

February 13, 2020

Dear Superintendent Thurmond,

We received your email of January 24, 2020 and want to reiterate that we strongly support your development of an Ethnic Studies curriculum; in fact, we offered feedback to the original request for feedback last year. With over a quarter of a century's experience in combating racism and bigotry through education, we believe that this effort is crucial in the current political climate where forces of white supremacy, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and other forms of bigotry have been given free rein.

We do, however, have a concern that we want to share with you. As we understand it, the draft which was under consideration designated four foundational groups to focus on, putting the peoples of the Middle East together with Asians as one group. **We believe that the peoples of the Middle East (and North Africa) must be treated separately as a foundational group of their own, on a level with the other four groups.** We are writing to explain our reasons for this request.

First, the peoples of the Middle East are racially, culturally, religiously, and linguistically distinct from other Asian populations. In most of the Middle East, Islam—followed by Christianity and Judaism—is the dominant religion, and the dominant languages are Arabic and Farsi; other aspects of culture are likewise distinct from the cultures in most of Asia. Moreover, the cultures and peoples of North Africa are closely allied with those of the area traditionally designated as the Middle East, so that the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East should be treated together as a unit distinct from the peoples of Asia, even though part of the Middle East is, geographically, located on the continent of Asia.

Second, Americans of Middle Eastern and North African origin or descent have distinct experiences and face distinct challenges in this country. This is due, first of all, to the fraught history of US involvement with that region, including support of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European colonialism, the position of the US with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, US concern with terrorism emanating from the Middle East, and US military activity in the region, including wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and other conflicts concerning Yemen and Iran. This history has brought formidable repercussions for Americans who trace their origin to that part of the world. These include legal and political issues such as surveillance of mosques and other Muslim community institutions, the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (known as NSEERS), which targeted people from several Muslim-majority countries, and the current “Muslim ban” affecting travel and immigration from much of the Muslim and Middle Eastern/North African world. Closely related to these problems is the political exploitation of anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Iranian attitudes and prejudices, which has shown a sharp uptick since the beginning of the 2016 election cycle.

Underlying these legal and political moves is the continuation and intensification of Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism among the US public. For instance, according to a recent YouGov [poll](#), only 15% of Americans have a “fairly favorable” or “very favorable” view of Islam, while 37% have a “very unfavorable” view, and 36% believe that “there is a fundamental clash between Islam and the values of society in the USA.”

Another recent [study](#) found that, when asked to rate how “evolved” various human groups are on a scale from 0 to 100, people rated Muslims lowest, at 77.6, and Arabs next lowest, at 80.9. Muslims are frequently associated with terrorism and viewed through other stereotypes. A [poll](#) in 2017 found that, on average, Americans believe that 41% of Muslim Americans sympathize with terrorism and that 34% would commit a terrorist act.

Given public attitudes, it is no surprise that Americans of Middle Eastern and North African origin—commonly assumed to be Muslim, although there are substantial Christian minorities in the region—face bullying and hate crimes. A [study](#) by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding found that 42% of Muslim students report being bullied on account of their faith, almost twice the percentage of students overall who report being bullied at school. Muslims are the second-most frequent victims of hate crimes (behind Jews), and a [report](#) by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) – California showed that the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes spiked by 91% in the first half of 2017 over the comparable period in 2016, which itself saw the largest number of such crimes since CAIR began reporting in 2013.

A major factor in Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism among the public and in anti-Muslim and anti-Arab hate crimes is undoubtedly long-standing bias in the media and popular culture. Jack Sheehan in his book *Reel Bad Arabs* documents the overwhelmingly negative and stereotyped portrayal of Arabs by Hollywood dating back to the beginnings of the film industry. Nor are news media immune to anti-Muslim and anti-Arab bias; on the contrary, a recent [study](#) found that perpetrators of ideologically motivated violent plots who were Muslims or perceived to be Muslim received twice as much media attention in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* as those who were not Muslim; Muslim perpetrators of ideologically motivated plots *that were not carried out* received 7.75 times the coverage as those perceived who were non-Muslim. In line with these facts, the US Department of Justice issued six times as many press releases concerning perpetrators who were Muslim or perceived to be Muslim as those concerning perpetrators not perceived to be Muslims.

While bias, bigotry, bullying, and hate crimes are hardly unique to Americans of Middle Eastern or North African origin, the pattern they take and the historical and political context in which they are embedded are indeed distinctive from those faced by other groups. Also distinctive are the openly discriminatory political and legislative attacks on Muslims, including, in addition to the actions already mentioned, 194 open or barely disguised “anti-Sharia” laws that were (as of 2016) introduced in 39 states, and of which 18 were passed.

We believe it is therefore imperative that people of Middle Eastern and North African origin be treated separately from other groups to educate about their unique historical, political, and social situation and about their distinctive cultures.

Our organization, Islamic Networks Group, has, as we have mentioned, a 27-year history of educating about Muslims and other Americans of diverse backgrounds, and we would be happy to collaborate in developing curriculum about the peoples of this pivotal region of the world or to review proposed curriculum. In particular, we have a long history of collaborating with the Jewish community, which we understand has been deeply concerned about some aspects of this effort.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our concerns, and we look forward to hearing how you will deal with them as you move forward with this crucial project. I may be contacted at Elgenaidi@ing.org or 408-296-7312 extension 170.

Sincerely,
Maha Elgenaidi
Executive Director