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Sent: Friday, November 13, 2020 11:46 AM

To: Ethnic Studies <EthnicStudies@cde.ca.gov>; [emails redacted]

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Subject: [EXTERNAL] West Asian Americans Scholars for Ethnic Studies

Dear Colleagues,

I am sending an amended version of the talking points generated by Arab American Studies scholars and activists to better include the gamut of West Asian groups, including Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Circassians, Kurds, Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews, Persians, Turks, Turkmen, Yezidis and others. Inserting Arab American Studies - and Arab American Studies alone - does more harm than good. Scholars in this field have succumbed to navel-gazing and self-interested careerism, instead of adequately interrogating histories of US empire, white supremacy, race-making, genocide and racial capitalism. The first rule of empire is divide and conquer, and unfortunately, many Arab American organizers and the leaders of Arab American Studies have become its handmaidens.

- We know, from the demands for racial justice sweeping this county, that it is offensive and dangerous to shunt the histories and perspectives of people of color and any group marginalized by US empire and racism to the sidelines. The revisions - and their drafters - need to better appreciate both the political moment we are living in and the long history of West Asian racialization in the United States.
- Our children are once again being left to fend for themselves in an increasingly racialized and polarized political climate. California should be a sanctuary, not a place of danger for our students and their families. This requires more nuanced rather than defensive postures, and more - not less - critical thinking.
- Young people in particular face the consequences of Islamophobia and anti-Middle Eastern racism and state policies that target people from across the MENA region, regardless of their ethnic background. We give far too much credit to the US state if we assume that it has ever been able to differentiate between people from the "Orient." This explains the simultaneous invisibilization and targeting of West Asian peoples - leading to the surveillance, detention and exclusion of hundreds of thousands of Armenians, Alevis, Assyrians, Copts, Persians (Jews, Muslims, Zoroastrians) from emigration and the full complement of rights accorded citizens in the United States *across* the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- For too long, West Asian youth have learned little about their history besides offensive and racist images and stereotypes. An Arab-American studies curriculum does not begin to undermine these stereotypes at their root, because it ignores the demographic majority of West Asian students impacted by these stereotypes in the California school system. A Zionist, white-washed curriculum is certainly not the answer; but replacing one victim for another is not the solution either.
- Pro-Israel interest groups should not define antisemitism; nor should any ethnic group define ethnic studies or an entire region of the world that is not even majority Arab. Definitions that name criticism of Israel as antisemitic are opposed by many Jewish organizations, both within the United States and internationally. These definitions violate our constitutional right to free speech because their application censors virtually all criticism of Israel and advocacy for human rights and equality. These definitions downplay the main source of antisemitism in the United States, which is white nationalism.

The next generation of California's youth deserve to grow up supported by an education system that models **coalition, solidarity** and our **shared commitment to liberation**. West Asian American Scholars are ready and willing to provide substantive and profoundly underexplored curriculum that connects our shared histories. As Audre Lorde critically noted, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Ethnic solipsism and exclusionary rather than inclusive thinking are the norm in US racial capitalism; they will never lead to our shared liberation. And, as Aimé Césaire said, and Edward Said often quoted, "There's room for everyone at the rendezvous of victory." That victory demands that we expand our vision to see that our struggle must be radically inclusive, and ensure that when we necessarily create categories, those categories are liberatory.

In solidarity,
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