

AJC Submission to Oversight Board on Posts that Include “From the River to the Sea”

I. Introduction and summary.

American Jewish Committee (AJC) writes to address several points on which the Oversight Board has invited public comment: Uses of the phrase “From the river to the sea”; research into any associated online and offline harms from the use of the phrase; and Meta’s human rights responsibilities in relation to content using the phrase including freedom of expression, freedom of association, and equality and non-discrimination.

The phrase “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” can be intended to convey numerous ideas. The phrase, and derivative formulations thereof, have become prevalent in public discourse, including online and on social media, particularly since the Hamas-led attacks against Israel on October 7, 2023, and in the context of protests opposing Israel’s responding military operation in Gaza. Nevertheless, Meta’s automated systems did not send the majority of user reports about the three posts selected for this case by the Oversight Board for human review, and the one post which human moderators did assess was reviewed as non-violating.

The phrase should be considered to violate Meta’s [Violence and Incitement policy](#) when it is used to call for the violent elimination of Israelis and Jews. The phrase “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” can be used as a “coded statement [] where the method of violence is not clearly articulated, but the threat is veiled or implicit” that “acts as a threatening call to action by inviting or encouraging others to carry out violent acts,” specifically the carrying out of violent acts against Jews residing in the State of Israel in the pursuit of the violent annihilation of Israel, and/or the carrying out of violent acts against Jews around the world or against others who believe that Israel is a legitimate State and that Jews have a right to reside on its territory. This is certainly the sense in which the phrase is used by Hamas. The terrorist organization makes no secret of its commitment to the violent annihilation of Israel; it “rejects any alternative to the full and complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea.” (Hamas Revised Charter 2017). Indeed, many Jews and Israelis, both of which Meta’s Community Standards protect, understand the phrase “From the river to the sea” to be a call for violent elimination of a Jewish homeland and its people. This belief has become more pronounced after October 7, when the Jewish people witnessed an attempted enactment of this aim.

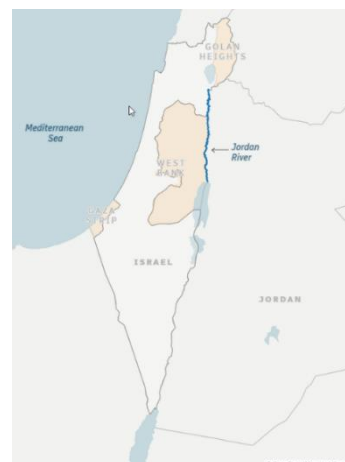
The phrase also should be considered to violate Meta’s [Hate Speech policy](#) when it clearly constitutes a discriminatory attack against Jews, such as when the phrase is used with other language that indicates intent to deny Jews’ right to national self-determination in their historic homeland and implicitly or explicitly call for their exclusion or removal from Israel, including by denying Jewish historic connection to the land or falsely suggesting Israel is a colonial entity that the Jewish people illegitimately established in violation of the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people. In these and other contexts, use of this phrase is creating an environment that is harassing and intimidating to Jews and that impacts Jews’ ability to enjoy their rights.

The call for the establishment of a Palestinian State or advocacy for Palestinian rights are not harmful. AJC supports a durable two-state solution. Some who use the phrase emphasize that their call for Palestine to be free “From the river to the sea” does not require the eradication of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, but simply that all people of Palestinian heritage, wherever they reside, have their rights, culture, and freedoms honored. We have heard this in spaces of Muslim-Jewish dialogue, academic debate, and elsewhere. Content that does not denigrate the rights of Jews and Israelis does not pose a threat to Jews or violate Meta’s policies. However, too often, the phrase is instead accompanied by indications of harmful intent.

AJC considers it critical that Meta remove content using the phrase on its platforms in contexts in which its spread is likely to give rise to harmful consequences for Jews. Specifically, we recommend content that uses the phrase “From the river to the sea” be removed when it appears alongside (a) text, images, or symbols **signaling violence**, including references to organizations that advocate for Israel’s violent destruction like Hamas and their leaders, members, or insignia or other symbols associated with them, or (b) text, images, or symbols **signaling a call for discrimination against Jews**, including the exclusion of Jews (or “Zionists,” as a proxy for Jews or Israelis), from social groups, political institutions, professional settings or the territory of the State of Israel itself.

II. Current uses of the phrase: “From the river to the sea.”

The phrase “From the river to the sea,” refers to the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. It includes the entirety of the territory of the State of Israel (in addition to the West Bank and Gaza, which are not a part of the State of Israel). In its [Resolution 181](#), adopted in 1947, the UN General Assembly [called](#) for the creation of independent Arab and Jewish states in the land west of the Jordan River, which for decades had been governed by Great Britain under a mandate, first, from the League of Nations, then the UN. Before this time, the same land was governed by another non-Palestinian and non-Jewish entity, the Ottoman Empire. However, from the moment of its declaration of independence on May 14, 1948, some actors have rejected the legitimacy of the State of Israel and sought its violent elimination. The origin of the phrase “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” is disputed, and current uses of it vary. However, among its most prominent uses is as a rallying cry by violent groups that seek Israel’s annihilation.



Key among these is Hamas, whose leaders have repeatedly reaffirmed their intention to engage in “resistance by any means necessary” – including armed force against civilians as we saw before, on, and since October 7 – to accomplish the eradication of Jews from the territory of the State of Israel. In a December 2012 [speech](#), Khaled Mashaal, then the head of Hamas’s political bureau, said: “...Palestine is ours **from the river to the sea** and from the south to the north...There will be no concession on any inch of the land...” The organization’s 2017 revision of its [Charter](#) asserts: “Palestine is a land that was seized by a racist, anti-human and colonial Zionist project that was founded on a false promise (the Balfour Declaration), on recognition of a usurping entity and on imposing a fait accompli by force.” “Palestine symbolizes the resistance that shall continue until liberation is accomplished, until the return is fulfilled and until a fully sovereign state is established with Jerusalem as its capital.” “Palestine, which extends from the River Jordan in the east to the Mediterranean in the west and from Ras Al-Naqrurah in the north to Umm Al-Rashrash in the south, is an integral territorial unit. It is the land and the home of the Palestinian people. The expulsion and banishment of the Palestinian people from their land and the establishment of the Zionist entity therein do not annul the right of the Palestinian people to their entire land and do not entrench any rights therein for the usurping Zionist entity.” “Hamas rejects any alternative to the full and complete liberation of Palestine, *from the river to the sea.*”



Hamas remains committed to the violent overthrow of the State of Israel and the eradication of Jews from it. Its motto for its 35th anniversary year, announced in December 2022, was “Palestine from the river to the sea,” accompanied by a [logo](#) including a map of the entire area of land from which Israel is absent. Following the horrific attacks it led against Israel on October 7, 2023, Hamas representatives [affirmed](#) their intention to continue to seek Israel’s destruction. One told a Lebanese news program on October 24, “The al-Aqsa Flood [*the name Hamas uses for the October 7 terrorist attack*] is just the first time and there will be a second, a third, a fourth... Israel is a country that has no place on our land. We must remove that country....” Responding to the anchor’s question “Does that mean the annihilation of Israel?” he said, “Yes, of course.”



Prior to, but particularly since the October 7 attacks, individuals and groups claiming to advocate for an end to Israeli military action and policies violating Palestinian rights have incorporated the phrase “From the river to the sea” in online and offline statements and other materials which also attempt to justify violent terrorist acts against Israelis (see image sources [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).



The inclusion of the phrase “From the river to the sea” alongside images evoking violence, including images representing groups with violent antisemitic ideologies like Hamas, such as the image of a paratrooper which recalls perpetrators of the October 7 attacks, clarifies that the intention is to encourage or justify the commission of violence across the entirety of the State of Israel and against its inhabitants.

In other contexts, the phrase has been used in connection with words or imagery that clearly show that the “freedom” sought is *from the presence of Jews*. In one November 2022 example ([here](#)), a large sign placed at a U.S. university featured the phrase “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” written over a canvas made entirely of copies of an op-ed in the student newspaper entitled, “I am proud of my Jewish identity more than anyone can ever hate me for it.” Similarly, in April 2023, Barcelona’s largest synagogue was defaced with graffiti bearing the phrase ([here](#)). Several other similar incidents are described in the next section. In some contexts, the phrase is also used to convey rejection of Jews’ right to national self-determination in some part of their historic homeland. Some who chant or post this phrase, pair it with calls such as “Jews go back to Europe.” Such denials of the Jewish people’s historical connection to the land and the continuous presence of Jews in the region for thousands of years also ignore that Israel’s population includes descendants of many of the 800,000 Jews expelled from Muslim-majority countries in North Africa and the Middle East following Israel’s creation.

The above-mentioned examples go beyond criticizing Israel’s policies, its military actions, or other elements of the State or expressing a desire to see the Palestinian people achieve self-determination, none of which are antisemitic. Instead, the phrase is paired with accompanying images or texts that convey support for Hamas’ meaning of it or for an explicit anti-Jewish agenda.

III. Online and offline harms from the use of the phrase “From the river to the sea.”

As noted above, “From the river to the sea” can, when paired with certain key indicators, communicate support or advocacy for the violent elimination of the State of Israel as an instantiation of Jewish collective rights. In these contexts, the phrase often denigrates Jews, denies their equality and right to self-determination, conveys antisemitic stereotypes including all Israeli Jews are “colonizers” and labeling as racist all people who believe Jews have a legitimate right to reside in Israel, and encourages the exclusion of Jews from Israel or even their violent elimination. The majority of Jews around the world see Israel as an essential part of their Jewish identity, whether historically, culturally, and/or religiously. In fact, for American Jews, 80% of them [report](#) that Israel is important to *what being Jewish* means to them. International authorities have affirmed that denying Jews’ aspiration for self-determination as illegitimate or even racist is antisemitic:

- Secretary-General António Guterres [recalled](#) in 2018 that “attempts to delegitimize the right of Israel to exist, including calls for its destruction” is a contemporary manifestation of antisemitism.
- The [U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism](#) created by the White House concurs: “Jewish students and educators are targeted for derision and exclusion on college campuses, often because of their real or perceived views about the State of Israel. When Jews are targeted because of their beliefs or their identity or when Israel is singled out because of anti-Jewish hatred, that is antisemitism.”
- The [EU Strategy on combating antisemitism](#) states that “Israel-related antisemitism” is “the most common form of antisemitism encountered online by Jews in Europe today.”
- The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) noted in a 2021 [recommendation](#) that while it is legitimate to criticize the Israeli government, “denying Jews their right to a national homeland, holding the State of Israel to a different standard of behaviour than other states, or demonising the State of Israel and viewing it and its people as inherently evil or racist, may be regarded as antisemitic,” and “the different treatment of Jews and their national aspirations, and the singling out of Jewish people for applying other standards to them, constitute forms of antisemitism,” when opposition is expressed solely to a Jewish nation-state. It expressed concern about “the widespread view that attacks on Jewish persons or property could be considered as justifiable reactions to policies or actions of the Israeli government” and stressed that “condoning and indirect support for antisemitic racism needs to be strongly condemned and prevented.”
- In a January 2022 [statement](#), a group of four independent UN human rights experts, remarking on incidents of violence, discrimination and harassment committed against Jews and Jewish sites by people targeting Jews as proxies for Israel because of their Jewish identity, particularly during and following armed hostilities in the Middle East in May 2021, said: “assertions that Zionism, the self-determination movement of the Jewish people, is an inherently racist ideology and a form of racial supremacy, suggesting that supporting Zionism is inherently equivalent to supporting racial discrimination...[are]...false [and] fuel resentment against Jews and normalise bias against Jewish communities worldwide.”

Antisemitic acts have been documented at record-high levels around the world in recent years. [AJC's State of Antisemitism in America 2023 Report](#) revealed that one in four (25%) American Jews reported being personally targeted by antisemitism in 2023 alone. Levels of antisemitism have increased since Hamas's October 7, 2023 attacks against Israel, which the Oversight Board acknowledged in its January 2023 [decision](#) on Holocaust denial. In the weeks after October 7, compared to the prior period, monitors documented an increase in incidents of [400% in the U.S.](#), [500% in Australia](#), [600% in the UK](#), [320% in Germany](#), and [960% in Brazil](#). The phrase "From the river to the sea" was expressed in some recent incidents, in addition to those mentioned above:

- On [January 25, 2024](#), a man used the phrase "From the river to the sea" in a threatening voicemail to a synagogue in Massachusetts expressing an intent to kill Jews in retaliation for acts by Israeli forces in Gaza.
- On [March 24, 2024](#) at a "Resistance 101" event at Columbia University, a speaker encouraged "armed resistance" against Israel, saying, "We have the right to return home, and we will get that right by any means necessary," and added that Palestinians had the right to "every inch of Palestine, from the river to the sea," including cities within Israel's internationally recognized borders such as Akko and Jaffa.
- On [March 26, 2024](#), a synagogue in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was targeted by two women who spraypainted "Ceasefire now, end the occupation, free Palestine," and "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" outside the congregation entrance.

Moreover, online content conveying support for the exclusion of or discrimination against Jews and encouraging the commission of violence against Jews is directly causing substantial harm to Jews. As noted in [AJC's State of Antisemitism in America 2023 Report](#), Jews continue to regularly experience antisemitism online or on social media, with 62% of U.S. Jews reporting having experienced antisemitism online, either as a target or by seeing antisemitic content, in the past 12 months. Younger Jews were more likely to have experienced antisemitism this way: 67% of those 18-29 years old compared with 61% of those aged 30 or older, and 25% said these online incidents made them feel physically threatened (compared to 21% of those over age 30). Regular experiences with antisemitism are both creating an environment that is harassing and intimidating to Jews and impacting Jews' ability to enjoy their rights. AJC also found that 46% of all Jewish respondents reported they had altered their behavior at least once in the past year due to fears of antisemitism: 30% avoided posting content online that would enable others to identify them as Jewish or reveal their views on Jewish issues; 26% avoided wearing or displaying things that might enable others to identify them as Jewish; and 26% avoided certain places, events, or situations due to concerns about their safety or comfort as Jews.

Meta should clearly prohibit use of the phrase "From the river to the sea," when accompanied by other indicators that make it likely to contribute to the dangerous spread of antisemitism online and in real life.

IV. Meta has a human rights responsibility to take steps to limit the presence and visibility of some content containing the phrase "From the river to the sea" on its platforms.

Meta has accepted a responsibility, articulated in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), to engage in ongoing human rights due diligence to evolve its operations and policies (UNGPs, Principle 17(c) and 18(b)) and address negative human rights impacts arising from its operations (UNGPs 11, 13). Jews have the right to equality and non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion and race (Art. 2, para. 1, ICCPR; Art. 2, ICERD; Art. 2(2) of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief). The UNGPs indicate that companies like Meta should take measures to prevent discrimination against Jews in access to their platforms for expression (Art. 19 ICCPR), and to protect against discrimination against Jews in areas including the right to life and physical integrity, the right to freedom of religion or belief, the right to participate in public life, and the right to participate in cultural life, as well as the right to health (Art. 12, ICESCR), particularly for children (Arts 2 and 6, CRC).

Meta has a responsibility to respect the right to freedom of expression (Article 19 ICCPR) but also a responsibility to prohibit advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to religious or racial discrimination, hostility, or violence (Article 20 ICCPR), as well as to prohibit other content amounting to hate speech in limited circumstances that adhere to the requirements of legality, legitimate aim, and necessity and proportionality as set out in ICCPR Article 19(3). Assessments of restrictions on hate speech by Meta will differ

from assessments of restrictions that governments can impose, as unlike a government, Meta can only limit users' access to its platforms, and cannot impose civil or criminal punishments. As affirmed by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of expression, and as noted by the Oversight Board in *Depiction of Zwarte Piet* (2021-002-FB-UA), *Armenians in Azerbaijan* (2020-003-FB-UA), and *Holocaust Denial* (2023-22-IG-UA) companies must remove content from their platforms that constitutes incitement to discrimination or violence, but they may also remove hate speech that falls below this threshold, particularly where it raises concerns in terms of tolerance, civility, and respect for others (Rabat Plan of Action, para. 12, 20).

For the reasons set out above, Meta should prohibit content containing the phrase “From the river to the sea” on its platforms (unless it falls under one of the general exceptions under the [Hate Speech Community Standard](#) permitting content that is intended to condemn or raise awareness about hate speech and for newsworthy and very limited types of satirical content) in the following situations:

- (1) When content using the phrase “from the river to the sea” appears alongside text, images, or symbols signaling violence, including of organizations that advocate for Israel’s violent elimination such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and their leaders, members, or insignia or other symbols associated with them; or
- (2) When content using the phrase “From the river to the sea” appears alongside text, images, or symbols that convey a call, explicitly or implicitly, for discrimination against Jews, including advocacy for the exclusion of Jews (or “Zionists” as a proxy for Jews or Israelis) from social groups, academic institutions, professional settings, or even the territory of Israel itself.

This limited restriction would have the legitimate purpose of protecting Jewish individuals and communities from antisemitic violence, discrimination, and hostility. Such a limitation is also necessary and proportionate given the extremely high levels of antisemitic acts being recorded worldwide, which is causing severe harm at a societal and individual level. It is necessary to ensure that users of Meta’s products are not repeatedly exposed to antisemitic messages denigrating Jews, depicting their presence in the Middle East as illegitimate and harmful, calling for their exclusion or justifying the commission of violence against them, and making it more likely that such acts will be committed and tolerated around the world. It is also necessary to prevent Jewish users of Meta’s products from suffering harmful consequences resulting from being repeatedly exposed to such content. The general rules proposed above can be clearly articulated and enforced at scale, avoiding the need for Meta to make more complex assessments of intent, as doing so would raise significant enforcement challenges and give rise to significant uncertainty (Oversight Board, *Depiction of Zwarte Piet*, 2021-002-FB-UA).

In the limited situations we have set out above, less severe interventions than removal of such harmful content, such as labels, warning screens, or other measures to reduce dissemination, might be useful but would not provide the same protection. In this regard, in the [2022 Follow-up Action Plan](#) to his [2019 report](#) on antisemitism to the General Assembly, then-UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief advised: “Social media companies should ensure that their community guidelines clearly convey that all forms of antisemitic content ... **are not permitted**, and that these guidelines are transparent and easily accessible to users ... They should consult with representatives of Jewish communities regarding the contents of their guidelines in order to understand what content is harmful in different contexts.” Similarly, in a December 2023 [statement](#), the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Special Adviser on Prevention of Genocide, and the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), who is the UN Focal Point to monitor Antisemitism, expressed alarm that “expressions of religious hatred and incitement to violence are proliferating rapidly on social media,” and called on social media companies to “act decisively against hate speech and incitement to religious violence, discrimination and hostility online.”

V. Conclusion

Meta’s platforms should facilitate robust public discourse, including in support of the rights of Palestinians. However, particularly when levels of global antisemitism are unprecedented, Meta has a responsibility to intervene and protect Jewish and all users when online expression crosses the line into anti-Jewish hatred or calls to violence.