

Dear _____,

We are writing to you as members of the National Arab American Women's Association's (NAAWA) Education Outreach Program. NAAWA is a grassroots organization of Arab American women. It serves as the platform and powerful voice of Arab American women for causes and actions that strive to achieve social justice, protect human rights and civil liberties, and provide a welcoming environment for women and families to prosper and thrive. The Education Outreach Program is one of NAAWA's initiatives, with a mission to promote accurate representation of the Arab world and Arab Americans in school systems.

We are writing to bring some issues to your attention regarding two videos from the "[Virtual Field Trips](#)" series. They are titled "Jerusalem: Then and Now (K-5)" and "Jerusalem: Then and Now (6-9)."

One of our members has a second grader and her teacher assigned your series as part of a virtual trip activity. The parents of this child are Palestinians from East Jerusalem and grew up there, so they have first-hand experience with the city.

We would like to enumerate some of the inaccuracies, missing information, and stereotypical aspects of the films. Our comments below are also based on research and the links are provided:

1. The films state that Jerusalem is located in Israel.

This is an inaccurate statement. In fact, the status of the city remains contested and the eastern part of Jerusalem is Palestinian territory that is militarily occupied by Israel. As recently as December 2019, the United Nations General Assembly [adopted a resolution](#) that called "on Member States not to recognize any changes to the pre-1967 borders, including with regards to Jerusalem ... the Assembly called on Member States to ensure that agreements with Israel do not imply recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the territories it occupied in 1967." These occupied territories include East Jerusalem, home to over 320,000 Palestinians, and are considered Palestinian territories under international law.

2. Often in the films, the narrator speaks in an orientalist and stereotypical way about the Palestinians living in Jerusalem, even avoiding calling them "Palestinians." Instead, they are referred to as Arabs who live in their part of Jerusalem where "donkeys and camels carry people and packages just as they have for thousands of years."

This portrayal of the Palestinians in Jerusalem as stuck in time is one of the tropes often used against indigenous peoples—that they are backward or are not modern and live the same way they did thousands of years ago, without progressing at all. This is a most harmful portrayal, not to mention highly inaccurate. And then these Palestinians are juxtaposed with the Israelis who live in West Jerusalem, with the narrator saying that the people of East and West Jerusalem “are about as different from each other as they can possibly be.” In other words, East Jerusalem is “traditional” and West Jerusalem is “modern,” more like the United States. This plays right into an [orientalist approach](#) that “often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous.”

3. The films, in general, are narrow in their focus on religion.

This is partly understandable because Jerusalem is the location of many holy sites. At the same time, it is important also to feature the real people who live and work and have family and rich lives in the city. Jerusalem is not some empty historic relic that is paused in time; people actually live there in the 21st century. Further, we noticed that within this frame of religion, Judaism is given a privileged position and often the history and facts are presented with Judaism at the center (an example is the focus on David, who “fought many battles, and eventually established this land as the nation of Israel with Jerusalem as its capital”). In addition, when the Dome of the Rock is mentioned (it and the al-Aqsa Mosque make Jerusalem the third holiest site for Muslims), the picture we see in the film is not of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem but of the city of Mecca, in Saudi Arabia. Why not depict the correct Islamic site in Jerusalem? In the short versions of the films, there is also no mention of Christian holy sites in the city, such as the Holy Sepulchre, which is revered in Christianity as the site of Jesus's crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

4. Both films state that three of the largest world religions consider Jerusalem a holy city.

It is indeed true that Jerusalem is a holy city for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, although Judaism is a major world religion, it is inaccurate to characterize it as one of the “largest world religions” or one of the “world’s most common religions.” According to the [CIA World Factbook](#), Christianity comprises the biggest chunk of world faiths (at 31.2 percent), followed by Islam (24.1 percent). Judaism ranks at .2 percent of the world’s religious adherents.

5. The films end with the narrator saying the Hebrew word “shalom.”

This is a worthy sentiment—peace—to end on; however, Hebrew and Arabic are the two main languages that are spoken in Jerusalem. Why not also use the Arabic word for peace, “salam,” along with the Hebrew? The fact that this

is missing shows clearly that the filmmakers were communicating their views of Jerusalem through a particular and narrow lens. It is hard to believe that this was not intentional.

6. **Finally, in the [Classroom Ideas section](#) of your website, suggested activities include “Listen to music from Israel,” “Explore signature foods from Israel,” and “Have students research Israeli festivals at the local, state, and national levels.”**

Why aren't Palestinian music, foods, and festivals included too? This is a glaring omission, and it is an erasure of the vibrant and rich Palestinian culture that is an integral part of the city.

These are just some of the problems we wanted to bring to your attention. We plan to share this letter with the classroom teacher and county social studies supervisor as well.

In this age of teaching about crises and conflicts, we owe it to our children to offer them factual and unbiased resources that reflect accuracy, inclusion, and equity. We hope that you will reexamine the content of your films and urge you to take our comments into consideration when you make the appropriate changes. Please reach out to us with any inquiries or further information, as we will be happy to assist. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Education Outreach Program
National Arab American Women's Association