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| **Committee for Accuracy in** **Middle East Reporting and Analysis** | **David M. Litman** |

**Submission on: Posts That Include “From the River to the Sea”**

The phrase “from the river to the sea,” in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict, is an annihilationist call for the destruction of the Jewish state. It grew to prominence with the establishment of Hamas, a designated terrorist organization, which used the phrase to advocate its goal of the violent eradication of the Jewish state. For the reasons elaborated below, we urge a policy which restricts use of the phrase when used in the context of the conflict, as well as in situations of unclear references, with appropriate exceptions such as for journalism.

**Context of the Phrase**

In its decision regarding the term “shaheed,” the Oversight Board emphasized the “cultural and religious significance” of the term. While the phrase had been previously used by dictators[[1]](#endnote-1) and terrorists,[[2]](#endnote-2) the phrase “from the river to the sea” rose to prominence with the establishment of the internationally designated terrorist organization, Hamas, in 1988. Hamas began using the phrase in its propaganda and public statements regularly,[[3]](#endnote-3) to the point the phrase quickly became associated with the terrorist organization and its annihilationist agenda.[[4]](#endnote-4) To this day, Hamas continues to use the phrase in policy statements as a call for the destruction of Israel.[[5]](#endnote-5)

As with all hateful slurs, the phrase must be understood in the relevant context.[[6]](#endnote-6) The phrase references the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, which lies on its eastern and western borders, respectively. It’s use in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict has been to call for the violent annihilation of the State of Israel, the world’s only Jewish state, and its replacement with an Arab and/or Islamic state.[[7]](#endnote-7)

That annihilationist meaning remains, as can be seen by its use at demonstrations[[8]](#endnote-8) and in online publications.[[9]](#endnote-9) For example, the most prominent American “pro-Palestinian” organization, National Students for Justice in Palestine, sent out a “Day of Resistance Toolkit” on October 8 – the day after the brutal massacre carried out by Palestinian terrorists – which unambiguously glorified the terror attack and the terrorist organizations behind it. In its “Messaging & Framing” section, it included: “Palestine will be liberated from the river to the sea, and our resistance, through their bravery and love for land…”[[10]](#endnote-10) Indeed, the presence of the phrase alongside other violent, exclusionary chants (e.g., “we don’t want no Zionists here” and “long live the Intifada”) is a common feature of organized anti-Israel activism.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Some activists have attempted to decontextualize the phrase and misleadingly characterize the phrase as an “aspirational call for freedom.” Attempting to divorce a controversial term from its well-understood meaning in order to make it more socially acceptable is nothing new. It is a common feature of hate movements and groups, who regularly couch their causes in aspirational language, often tied to perceived injustices over land and ownership (e.g., “[blut und boden](https://www.ushmm.org/antisemitism/what-is-antisemitism/origins-of-neo-nazi-and-white-supremacist-terms-and-symbols),” “lebensraum,” “[you will not replace us](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/10/10/when-white-nationalists-chant-their-weird-slogans-what-do-they-mean),” and variations of the “great replacement theory”).

**Meta Policy**

The exclusionary, annihilationist phrase falls under three categories of Meta’s moderation policies: hate speech; violence and incitement; and dangerous organizations and individuals.

*Hate Speech* – Included in Meta’s hate speech policy are “calls for exclusion or segregation,” as well as “aspirational or conditional statements about…harm” including “[c]alls for death without a perpetrator or method” and “[c]alls for…other physical harms caused either by no perpetrator or by a deity.” The policy also includes “[s]tatements denying existence,” including “‘[protected characteristic(s) or quasi-protected characteristic] shouldn’t exist’.” Also included are “[e]xclusion…in the form of…aspirational or conditional statements…advocating… [e]xplicit exclusion, which means things like expelling certain groups or saying they are not allowed…”

*Violence and Incitement* – Meta’s moderation policy calls for the removal of “violent speech targeting a person or group of people on the basis of their protected characteristic(s),” as well as “statements or visuals representing an intention, aspiration, or call for violence against a target,” which “can be expressed in various types of statements such as statements of intent, calls for action, advocacy, aspirational statements and conditional statements.”

*Dangerous Organizations and Individuals* – Under this policy, Meta removes glorification of “Tier 1 entities,” as well as “content that [g]lorifies, [s]upports, or [r]epresents ideologies that promote hate,” including “unclear references to these designated…ideologies.”

**Analysis**

The phrase “from the river to the sea” is violative of all three of these Meta policies. As the phrase’s origins and continued use show, it is popularized by a “Tier 1 entity,” Hamas, and represents its ideology of the destruction of the Jewish state. It is a call for the violent destruction of Israel and the exclusion or subjugation of its people from “Palestine.” While a full analysis isn’t feasible within the length limits imposed by the Board, a few points in particular are worth bearing on in the context of whether any restrictions of the phrase would satisfy the requirements of necessity and proportionality.

In regard to necessity, the harm resulting from the surge in antisemitic rhetoric and attacks has reached critical levels. The Board itself has recognized that there is always an elevated risk in the context of armed conflict in terms of the harm that can be wrought by hate speech and incitement.[[12]](#endnote-12) The Board has also signaled it considers “the broader context of online and offline harms” a protected community is facing.[[13]](#endnote-13) In the *Post in Polish Targeting Trans People* decision, the Board also noted the “traumatic psychological impact of being relentlessly exposed to slurs and hateful conduct online” as support for its conclusion, along with the “broader context of online and offline harms” the protected community was facing.

In this regard, the evidence of an inundation of violent antisemitism is overwhelming. Studies show, for example, a shocking surge in antisemitism on campuses, with three-quarters of Jewish students reporting having experienced or witnessed antisemitism on campus just within the first few months of the 2023-24 academic year.[[14]](#endnote-14) Indeed, in the United States, a February 2024 survey found that close to two-thirds of Jews said they felt less safe than a year ago and that nearly half have had to alter their behavior over the past year to avoid antisemitism.[[15]](#endnote-15)

These feelings are supported by the data. In the United States, the ADL recorded an unprecedented rise in antisemitic incidents, with 8,873 incidents of assault, harassment, and vandalism in 2023, a 140% increase from 2022, and a spike of 5,204 antisemitic acts just after October 7.[[16]](#endnote-16) In the United Kingdom, an all-time record of 4,103 antisemitic incidents were recorded in 2023, more than twice the figure in 2022.[[17]](#endnote-17) In France, antisemitic acts quadrupled in 2023 compared to 2022, the worst spike on record, with nearly 60% of the acts “involving physical violence, threatening words or menacing gestures.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Data is also showing belief in anti-Jewish tropes is growing, and that younger generations, who grew up on social media, are significantly more likely to believe the tropes than older generations.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Much of this is connected to the annihilationist ideology of which “from the river to the sea” represents, demonstrating a genuine risk of physical harm and direct threats to public safety. Indeed, Jews have been attacked,[[20]](#endnote-20) driven out of public gatherings,[[21]](#endnote-21) and blocked from accessing universities by those chanting the “from the river to the sea” slogan.[[22]](#endnote-22) Top law enforcement officials have stated that the terror threat since the October 7 massacre is at unprecedented levels they had never seen.[[23]](#endnote-23) Indeed, one need only consider the October 7, 2023 massacre carried out by Hamas, which was an attempt at manifesting its “from the river to the sea” ideology, to see how this hateful ideology leads to unspeakable crime and violence targeting civilians.

Given the growing attacks and marginalization of the Jewish and Israeli communities, there is a clear “pressing social need” for intervention.[[24]](#endnote-24) The danger is perhaps best illustrated by a 2023 study which examined an “ecosystem of antisemitism, complete with online and real-world spikes in antisemitism, robust social cyber signals, coded language, and moral outrage” in the context of the Israel-Hamas war in 2021. As articulated by the study’s authors:

Warfare during the May 2021 Gaza-Israel conflict sparked the largest increase of online mentions of social justice terms like “apartheid”, “colonialism” and “settler” in the history of social media. A key finding in this respect is that the language of human rights becomes extremely eroded (i.e., completely misappropriated) on social media with respect to Israel, thereby losing its meaning and intent in the human rights realm. The authors further demonstrate that these “social justice terms” become co-opted as “weaponized conflict language,” which create an overwhelming volume of racialized, demonizing, and unprecedented double standards against Israel. The scale and intensity of this phenomena suggest that this activity is antisemitic, due to clear matching of the criteria set out in IHRA definition of antisemitism. Warfare during the Gaza-Israel conflict also sparked the largest increases in anti-Israel protests and antisemitic incidences in recent history in the United States. Notably, NCRI **data suggests that expressions of that outrage on social media corresponded in both time and location with anti-Israeli protests and antisemitic acts and incidents**.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Given this surrounding context, there is a legitimate necessity falling under the exceptions provided in international law, including: the rights or reputations of others (ICCPR art. 19(3)(a); the protection of national security and public order (ICCPR art. 19(3)(b); and propaganda for war and advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred (ICCPR art. 20).

In regard to proportionality, it is important to note that restricting the use of the phrase “from the river to the sea” is minimally intrusive. Even if one accepts the revisionist claim that it for some the phrase is just an “aspirational call for freedom,” any restriction on the “river to the sea” phrase would not impose any barrier on activists advocating against whatever real or imagined injustices they perceive. The use of the plethora of other chants and phrases utilized by the anti-Israel movement would remain unimpeded. It should not be a difficult ask for those who seek to advocate for Palestinian rights to do so without adopting the annihilationist language of a designated terrorist organization which openly advocates for the murder of Jews everywhere.[[26]](#endnote-26)

It is also worth noting the *Depiction of Zwarte Piet* decision of the Board, in which the Board stated: “the Hate Speech Community Standard, including the rule on blackface, does not require a user to intend to attack people based on a protected category.”[[27]](#endnote-27) That is, under the Board’s interpretations, even if some use the phrase as a call for freedom, the intent does not matter in light of the widely recognized and longstanding annihilationist meaning of the phrase.

1. E.g., *Libya warns U.S. it is 'playing with fire'*, United Press International, 24 Jan. 1986 (Libyan radio under Moamar Gadhafi broadcasting: “We will not retract from calling for Arab unity and for working to realize it by various means or from instigating the liberation of Palestine from the river to the sea.”). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. E.g., *Regular Shorts*, Sydney Morning Herald, 20 Jan. 1987 (Quoting arch PLO terrorist Abu Iyad: “every one of us wants the retrieval of Jaffa and, indeed, every last inch of Palestinian soil. We believe that Palestine, from the river to the sea, is our country”). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. E.g., Robert Kool, *Israel returns to deportation policy for Arabs*, United Press International, 16 Dec. 1990 (“’We will continue the Jihad (Holy War) until all Palestine will be returned to Islam from the river to the sea,’ the Hamas leaflet said.”); Jon Immanuel, *Two Palestinians killed in anti-accord rally Several weekend rallies held supporting and opposing agreement*, Jerusalem Post, 12 Sept. 1993 (“Hamas speeches emphasized Palestine ‘from the river to the sea.’”). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See, e.g., Joel Greenberg, *Oustings by Israel Raise Arab Militants' Esteem*, New York Times, 20 Dec. 1992 (“The clarity of [Hamas’s] message appealed to many: Holy war to establish an Islamic state ‘from the river to the sea,’ in the entire area of Israel and the occupied territories.”); Isabel Kershner, *In the World to Come*, The Jerusalem Report, 28 Jan. 1993 (“Abdallah Darwish, head of the Islamic Movement in Israel:] ‘Every Hamas backer has the right to dream of a Palestine from the river to the sea. But it is well known in politics that agreements are based on reality, not dreams.’ ‘Today,’ he says with approval, ‘we live in a world that is interested in social and economic peace and well-being, not war and violence.’”); Cherif Cordahi, *Palestine: Hamas Meeting Condemns Palestinian Self-Rule Agreement*, Inter Press Service, 6 May 1994 (“Hamas's message of ‘liberating Palestine from the river to the sea’ strikes a chord with many.”). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Backgrounder: New Hamas Platform*, CAMERA, 9 Jun. 2017, <https://www.camera.org/article/backgrounder-new-hamas-platform/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See, e.g., the “[South Africa Slurs](https://www.oversightboard.com/decision/fb-tye2766g/)” decision of the Oversight Board (“The Board found that the post contained a slur which, in the South African context, was degrading, excluding and harmful to the people it targeted.”). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See, e.g., *Provisional Verbatim Record of the Two Thousand Nine Hundred and Twenty-Third Meeting*, United Nations Security Council, 25 May 1990, <https://undocs.org/s/pv.2923> (quoting a statement by PLO leader Yasser Arafat to a Libyan news agency: “The Palestinian people's struggle ought to be assisted until the complete liberation of Palestine from the river to the sea. We will fight until the last bullet, until the last drop of blood.”); *Chronological Review of Events Relating to the Question of Palestine*, United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights, Nov. 2007, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-196659/> (Quoting a statement by Hamas: “It is not shameful to correct a mistake. Palestine is Arab-Islamic land from the river to the sea, including Jerusalem, and Jews have no place there.”); see also *Slogan: “From the River to the Sea Palestine Will be Free”*, Anti-Defamation League, 26 Oct. 2023, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/slogan-river-sea-palestine-will-be-free>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. E.g., <https://x.com/TaliaKhan_MIT/status/1787337147441107301> (Video showing demonstrators at MIT chanting the Arabic version of the phrase: “From water to water, Palestine is Arab,” “Israel will be destroyed,” and “death to the Zionists.”); <https://x.com/KarenBekker/status/1782150300687581433> (Video of chanting at Columbia University also using the Arabic version of the phrase, translated to “From the water to the water, Palestine is Arab” along with “Israel, go to hell”); <https://x.com/ShaiDavidai/status/1748449960368996486> (Video of demonstrators at Columbia University chanting “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be Arab”). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. E.g., *Palestinian Resistance News Network’s Media Guide*, Black Ink, 13 Oct. 2023, <https://black-ink.info/2023/10/13/palestinian-resistance-news-networks-media-guide/> (“Anti-zionism means the dismantlement of the zionist entity. Anti-zionism does not mean post zionism, or that the ‘two sides’ are ‘equal.’ It is never over until imperialism is over. It is not over until all land, from the river to the sea, has been returned to the indigenous Palestinians and the occupation has been totally dismantled.”). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Day of Resistance Toolkit*, National Students for Justice in Palestine, 8 Oct. 2023, available at <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/24028356/day-of-resistance-toolkit.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Protests Highlight U.S. Non-Profits Driving Ethnic Cleansing in Palestine*, Defund Racism, 2 Sep. 2021, <https://defundracism.org/protests-highlight-u-s-non-profits-driving-ethnic-cleansing-in-palestine/>; [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See, e.g., the [*Alleged Crimes in Raya Kobo*](https://www.oversightboard.com/decision/fb-mp4zc4cc/) and [*Armenians in Azerbaijan*](https://www.oversightboard.com/decision/fb-qbjdascv/)decisions. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See, e.g., the [*Posts in Polish Targeting Trans People*](https://www.oversightboard.com/decision/fb-uk2rus24/) decision. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Campus Antisemitism: A Study of Campus Climate Before and After the Hamas Terrorist Attacks*, Anti-Defamation League, 29 Nov. 2023, <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/campus-antisemitism-study-campus-climate-and-after-hamas-terrorist-attacks>. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Close to 2/3 of US Jews feel less safe than they did a year ago, says AJC study*, Times of Israel, 13 Feb. 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/close-to-2-3-of-us-jews-feel-less-safe-than-they-did-a-year-ago-says-ajc-study/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Massive spike post-Oct. 7 recorded; campus incidents tripled; bomb threats targeting Jewish institutions up 10 times*, Anti-Defamation League, 16 Apr. 2024, <https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/us-antisemitic-incidents-soared-140-percent-2023-breaking-all-previous>. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *UK Jewish group records all-time high in antisemitic incidents after October 7*, Times of Israel, 15 Feb. 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/uk-jewish-group-records-all-time-high-in-antisemitic-incidents-after-october-7/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Antisemitic acts quadrupled in France last year — Jewish council*, Times of Israel, 25 Jan. 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/antisemitic-acts-quadrupled-in-france-last-year-jewish-council/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *Antisemitic Attitudes in America 2024*, Anti-Defamation League, 29 Feb. 2024, <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/antisemitic-attitudes-america-2024>. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. E.g., X Post, @EllieCohanim, 2 May 2024, <https://x.com/EllieCohanim/status/1786118945394626755> (Showing NBC News report on attack on Iranian-American Jew at UCLA); *Pro-Palestinian demonstrators leave UCLA buildings vandalized, covered in trash*, KTLA News, 2 May 2024, <https://ktla.com/video/pro-palestinian-demonstrators-leave-ucla-buildings-vandalized-covered-in-trash/9658431/> (Local news report showing vandalism at UCLA encampment, showing “from the river to the sea” alongside other Hamas symbols like the red triangle that has become a Hamas symbol due to its use in Hamas propaganda films, as well as signs reading “glory to the liberation fighters”). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. E.g., Michael Starr, *'Globalize the Intifada:' Rutgers president, Jewish students flee meeting*, Jerusalem Post, 8 Apr. 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-795989>. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. E.g., Danielle Greyman-Kennard, *Jewish UCLA student blocked from entering campus by pro-Palestinian activists*, Jerusalem Post, 30 Apr. 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-799131>. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Chris Pandolfo, *FBI director says terror threats elevated to all-time high since Oct. 7: 'Blinking lights everywhere'*, Fox News, 5 Dec. 2023, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/fbi-director-terror-threats-elevated-all-time-high-oct-7-blinking-lights-everywhere>. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See *Jersild v. Denmark*, App. 15890/89, Eur.Ct.H.R. (ser. A) 298, ¶¶ 29, 31 (1994), <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-57891> (discussing and applying the principles of legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality in the context of hate speech and incitement). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Jack Donoghue, et al., *Memes, Missiles, and Mobilizations: An Analysis of the 2021 Israel/Hamas Conflict*, Boundless Israel, 2023, <https://boundlessisrael.org/paper/74/details>. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. *Hamas Charter*, Federation of American Scientists, <https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/880818.htm> (containing an English translation of the Hamas Charter, showing language like “Israel, by virtue of its being Jewish and of having a Jewish population, defies Islam and the Muslims” and “The time will not come until Muslims will fight the Jews (and kill them); until the Jews hide behind rocks and trees, which will cry: 0 Muslim! there is a Jew hiding behind me, come on and kill him!”, as well as depictions of Jews as “the merchants of war” and the use of the antisemitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* forgery). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. [*Depiction of Zwarte Piet*](https://www.oversightboard.com/decision/fb-s6nrtdaj/) decision. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)