

THE U.S. PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM'S FAILURE TO ACCURATELY EDUCATE STUDENTS ON THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

By: Sanaa M. Ghanim

Editor: Noah Meyer

ABSTRACT

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is arguably the world's most controversial conflict in modern history. The United States plays a central role in its mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the mid-twentieth century, making the ways in which the conflict is taught in American public schools especially relevant to the future of the conflict and more specifically, the role of the United States in the future of this conflict (Arieli, 2016). The United States has put forth numerous peace solutions that have all failed. In understanding why these peace solutions have failed to bring about peaceful change in the region, the U.S. public education system must be investigated to understand how U.S. policymakers have been educated on the conflict itself. An accurate curriculum is a vital precursor to any effort to dissect the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially in an attempt to develop a peace plan. This paper takes the position that the public education system in the United States of America contains a biased curriculum concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, therefore requiring investigation and reform. Additionally, this paper argues that the United States has failed to provide middle and high school students with an accurate history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The state of Israel was founded on the idea of creating a unique identity and nation for the Jewish people, yielding a modern nation that withholds sentiments of territorial independence. However, the ideas for the foundation of the state of Israel came to fruition at the expense of a group that was excluded from the plans for the great state—the Palestinians. Modern political Zionism, founded by Theodor Herzl, is defined as “the advocacy of national self-determination for the Jewish people” (Rubner, 2018). It is especially important to make clear that in Theodor Herzl’s vision for the emergence of a modern nation with territorial independence, he envisioned that this state would be governed “by and for Jews but was devoid of any connection to Judaic religious practice, Jewish culture or the Hebrew language” (Rubner, 2018). This fact is relevant to the common claim that the founding of Israel through Zionism was founded on religious principles. The father of Zionism made clear that the state would be absent of any connection to Judaic religious practice, making the founding of the state and Zionism solely rooted in politics, serving as a means to create a national home for Jews.

Palestinians have lived in modern-day Israel before, during, and after its founding. Yet, this paper will demonstrate how the story of these people has been neglected in almost every attempt to educate American students on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While erasing the narrative of an entire group of people appears to be an absurd practice, the public education system has repetitively made this mistake. The rich histories of African American and Native American peoples in this country have been misrepresented in the textbooks of public education since the founding of public education in the United States. In the article “What You Supposed to Know: Urban Black Students’ Perspectives on History Textbooks,” Woodson argues that the United States must rethink social studies curriculum and pedagogy as it relates to the historical knowledge about the civil rights movement in the United States (Woodson, 2015). Woodson argues that the misrepresentation of the civil rights movement and the leaders within the movement in history textbooks have the potential to negatively impact the learning experience of urban youth (Woodson, 2015). In similar ways, this study argues that the misrepresentation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in social studies curriculum yields similar potential

dangers in middle and high school youth populations.

The power of the United States' influence over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been prevalent since Israel's withdrawal from Sinai, informing this study's decision to specifically investigate public education systems within U.S. territory (Arieli, 2016). This study explores the public education curriculum of California, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas. These six states were selected as they collectively account for a diverse group of populations, political trends, demographics, and geographical locations in the United States. United States territory was specifically selected for this study given the United States' role in influencing the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Data was collected through analysis of the curriculum as well as each state's textbook/resource recommendations to assist teacher instruction at the middle and high school level. The curriculum, textbooks, and resources were compared to a comprehensive history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict made up of Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin's *The Israeli-Arab Reader*, and Ilan Pappé's *The Forgotten Palestinians: A History of the Palestinians in Israel*. The comprehensive history used to analyze and critique public state curriculum focused primarily on these vital points in Israeli-Palestinian history: the birth of Zionism, early Zionist settlement and Palestinian response to this settlement, the Balfour Declaration and other relevant documents, the year '1948' (recognized as the year of Independence for Israelis and the "Nakba" for Palestinians, the 1948 refugees, the building of settlements in Palestinian territory, proposed peace solutions including the plans put forth by the United Nations and the United States, and finally, the current state of the Israeli-Palestinian region and the Israeli government. Additionally, this study analyzes the language used in the state curriculum to gauge biases within the text.

California

California state curriculum references the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in standard identifier HSS-10.9.6 of grade 10. The content area relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the state of California falls within History—Social Science and the category World History, Culture, and Geography: The Modern World, Grade 10. The overarching standard is "HSS-10.9 Students analyze the international developments in the post-World War II world" and the

standard for teaching instruction is as follows: “Understand how the forces of nationalism developed in the Middle East, how the Holocaust affected world opinion regarding the need for a Jewish state, and the significance and effects of the location and establishment of Israel on world affairs” (California Department of Education, 2019). The curriculum referenced by the California Department of Education is inadequate as it fails to acknowledge the existence of Palestinians.

Additionally, the curriculum fails to incorporate key points in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict including the birth of Zionism, early Zionist settlement and Palestinian response to this settlement, the Balfour Declaration, the year ‘1948’ (recognized as the year of Independence for Israelis and the “Nakba” for Palestinians, the 1948 refugees, the building of settlements in Palestinian territory, proposed peace solutions including the plans put forth by the United Nations and the United States, and finally, the current state of the Israeli-Palestinian region and the Israeli government. In describing the framework of the tenth grade social studies curriculum that is relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the California Department of Education states that the curriculum is intended to guide students in tracing the “rise of democratic ideas and [to] develop an understanding of the historical roots of current world issues, especially as they pertain to international relations” (California Department of Education, 2019). While California’s History-Social Studies Science Content Standards do indeed trace the rise in the intended democratic idea of the state of Israel, in its negligence of the Palestinian people, the curriculum fails to develop an understanding of the historical roots of current world issues, therefore failing to meet its intended purpose.

New York

The State Education Department of New York uses the social studies framework to guide the curriculum of grades 9-12. Section 10.7 of the curriculum framework is titled and described as “Decolonization and Nationalism (1900-2000): Nationalist and decolonization movements employed a variety of methods, including nonviolent resistance and armed struggle. Tensions and conflicts often continued after independence as new challenges arose. Point 10.7c of this section is titled “nationalism in the Middle East was often influenced by factors such as religious beliefs and secularism” and instructs

that “students will investigate Zionism, the mandates created at the end of World War I, and Arab nationalism... students will examine the creation of the State of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict” (New York State Education Department, 2019). Section 11.9 of the New York State Education Department curriculum is titled and described as “COLD WAR (1945 – 1990): In the period following World War II, the United States entered into an extended era of international conflict called the Cold War which influenced foreign and domestic policy for more than 40 years” (New York State Education Department, 2019). Point 11.9c of this section is introduced with the following: “American strategic interests in the Middle East grew with the Cold War, the creation of the State of Israel, and the increased United States dependence on Middle Eastern oil. The continuing nature of the Arab-Israeli dispute has helped to define the contours of American policy in the Middle East” (New York State Education Department, 2019). The section then asserts that from this curriculum point, “students will examine United States foreign policy toward the Middle East, including the recognition of and support for the State of Israel, the Camp David Accords, and the interaction with radical groups in the region” (New York State Education Department, 2019). The New York State curriculum successfully articulates the rise of Zionism in connection to the creation of the state of Israel while also connecting the conflict to American policy in the Middle East. The curriculum acknowledges the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself as well as the Arab population within the region, the Palestinians. However, the curriculum must extend to include relevant history of the Holocaust in connection to the founding of the state of Israel. The curriculum must also assert more specificity beyond instructing students to “examine the creation of the state of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict” (New York State Education Department, 2019). The New York State Education Department must equip teachers and students with a more specific curriculum, in conjunction with extensive instructional support tools, to yield holistic student understanding of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Massachusetts

The History and Social Science Framework of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education provides a lengthy curriculum for teaching the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict at the high school level in the “Cold War Era, 1945-1991” section. The section requires that teachers “explain the background for the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948, and subsequent military and political conflicts including a) the growth of Zionism, and 19th and early 20th century immigration by Eastern European Jews to Palestine, b) anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, c) the United Nations (UN) vote in 1947 to partition the western part of the Palestine Mandate into two independent countries, d) Palestinian loss of land and the creation of refugees by Israeli military action, e) the rejection of surrounding Arab countries of the UN decision and the invasion of Israel by Arab countries, f) the various wars between Israel and neighboring Arab states since 1947, (e.g., the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War), g) the diverse mix of cultures (e.g., Jews, Palestinians, and Arabs of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Druze backgrounds) in the region in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, h) attempts to secure peace between Palestinians and Israelis, including the proposal of a two-state solution” (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018). The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education provides the most extensive and accurate account of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, providing an educational template that should be replicated across the United States. The Massachusetts state curriculum provides history on the factors contributing to the founding of the state of Israel, the peace propositions put forth by the United Nations, tensions between Israel and the Arab world, the current culture of the Israeli-Palestinian territory, and proposed peace solutions (including the two-state solution) put forth by mediators, primarily the United States.

North Carolina

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction develops the “Instructional Support Tools for Achieving New Standards” to “increase student achievement by ensuring educators understand specifically what the new standards mean a student must know, understand and be able to do” (North Carolina Department of Education, 2013). In this document, essential standard WH.H.8 analyzes global interdependence and shifts in power in terms of political, economic, social and environmental changes and conflicts since the last half of the twentieth century. This essential standard begins with WH.H.8.1 which requires teachers to evaluate global

wars in terms of how they challenged political and economic power structures and gave rise to new balances of power including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is referenced twice in this standard and requires that students learn “how and why the nation of Israel was established following the Second World War” and the “factors that contributed to and consequences of late 20th and early 21st century conflict in the Middle East” including the Israeli-Arab conflict. The curriculum guide suggests that teachers use an article from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum titled “Postwar Refugee Crisis and the Establishment of the State of Israel” as a tool to educate students on the establishment of the state of Israel. While the article provides relevant information on Jewish displaced persons in the 20th century, the article lacks information on the Palestinian narrative during the founding of the state of Israel. The curriculum guide also suggests that teachers use a Britannica article titled “Arab-Israeli Wars” to teach students about the factors that contributed to and consequences of the late 20th and early 21st century conflict in the Middle East. The Britannica article effectively communicates the significance of the Six-Day War in the Golan Heights and the Yom Kippur War, therefore providing students with the critical information required to educate students on the factors which contributed to the conflict. The curriculum guide then suggests that through these articles, students will come to understand how the “conflict between Israel and its Muslim neighbors resulted in increased global tensions between the West and the Muslim world” (North Carolina Department of Education, 2013). This conclusion is insufficient as it assumes that the Israel-Palestinian conflict (and the involvement of Muslim neighboring countries in the conflict) is the result of tension between the West and the Muslim world. The curriculum makes a stark transition from explaining the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to then directly correlating the details of the conflict to the tension between the West and the Muslim world. This conclusion places complete blame on the Muslim world while failing to dissect the ways in which the West has contributed to increased tensions between the West and the Muslim world, including the wars sparked by the West onto the Muslim world in the early 21st century. Finally, curriculum standard WH.H.8.7 states that teachers are expected to “explain why terrorist groups and movements have proliferated and the extent of their impact on politics and society in various countries” including “Palestinian Islamic Jihad” (North

Carolina Department of Education, 2013). The curriculum states that the “PLO and Islamic Jihad in Israel who want to change the existing political order and replace it with their own” exemplify how “desire for change in existing political order or geopolitical boundaries can lead to violent acts and alter societies” (North Carolina Department of Education, 2013). This standard is perhaps the most dangerous in its extreme bias towards the state of Israel. The curriculum, in its rightful mention of groups including Hamas who have played a role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, fails to acknowledge why such groups exist, and how Palestinians have been terrorized by the Israeli Defense Force since its founding. Furthermore, the curriculum’s assertion that “Islamic Jihad in Israel” exists to change the existing political order and replace it with their own” is ironic given the fact that the State of Israel, in its forced creation by the Zionist movement, was founded for the desire for change in existing political order and geopolitical boundaries. The Zionist movement transformed Palestinian territory into Israel, a country founded exclusively for one group of people, at the expense of another. To create a fair and balanced curriculum on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction must address this contradiction in their current curriculum standard.

South Carolina

South Carolina’s Department of Education drafts the state’s social studies standards. The subject of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is referenced in the sixth and seventh grade standards. For sixth grade, the Israeli-Palestinian subject matter falls under Global Interdependence standard 6.5.CE which states that teachers must “explain the impact of nationalism on global conflicts and genocides in the 20th and 21st centuries” (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019). The document then communicates that this standard was created to “promote inquiry into the cause and effect relationship between nationalism and world wars... to promote inquiry into genocide, including the Holocaust, as well as the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the ensuing conflict that resulted from the creation of the state of Israel” (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019). For seventh grade, the Israeli-Palestinian subject matter falls under “World History from 1300: The Making of the Modern World” standard MWH-7.4 which states that

teachers must “explain the origins of the conflict in the Middle East as a result of the collapse of the German, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires after World War I and the creation of the state of Israel after World War II” (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019). Additionally, standard USHC-7.4 under the “United States History and the Constitution” section requires teachers to “summarize the economic, humanitarian, and diplomatic effects of World War II, including the end of the Great Depression, the Holocaust, the war crimes trials, and the creation of Israel” (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019). Lastly, standard 7-4.6 under the section “Contemporary Cultures: 1600 to the Present” requires that teachers teach students to “analyze the Holocaust and its impact on European society and Jewish culture, including Nazi policies to eliminate the Jews and other minorities, the Nuremberg trials, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the rise of nationalism in Southwest Asia (Middle East), the creation of the state of Israel, and the resultant conflicts in the region” (South Carolina Department of Education, 2019). While the South Carolina Department of Education successfully highlights the important connection between World War II and the founding of the state of Israel, the curriculum fails to demonstrate the ways in which the state of Israel came to be, and dismisses the existence of Palestinians and the Palestinian experience before, during, and after the founding of the state of Israel. South Carolina’s Department of Education’s decision to completely dismiss the Palestinian narrative is damaging to the academic experience of the students of which they serve within South Carolina’s public education system. From South Carolina’s public education curriculum standards, students receive a history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that only communicates the factors that contributed to the founding of Israel, failing to acknowledge the Palestinian people, and therefore inadequately educating students on the conflict.

Texas

The Texas State Board of Education drafts the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies which are used to guide teaching at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The social studies standards for the high school level include World History Studies requiring that students understand the “impact of major event associated with the Cold War and independence movements” in which

a student is expected to “discuss factors contributing to the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the rejection of the existence of the state of Israel by the Arab League and a majority of Arab nations” (Texas Education Agency, 2018). The Texas Education Agency’s decision to include only one example for the factors contributing to the Arab-Israeli conflict creates an extremely biased narrative that lacks accuracy and dismisses more significant factors that contribute to the conflict, including the displacement of Palestinians in the state of Israel’s assertion that the state is to be a state exclusively reserved for Jewish populations. While the tension between Israel and neighboring Arab nations is a critical component of the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, reducing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a conflict that is solely the result of this tension is unfair to the conflict and the students receiving a public education in the state of Texas. In the United States History Studies Since 1877 curriculum category, teachers are required to help students understand the “impact of political, economic, and social factors in the U.S. from the 1970s through 1990” (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Through this understanding, students are expected to “describe U.S. involvement in the Middle East such as support for Israel” (Texas Education Agency, 2018). This section of the Texas state curriculum effectively communicates the significance of United States support for the state of Israel—a factor that is essential to student understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, in its repeated mention of the state of Israel, the Texas Education Agency fails to acknowledge the existence of the Palestinian people or Palestinian territory. An attempt to educate students on the emergence of the state of Israel and United States support for the state while simultaneously failing to acknowledge the Palestinian people and/or Palestine is a failed attempt to educate students on the conflict.

CONCLUSION

Through examining the public education curriculum of California, New York, Massachusetts, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas, it can be concluded that, in broad terms, the United States has failed to provide public school students with an accurate education of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An accurate education of the conflict is a precursor to drafting effective peace solutions to the conflict, and

the United States' decision to inaccurately articulate the history of the conflict to its students threatens the success of future peace solutions presented by the United States to Israelis and Palestinians. In order to accurately educate students on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, each state in the United States must adopt a human rights-rooted curriculum that first, establishes the existence, dignity, and human rights of both Palestinians and Israelis, to then explain the factors contributing to the creation of the state of Israel and how the creation of this state has affected the lives of both Palestinians and Israelis. Of the six U.S. states investigated within this study, the state of Massachusetts provides the most extensive, accurate, and effective curriculum to educate students on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Until the United States can accurately communicate the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in each of the fifty states, United States policymakers should refrain from drafting policy that affects the lives of both Palestinians and Israelis.

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