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Image: CA Ethnic Studies

Caption/credit: Press conference in support of the ethnic studies graduation requirement in Sacramento, June 27th, 2018. Photo courtesy of California State Assemblyman Luis Alejo.

LAST AUGUST, Siamak Kordestani, assistant director of the American Jewish Committee’s Los Angeles office, penned an [op-ed](#) in the *Jewish Journal* criticizing the California Department of Education’s draft of a model curriculum for teaching ethnic studies in K-12 public schools. The implication of the new curriculum, he argued, is that “California’s Jewish population does not exist.”

A California statute passed in 2016 had mandated the creation of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC), [arguing that](#) ethnic studies—a discipline traditionally consisting of histories and theories from African American, Native American, Chicanx and Latinx, and Asian American studies—would benefit all California students, helping them become “more academically engaged, increasing their performance on academic tests, improving their graduation rates,” and allowing them to develop “a sense of self-efficacy and personal empowerment.” But when the curriculum was finally presented to the public in the summer of 2019, it attracted a storm of controversy. Much of the backlash came from American Jewish Zionist groups who were against the inclusion of Palestinian topics—including a mention of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement—within the Arab American studies portion of the Asian American module. Pro-Israel voices have attacked not only the inclusion of BDS in the curriculum, but also the California Department of Education (CDE)’s general vision for ethnic studies. In Kordestani’s op-ed, for example, he claimed that the curriculum was “a political statement masquerading as education” that amounted to “advancing the interests of some ethnic groups over others.”

Ultimately, the massive backlash led by the AJC and a host of other Jewish Zionist groups caught the ear of the CDE. State Superintendent Tony Thurmond [has promised](#) to fix the original curriculum to address concerns. A revision process has been underway since the fall, and despite the original law mandating that the curriculum be completed by March 2020, the Covid-19 crisis has delayed a vote by the Instructional Quality Commission (IQC) of the CDE originally planned for this spring; the IQC now says it will not vote on the revised curriculum until late summer at the earliest. (After repeated inquiries, the CDE declined to comment for this article, as did the AJC.) The [CDE indicates](#) that the revised curriculum will “acknowledge and honor [ethnic studies’] four foundational groups,” but it’s unclear whether, in this new draft, Arab American studies, which has long been housed under Asian American studies, will remain in the curriculum. Arab and Muslim groups and their allies have rallied support, asking Californians and others to [send letters to state legislators](#) to protect the existing curriculum.

ETHNIC STUDIES EMERGED at California universities in the late '60s and early '70s as a political education effort stemming from [radical anti-imperialist social movements](#). Student leaders from Black Student Unions at San Francisco State University and University of California (UC) Berkeley [formed coalitions](#) with Native American, Asian American, Chicanx, and Filipinx student groups to demand an increase in the hiring of faculty of color and the creation of a “Third World College.” The Third World Liberation Front organized months of hunger strikes and full campus shutdowns from 1968–1969, with protests spreading to other UC campuses and across the nation. Ethnic studies departments are now common across California university systems as well as nationally, and some California K-12 districts and schools have offered ethnic studies courses for decades. But the movement took off after a 2010 [ban on ethnic studies in Arizona energized](#) educators to fight for the institutionalization of ethnic studies across the country. In California, that effort coalesced in a legislative push to formalize a K-12 ethnic studies program, resulting in the 2016 ESMC statute.

The California statute does not require schools to teach ethnic studies; instead, the ESMC is intended as a resource for districts that do want to implement such programs, with the expectation that schools will modify the curriculum to best meet the needs of their particular student body. Written by CDE staff and revised by an advisory committee of K-12 teachers and college professors with extensive ethnic studies teaching and curriculum development experience, the draft ESMC unveiled in spring 2019 contains [“sample course models”](#) with lesson plans corresponding to the aforementioned four “foundational groups” of ethnic studies, and lists of “sample topics” that teachers could cover as part of each course. The Asian American studies module includes a submodule on Arab American studies, which suggests topics such as Arab American immigration to the US, combatting Arab stereotypes, and confronting Islamophobia and racism against refugees.

Within that submodule, [pro-Israel groups attacked](#) three “sample topics” specifically: “Direct Action Front for Palestine and Black Lives Matter”; “Call to Boycott, Divest, and Sanction Israel”; and “Comparative Border Studies: Palestine and Mexico.” Jewish groups also reacted to an additional suggested lesson plan dissecting anti-Arab stereotypes because it included an [Ana Tijoux and Shadia Mansour song](#) containing the lyric “Free Palestine”; an oblique reference to pro-Israel media bias (the lyric was translated in the curriculum, perhaps slightly incorrectly, as “They use the press so they can manufacture”); and a reference to “Israeli colonies.” (This line was also not accurately translated from Mansour’s Arabic lyrics; the Arabic word “must‘amara” means “colony,” but also “settlement,” a widely accepted term used to describe Jewish-only enclaves in the West Bank.)

These Palestine-related topics may have been brief inclusions in a 500-page curriculum, but they nevertheless caused the [California Jewish Legislative Caucus](#) to claim that the curriculum [“denigrates Jews”](#) and feeds into antisemitic tropes of Jewish media control. Numerous American Jewish Zionist groups, from the [Anti-Defamation League](#) to the AJC, have decried the curriculum.

In response, ethnic studies scholars and educators have staunchly defended including Palestine and Arab American topics within the curriculum. Dr. Keith Feldman, associate professor of Comparative Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, and secretary of the Arab American Studies Association, said in an email that ethnic studies is a field that “makes legible how histories of colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism shape the contemporary moment. Palestine as a place, as an idea, as a desire, refracts all of these concerns in palpable, tangible ways.”

Speaking to Arab American studies’ inclusion under the Asian American studies umbrella, Dr. Robyn Rodriguez, chair of Asian American Studies at UC Davis, said that in the War on Terror era, it became clear that “Arab Americans and their experiences were very critically connected” to that of Asian Americans. For instance, the Department of Homeland Security’s [“special registration” program](#), which surveilled and unlawfully detained Arabs and Muslims deemed “security threats” in the months after 9/11, reminded many Japanese Americans of [World War II internment camps](#), as has President Trump’s [Muslim Ban](#). In a [statement to the CDE](#), representatives from the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) defended the inclusion of Arab American studies in the ESMC, explaining that Asian American and Arab American studies are both centrally concerned with the study of “U.S. war and militarism as well as anti-imperialism.” Asian American and Arab American departments in US higher education have historically shared faculty appointments, and scholars from both fields have shared academic publications and scholarly conference panels. Palestine solidarity has thus long been part of Asian American scholarship and organizing; it is perhaps because of these close historic and contemporary ties that, in 2013 the AAAS became the first American academic association to endorse the academic boycott of Israel.

Arab American organizations feel the attempt to silence Palestinian narratives has high stakes for all Arab communities, not just Palestinians. “We see [the backlash] as an attack on social justice movements of Arab people in diaspora and in our homelands,” said Lara Kiswani, director of the Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC) in San Francisco and lecturer at San Francisco State University in the College of Ethnic Studies. “We cannot talk about social justice issues for Arab Americans or Arabs in our homelands without talking about Palestine.”

For Arab American students, the potential benefits of having their own curriculum unit is significant, Kiswani said: “Imagine if a young Arab student was to go through K-12 acknowledged for who they were, for the history and contribution that their community has had for the US and rest of the world, if they felt empowered by the struggles of resistance and liberation that their communities have been part of—how that would shift the consciousness of so many young people facing Islamophobia and heightened anti-Arab racism under this Trump administration.”

IN ADDITION TO CLAIMING that the pro-Palestinian content in the ESMC is antisemitic, American Jewish Zionist groups maintain that the curriculum erases Jewish experiences, does not address antisemitism, and falsely portrays Jews as “white privileged.” This argument has touched a nerve, as the American Jewish community’s public conversation over whether Jews

are white and the communal role of Zionism [has intensified](#) with a rise in violent antisemitic attacks since Trump's election.

Though “antisemitism” appears in the ESMC only as a key term in the glossary, each of the nine ethnic studies educators I spoke with, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, agreed that teaching youth about antisemitism, white nationalism, and white supremacy was both politically important and in line with ethnic studies’ major tenets. Many educators I spoke to pointed out that antisemitism is covered in another model curriculum: [the Model Curriculum for Human Rights and Genocide](#), published in 2000. In that curriculum, however, European antisemitism is relegated to a single lesson on the Holocaust, while US antisemitism is only discussed as a form of “religious intolerance” alongside anti-Catholic and anti-Mormon sentiments. A critical understanding of the links between antisemitism, white supremacy, and white nationalism is absent in any formal, state-level curriculum.

Yet most educators also pointed out that, despite sharing some topics of interest, Jewish studies and ethnic studies have long represented two distinct fields of study, with different academic histories and lineages. Professor Kenneth P. Monteiro, coordinator of the California State University Council on Ethnic Studies, argued in a that “Jewish Studies has over a century of tradition in the American Academy as either religious or cultural/multicultural studies, but it has no academic tradition inside of Ethnic studies at any point in the 50-year history of the field.” Instead, he contends that “Jewish Studies for the most part was a project to understand the assimilation of American Jews into American Whiteness.”

Multiple Jewish studies scholars I spoke to felt that Monteiro’s characterization was overly simplistic. There are several origin stories for Jewish studies: the field is sometimes traced to European 19th-century social sciences’ turn to analyze Jews (among others) as a religion and a “race” through an “objective, scientific” lens, and is also often linked to cultural movements in the US in the 1960s—the same mid-century ethnic revivalism that fostered some of ethnic studies’ early organizing. The issue of whiteness and American Jewry is well-studied and argued in Jewish studies, but Jewish studies has also concerned itself with broader questions of Jewish racial formation around the world and throughout history.

Because most Ashkenazi Jews have been assimilated into whiteness, and because Jewish studies was not designed to Jews of color, many of the educators I spoke to felt that Jewish studies would not fit in a curriculum centered on the experiences of communities of color. And while all the educators acknowledged that an analysis of antisemitism would be helpful to the project of ethnic studies more broadly, many Jewish scholars and organizers I spoke with felt that this analysis would have to happen *within* Jewish studies first—and would, in fact, require a reshaping of the discipline itself. In other words, the enormity and specificity of the project puts it outside of the scope of ethnic studies and the current ESMC. These Jewish scholars suggested that Jewish studies has fallen short, not only in building bridges with ethnic studies but also in offering new analyses of antisemitism for the present moment. “It’s our responsibility [as Jews and as Jewish scholars] to find a new way to talk about Jewish studies and antisemitism for an ethnic studies curriculum,” said Maxwell Greenberg, PhD candidate in Chicana/o Studies at UCLA. Greenberg noted that Chicanx studies today is deeply interested in issues of race,

migration, and diaspora—all key concepts in the Jewish experience, both in the US and globally. While he acknowledged that explicitly Jewish topics were often missing from ethnic studies courses, Greenberg expressed hope that a joint ethnic–Jewish studies analysis would foster a deeper understanding of how different oppressions are historically connected. For instance, he explained that “direct links between antisemitism and Islamophobia” can be historically traced to the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain in 1492—coinciding with the beginning of the colonization of the Americas, genocide of Indigenous peoples, and, eventually, the racialization of Chicanx peoples. This represents a natural confluence for Jewish studies and ethnic studies. As postcolonial and Arab Jewish scholar Ella Shohat [wrote in 1992](#), “The campaigns against Muslims and Jews . . . made available an entire apparatus of racism and sexism for ‘recycling’ in the newly raided continents.”

Complaints about the ESMC aren’t coming solely from white Ashkenazi Jews; Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish groups have also claimed the curriculum leaves out their experiences. Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA)—which is also an explicitly Zionist group—[claimed](#) in multiple letters to the CDE that the draft ESMC “portray[s] Arabs as a homogenous, Muslim group,” and “excludes and erases the experiences, perspectives, and voices of diverse Middle Eastern communities.” (JIMENA did not respond to requests for comment for this piece.) California is home to a large Mizrahi Jewish population; Los Angeles is home to the [largest Iranian-Jewish population](#) in the US.

However, while Zionist groups cite Mizrahi concerns as part of their argument against the curriculum, others trace the difficulty of imparting Mizrahi history to Zionism itself. Michal David is a multiethnic Mizrahi woman who organizes in the progressive Jewish community in Los Angeles. “The term ‘Arab Jew’ is one that I’ve had to actively and radically reclaim in my life,” she said. “Since the formation of the state of Israel, that’s a dual reality that can’t exist, that the nationalist forces of the Israeli and Zionist state don’t want to exist.” David argued that American Jewish Zionist institutional “red lines” around BDS and Palestine meant that it was difficult for progressive Jews and Jews of color to build trust with ethnic studies scholars and organizers—thus leaving the space for Jewish studies to a reactionary right-wing. Yet, she said, it’s urgent that this be prevented: “In the US right now, antisemitism is a distraction from the ultimate power capitalism has on our lives and [how it is] oppressing all of us. Understanding that Jews are not the source of that evil is critical to an understanding of the actual source,” she explained.

But it’s hard to imagine a critical analysis of antisemitism making its way into ethnic studies as long as pro-Israel groups dominate the conversation around defining antisemitism in public and academic discourse. The role of Zionist donors in using accusations of antisemitism to foment repression against Palestinian faculty and students and their allies is well known among ethnic studies advocates, many of whom are the prime targets of such campaigns—as evidenced most strongly [by the “dehiring” of](#) University of Illinois professor Steven Salaita in 2014.

Furthermore, Jewish studies departments’ breadth of opinions on antisemitism and Israel/Palestine have at times been [restricted due to donor interference](#). Mark Tseng-Putterman, a PhD student in American Studies at Brown University who has [written about](#) Jewishness, whiteness, and antisemitism, expressed frustration over American Jewish Zionist groups

exploiting concerns about instruction on antisemitism for the anti-ESMC campaign. “Frankly, the allegations of exclusion and erasure seem to be bad-faith arguments designed to tear down this program rather than engage productively and build something sustainable,” he said.

TO BOLSTER THEIR ATTACK on the ESMC, Zionist groups have not only highlighted the exclusion of the Jewish experience from the curriculum, but have claimed that the curriculum is not diverse enough in general. For instance, a March [op-ed](#) in the *San Francisco Chronicle* by Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, co-founder and director of the right-wing Zionist AMCHA Initiative, claims the goal of the 2016 statute creating the ESMC was to foster a “politically neutral,” “multicultural approach” to ethnic studies. To that end, she advocates for scrapping the entire draft ESMC—not only because of its supposed antisemitism but because of the “exclusion of dozens of the state’s ethnic groups” from the draft. [letters](#) submitted as part of an AJC-led coalition included signatories from Armenian, Korean, Greek, and Hindu American organizations who also claimed their communities were not adequately represented in the draft ESMC. The exclusion of minority voices even from within marginalized groups has been an [ongoing issue](#) within ethnic studies. For instance, the ESMC contains a specific Pacific Islander module in addition to a broader Asian American module because of advocacy from Pacific Islander communities, who have long felt marginalized when lumped into a larger, often East Asian-centric, experience. Native American Studies is also [developing a separate model curriculum](#) in addition to the ESMC.

Kiswani of AROC expressed sympathy for the non-Jewish groups that co-signed AJC’s letter, noting that “they should be included.” But she expressed skepticism of the letters: “We are noticing the ways in which these voices have been tokenized and exploited for the interests of Israel.” Some of the signatory organizations on the AJC-organized letter have longstanding Zionist and Islamophobic politics which predate the current ESMC fight. One co-signer, the Hindu-American Foundation (HAF), has [defended](#) India’s recent anti-Muslim citizenship law and its 2019 military incursions [into Kashmir](#). Since its inception, HAF has had a close relationship with AIPAC, and in fact HAF and other Hindu nationalist American lobby groups were, according to the Jewish People Policy Institute, [“founded with the close support and encouragement of AJC and/or AIPAC.”](#) Rossman-Benjamin, the author of the *San Francisco-Chronicle* op-ed, has previously unsuccessfully [instigated a Title VI complaint](#) against UC Santa Cruz for antisemitism and [smeared Palestine solidarity student organizers](#) as terrorist sympathizers.

Furthermore, some ethnic studies advocates say that focusing on representing as many groups as possible misinterprets the purpose of ethnic studies as a discipline. Aimee Riechel has taught high school ethnic studies and history courses in San Francisco for over a decade and served on the CDE’s Model Curriculum Advisory Committee in spring 2019. Her approach to teaching ethnic studies focuses less on stories from individual ethnic groups, and more on interrogating systems of power that cut across lines of race, gender, class, and other identities. “What that allows us to do is to be truly community responsive, and allows each teacher to be much more flexible to the community of students that are in front of them,” she said. Riechel cautioned that

an “identity-based” approach allows the state to “maintain a level of multiculturalism that doesn’t necessarily challenge systems as they stand.”

Riechel said that when the CDE invited K-12 educators to join the process, it was already “very clear” to her that the model curriculum would be based around ethnic groups, not around concepts related to systemic oppression. In fact, the language of the 2016 statute framed the curriculum partially as an effort to understand multiple cultures: [the bill itself](#) mentions the “92 languages other than English spoken throughout the state,” and as an explanation for the bill, its author, State Assemblymember Luis Alejo, included a [fact sheet](#) that read: “it is especially important that students gain knowledge of the various racial and ethnic groups in our state.”

In this regard, the integrity of the ESMC was perhaps already imperiled before the pro-Israel backlash began; in fact, some close to the development process within the CDE have indicated that systemic limitations were present from the beginning. Dr. Jeanelle Hope, who worked as a fellow and then as a part-time staffer on the ESMC while completing her PhD at UC Davis, said that some of the problems with the draft curriculum stem from a flawed process. “Systematically, this project was really set up for failure in many ways,” said Hope, who is now an assistant professor in comparative race and ethnic studies at Texas Christian University. Hope claimed that there were “half as many advisory committee meeting dates” compared to other CDE advisory committees, and that the staff supervisor on the project, while sympathetic, had no background in ethnic studies. Hope was the only other paid staff member on the project. Even with a finalized “model curriculum”—a prospect which seems increasingly far off—few resources have been allocated to help more schools actually adopt ethnic studies. A bill to make ethnic studies a graduation requirement [was put on hold](#) after the ESMC backlash, and no funding has been attached to train teachers or rewrite textbooks. “At the end of the day, you’re going to have the same history textbooks, be governed by the same standards and framework. Ethnic studies becomes a footnote,” Hope lamented. “This is a form of systemic racism, too.”

AFTER THE ANTI-ESMC CAMPAIGNS began in 2019, the CDE dissolved the original advisory committee and [appointed new “experts,”](#) led by State Assemblymember and scholar of Africana studies Dr. Shirley Weber, to oversee the curriculum’s revision process. The entire list of new consultants has not been publicly released, and those originally involved in the ESMC’s development feel they have been left in the dark. Members of the original advisory committee who support keeping Arab American studies in the curriculum have requested multiple meetings with decision makers at the CDE and State Board of Education. “We have been repeatedly turned down, whereas the [California Legislative] Jewish Caucus and other conservative Jewish organizers have not been,” Riechel said. “And that’s been incredibly frustrating because we now know where we stand.” AJC representatives and others personally [met with Superintendent Thurmond](#) in January.

Hope contended that perhaps these issues were inevitable as soon as a centralized curriculum was developed by the state. “My biggest fear is that the state will get to define what ethnic studies is,” she said. “Our notions and understanding of ethnic studies have already been reduced” from the field’s radical origins. The [media coverage](#) of the ESMC debate has already

[demonstrated](#) that popular discourse around ethnic studies misunderstands the field's origins and goals. It's unsurprising to Hope—though still frustrating—that this state-run effort at ethnic studies would be excised of a strong critique of the state and US empire.

As California's ESMC undergoes revisions with little transparency, every educator and organizer I spoke with expressed concern that if Arab American studies were to be cut, the new curriculum would emerge with many of its important political elements removed. All that would be left would be a pallid liberal multiculturalism that would appeal to diversity efforts but leave power unchecked. As R. Tolteka Cuauhtin, co-chair of the Save CA Ethnic Studies Coalition who also served on the ESMC Advisory Committee, told me, “pressures that want conformity to the curricular status quo” could result in “sabotaging the project’s transformative potential and setting it up for failure, as has been done to students of color for far too long.” In short, if Arab American studies were to be removed, ethnic studies will be whitewashed.

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