

**From:**

**Sent:** Wednesday, August 12, 2020 2:27 PM

**To:** [email redacted]; Ethnic Studies

**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Comments For Improving Ethnic Studies Curriculum

I would like to thank the California Department of Education for its goal of improving the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum. However, I am troubled to see our stories and the diversity and oppression of Mizrahi Jews and other Middle Easterner communities are omitted from this curriculum. I am writing the following to help clarify some historical points.

My name is Sina Niku. I am born and raised as an Iranian Jew with my three brothers and one sister. We all lived in Iran until the 1979 revolution and had to leave Iran with our parents, like most other Persian Jews due to serious Antisemitism showing by the new regime. The same has happened to my wife, Shiva, and her family. We have been living in Los Angeles since 1979 and raised our family here and have studied and worked in Los Angeles.

At the time of the revolution, at least 80,000 Jews were living in Iran and at least 65,000 have left Iran, and about 50,000 have come to Los Angeles and the rest to New York or Israel.

During their 2500 year of history in Iran, the rate of assimilation with non-Jews has been very low or non-existent, mainly due to anti-Semitism, especially after the Islamic conquer of Iran. Iranian Jews have faced discrimination and persecution throughout history, especially under Islamic rule, but have kept their ethnicity, religion, customs and to some degree food and art throughout their stay in Iran and still have preserved them living in America. Almost the 50,000 Persian Jews in Los Angeles greater area, are a distinct ethnic group in Southern California and their customs, the spoken language at home, food, and music are distinct from other Jews living in Southern California.

Jews of Iran are considered Mizrahi (Eastern) Jews, like Jews of the Arab countries and Kurdistan, and although they have a lot in common in religion and the Hebrew language for prayers with the Ashkenazi (European) and Sephardi (Spanish, North African and Turkish) Jews, they are culturally different for their food, music, and customs. Since 1948, after the establishment of the State of Israel, about 900,000 Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews were forced out from the Arab countries and Iran to go mostly to the US, Israel, and Europe, due to persecution and anti-Semitism.

Jews living in different areas of Iran were speaking Farsi, the local language as well as the special Jewish dialects of that area, like in Kurdistan and Kashan, and many still have kept their special dialect speaking at home, while leaving in the US.

Since we came to the US, we all worked very hard to earn a living and go to college, to raise a family and be a good citizen. Although unlike Iran, there was no systematic anti-Semitism in the US, to my surprise, as an Iranian immigrant/resident/American and as a Jewish person, I faced and still continue to face bigotry and discrimination in this country, and especially in the last decade, it has become much worse.

I have felt and encountered a lot of anti-Jewish and Anti-Iranian sentiments by people. We have never been considered full Americans. In this age of identity politics, it is unfair and it really hurts to consider Jewish immigrants from anywhere in the world and especially from the Middle East or Iran as privileged white. We all have faced extreme challenges to get ahead and still are being hurt by increasing anti-Semitism from the White American community as well as the Moslem groups.

It is important to mention that Persian culture in general is very different from Arabic culture and Iranians are not Arabs. Although the dominating religion and the alphabet were adopted from Arabs by Islamic rule, there were always religious minorities and ethnic groups with their own language and culture (music, dance, food, and clothing) living in Iran besides the Jews, like the Zoroastrians, Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds, Turks, Balochis, and Gilakis, and there are still special concerts and exhibitions performed by those ethnic groups in Los Angeles. Iranians altogether are totally different from Arabs and Iranian Jews have large differences with their Ashkenazi co-religionists.

As a Middle Eastern Jewish resident of Los Angeles, I identify me as one of the [500,000 Californians of Middle Eastern heritage who are ignored](#) in the revised Ethnic Studies curriculum. My family comes from Iran that is racially, ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse community. The revised Ethnic Studies curriculum fails to reflect Middle Eastern and Jewish demographics both here and abroad.

As an Iranian-Jew, I am both proudly Jewish and proudly Iranian. My ancestors lived continuously in Iran for over 2,500 years until they fled oppressive and systemic anti-Semitic persecution. In keeping with AB 2016's objective of "preparing pupils to be global citizens with an appreciation for the contributions of multiple cultures," my community, and the more than 60% of other Middle Eastern groups in California deserve equal representation and inclusion in the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum.

All references to Middle Eastern people in the curriculum should include and teach on the diverse groups of Mizrahi Jews, Coptic Christians, Kurds, Iranians, Assyrians, and other minority groups from the region who together represent 60% of California's Middle Eastern population and expect inclusion. In order for the curriculum to be well balanced, each group should be equally and equitably represented in the Ethnic Studies Curriculum.

I would like to see the next draft of the curriculum includes the lesson plan, "[Antisemitism and Middle Eastern-American Jews](#)" produced by the organization, JIMENA: Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, as it will provide students with high-quality instruction on contemporary issues of antisemitism, bigotry, and the Middle Eastern-American Jewish experience.

The ESMC should make clear that under the "broadly defined umbrella of Asian Studies" the Mizrahi Jews and other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) groups which represent ~60% of CA's MENA population are mentioned and are not uniquely referred simply as Arabs and other Middle Easterners.

Thank you,  
Sina Niku