNIA SCHOLARS FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM

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California Department of Education 1430 N Street Sacramento, CA 95814-5901

## Dear California Department of Education:

We write on behalf of the California Scholars for Academic Freedom with regard to the attacks on the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) draft. California Scholars for Academic Freedom is a group of over 200 scholars throughout California committed to fighting all forms of racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism. We are scholars, teachers, researchers, and organizers. Many of us are housed in Ethnic Studies departments across California's campuses. We are committed to the critical study of race and ethnicity not only on our own campuses, but also in K-12 classrooms, as the histories of race, colonialism, and empire within U.S. borders and within its imperial reach are necessary for all of us to collectively understand the inequalities of the present moment. Additionally, research has shown that the kind of culturally relevant and meaningful curriculum that critical ethnic studies provides empowers students to be more engaged in school and thus more likely to graduate.2

We unequivocally support the inclusion of Arab American Studies in the ESMC. The current draft includes Arab American Studies under the rubric of Asian American studies, one of the four recognized mainstays of ethnic studies as a field formation. The National Board of Directors of the Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS) has publicly applauded this inclusion. While Arab American Studies is indeed its own field, with categories that include Arab American, Arab, Muslim, Muslim American, South West Asian, North African, and Middle Eastern, AAAS's letter of support shows that Arab American studies has also long been part of Asian American studies as a field. In addition to shared frameworks, methods, and topics across Indigenous, African, African American, Jewish American, Latinx, and critical American Studies, Arab American studies and Asian American studies have long shared both overlapping geographies and a dialogue about racialized surveillance and the afterlife of war. Central to Asian American studies is the study of war, diaspora, exile, and militarization; and central to Arab American studies is the study of militarism, empire, pre- and post-9/11/2001 Islamophobia, and the shared and unequally distributed effects of the "war on terror." For these reasons, the AAAS Board of Directors has reiterated their support for the ESMC.

The January 2020 AAAS letter was drafted in response to the attacks on the ESMC launched by groups that describe themselves as civil rights organizations but are far from advocating for justice-centered

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> California Scholars for Academic Freedom is a group of scholars committed to academic freedom and rights to education of faculty and students not only in California and the United States but internationally as well. We recognize that violations of academic freedom anywhere are threats to academic freedom everywhere. CS4AF investigates legislative and administrative infringements on freedom of speech and assembly, and it raises the consciousness of politicians, university regents and administrators, faculty, students, and the public at large through open letters, press releases, petitions, statements, and articles.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See FAQ, Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, California Department of Education.

knowledge production. In fact, these groups are explicitly right-wing pro-Israel groups, often racist, and with organizing mandates to silence Palestinian voices on U.S. campuses. In a letter to the Department of Education titled "83 Organizations Urge Safeguards Against Political Indoctrination in ESMC," the authors express their alarm that California students would be required to take ethnic studies courses, falsely accusing the ESMC of antisemitism because of its inclusion of Arab American Studies and for highlighting Palestinian histories and narratives that have been erased in the curriculum. This letter claims that the proposed ESMC is equivalent to political indoctrination on Palestine. In fact, the current K-12 curriculum is *already* politicized to delegitimize Palestinian histories and narratives. As Beshara Kehdi rightly asserts, the Arab American studies curriculum in ESMC *introduces* diverse histories of Arab American experiences, including those of Palestinian Americans. Kehdi notes that, in the existing History-Social Science framework that is currently taught in California public schools, Arabs are portrayed in a racist manner: as warring, patriarchal, and homogenous relics of history and/or Cold War and post-9/11/2001 terrorists "exacerbating the West's relative decline."

In the current curriculum for K-12 students, Palestinians are only mentioned twice: as refugees, with no mention of why they became refugees, and as associated with "the recurrent use of terrorism." Israeli occupation and Israeli settlements are not mentioned; nor is U.S. foreign policy or the U.S. financial and military aid that sustains Israeli state practice. The Nakba, or catastrophe, that resulted from Zionist paramilitary forces planned and executed expulsion of over 750,000 Palestinians in 1948, which explains how most Palestinians became refugees, is absent from the current textbooks. Likewise, solidarities between Palestinians and other colonized and racially marginalized groups – a central *part* of the history of ethnic studies – is missing from the current K-12 curriculum. Here, the ESMC is far from politicizing a politically neutral curriculum; it is providing an historical *corrective* to the simultaneous absence and caricature of Arab Americans, Palestinians included, that already exists in the curriculum.

Equally concerning is this letter's characterization of these 83 organizations as civil rights organizations. The signatories include, among others, the AMCHA Initiative, the Zionist Organization of America, Hasbara Fellowships, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, American Jewish Committee, and the Lawfare Project. Each of these groups has actively sought to silence scholars, students, and public intellectuals who research, teach, and advocate for justice in and for Palestine as part of the indivisibility of justice. The AMCHA Initiative, is, in fact, well known for harassing Palestinian students, attacking and falsely accusing Palestinian professors of antisemitism and terrorism, and otherwise working to silence Palestinian perspectives on California campuses. Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, Executive Director and cofounder of AMCHA, has a long history of racism on California campuses, particularly in the Bay Area. Benjamin has long demonized Muslim student groups and falsely labeled Students for Justice in Palestine as a terrorist organization. Benjamin has launched smear campaigns against professors who support Palestinian rights. The Zionist Organization of America and Hasbara Fellowships fund trips to Israel that encourage youth groups to support the occupation, see colonial settlements as legitimate, and smear Jewish groups that oppose the occupation as traitors. The Zionist Organization of America has even launched campaigns against children's books that center Palestine and Palestinians. The Simon Wiesenthal Center, whose Museum of Tolerance was built atop the ruins of a historic Muslim cemetery in Jerusalem, has habitually launched attacks on Palestine solidarity networks, including campaigns against Palestinian Christians organizing against the occupation of their land. Lastly, The Lawfare Project denies the existence of Palestinians and routinely attempts to blacklist and intimidate Palestine solidarity activists and students. And these are only 5 organizations of the 83 listed.3

Mainstream newspapers, like the San Francisco Chronicle, have provided a platform for the racist agenda of AMCHA and Rossman-Benjamin, underlining the need for the critical perspective of the ESMC. In an open editorial in the San Francisco Chronicle, Benjamin distorted the inclusion of Palestinian history by referring to it as "highly controversial" and legitimized the false equation between anti-Zionism, the opposition to a colonial apparatus and a political ideology, and antisemitism, a discourse of ethnic-racial superiority that must be vehemently rejected by advocates for justice in/for Palestine. This conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism has been roundly debunked by leading scholars in the fields of Jewish studies, philosophy, and critical theory and, most recently, decried by the Jews of Color Sephardi/Mizrahi Caucus (JOCSM), in partnership with Jewish Voice for Peace, in response to the statement released by Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA). In their response, Caucus members Michal David and Shahar Zaken argue that "Conflating the various moral, political, and religious positions of anti-Zionism with antisemitism – born in Christian Europe, and modernized and secularized through Western race science – is not only incorrect, but also reduces our ability to combat true antisemitism, which is intrinsically connected to white supremacy." Ethnic studies curricula, like that proposed in the ESMC, in combination with broad learning in fields of history and social studies, provide tools and methods through which students can recognize and resist racialized violence caused by racism and antisemitism.

We note that this letter is not the first time these actors, and groups affiliated with them, have attacked Ethnic Studies departments and programs that center Arab American studies in their curriculum; Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diaspora Studies (AMED) at San Francisco State University has long faced campaigns launched by AMCHA that attempted to discredit its work. In October 2018, a federal judge permanently dismissed a 2017 lawsuit filed by The Lawfare Project against both Professor Rabab Abdulhadi of AMED and SFSU that attempted to compel the university to restrict the freedom of speech and academic freedom of students and faculty who support Palestinian freedom. And, as recently as October 2019, StandWithUs, another right-wing pro-Israel group, launched an additional campaign against Dr. Abdulhadi for her lecture in UCLA Professor Kyeyoung Park's class on race and racism, an attack that was roundly criticized by twenty groups including Council on American-Islamic Relations, Palestine Legal, Jewish Voice for Peace, National Women's Studies Association, National Students for Justice in Palestine, National Black Education Agenda, the Asian American Studies Department at SFSU, and ourselves — California Scholars for Academic Freedom, among other civil rights organizations dedicated to ensuring that *all* individuals are equally able to assert their rights and express their views.

As we have written elsewhere, California Scholars for Academic Freedom firmly believes that criticism of Israel and support for Palestinian rights is not tantamount to antisemitism. Indeed, labeling Palestine solidarity as antisemitism is an attempt to make it impossible to teach, research, or even to speak about Palestine on university campuses. Such a situation undermines the academic freedom that is vital to higher education. It also diverts attention and resources from serious efforts to combat actual antisemitism.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the attacks launched by these organizations, see Palestine Legal, "The Palestine Exception" and International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network, "The Business of Backlash."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See our February 2020 letter to Andrew Hamilton, President, NYU re: the investigation of New York University launched in November 2019 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR).

Ultimately, this appears to be the goal of the Zionist organizations that repeatedly seek to suppress the academic freedom to discuss, teach, and do research on Palestinian rights with false claims of antisemitism: to impede scholarship and activism that addresses the condition of Palestinian people and to condemn scholars and educators who do this work.

For all of these reasons, we urge the California Department of Education to reject the mischaracterizations, threats, and pressures by Israel lobby groups determined to deny California students critical knowledge by seeking to keep ethnic studies, Arab American studies, and the study of Palestinian narratives out of our public schools. As educators, we are committed to and fully supportive of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum draft. We affirm that Arab American studies is not disposable, that Arab American studies belongs within ethnic studies, and that the study of Palestine and the affirmation of Palestinian rights is not antisemitic.

On behalf of California Scholars for Academic Freedom,

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