

Moderating the Phrase ‘From the River to the Sea.’

The Antisemitism Policy Trust welcomes Meta’s consultation on moderating the phrase “From the River to the Sea.” The Trust has for many years provided training and advice to the UK Parliament, government, civil service, and public and private companies on matters relating to antisemitism. We hope that the oversight board will find our input useful.

‘From the Rive to the Sea’ explained

“From the River to the sea” is one of the most common phrases used in anti-Israel/pro-Palestinian demonstrations in the UK and around the world, and on social media.

It is not a new phrase. It has traditionally been used by arch-terrorists and leaders of terrorist organisations, for example Osama Bin Laden, leader of Al Qaeda, and Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Lebanon-based terrorist organisation Hezbollah, to reflect their objection to the existence of the state of Israel, their commitment to its annihilation and as a call for violence against Israeli and Jewish people in particular. The terror group the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) used the slogan from as early as the 1980s, stating that ‘we believe that Palestine, from the River to the Sea, is our country.’ Hamas’s founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin also stated on many occasions that Hamas ‘seeks to liberate Palestine from the river to the sea.’ This effort was also underlined in Hamas’s charter. The annihilation of the state of Israel is one of Hamas’s stated aims, one that was borne out in the 7 October attacks on Southern Israel in which over 1,300 Israelis were violently murdered, raped, tortured and kidnapped. Hamas, Hezbollah and Al Qaeda are not only anti-Israel organisations, they are deeply antisemitic and target Jewish people internationally. Iranian leaders, who have repeatedly vowed to annihilate Israel and mounted a substantial attack on 13 April 2024, use this slogan regularly in public statements and anti-Jewish propaganda.

The phrase taken in its original meaning, calls for war to ‘liberate’ the region between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, and annihilate the state of Israel – either forcing all Israeli Jews out of the country, or killing them, paving the way to establishing an Arab, Muslim state that is free of Jews. It is a threat of genocide directed specifically at Israeli Jews, not all Israelis (such as Muslim, Druze and Christian Israelis). This chant rejects Israel’s right to exist and denies Jews the right to self-determination in their ancestral homeland. In this context, the phrase can also be seen as antisemitic hate speech. Worryingly, The frequent use of the slogan acts to normalise this phrase as well as the ideology behind it.

Some of those who use this phrase claim that they are advocating for the dignity of Palestinians. Others claim that they are chanting it in support for a two-state solution. These alternative explanations are in some cases an attempt to avoid legal challenges, violate policies, evade punishment or being labelled a racist. In other cases, these artificial meanings emerge from ignorance about the origins and true meaning of the phrase.

Attempts to redefine the phrase and to change its meaning are largely unconvincing. Attaching a meaning to it that is fundamentally different to what this phrase really means, does not make it so.

For example, claiming the slogan supports a two-state solution is absurd. The literal meaning of the phrase is the establishment of a Palestinian State on the same territory as the state of Israel. Replacing Israel with Palestine renders a two-state solution impossible. Additionally, people can use many other forms of advocating for the dignity of Palestinians in ways that do not include a suggestion that the state of Israel should be annihilated and that Jewish people do not have a right to self-determination in their ancestral homeland. There are many more phrases with less plausible genocidal intent.

Recommendations

We believe that the slogan should be understood in its original (and quite literal) meaning, which is antisemitic and a call for violence. This would be in line with a warning issued by the UK government against use of the phrase. The government is also reviewing whether to treat it as a racially aggravated public order offence. We disagree that the underlying assumption of the Board should be that without context, the phrase is not a call to violence. Quite the opposite. We urge Meta to consider the phrase as violating its Violence and Incitement policies, unless there is evidence to show that a user employs the phrase in a way that is convincingly different from the phrase's original meaning and does not encourage violence or the destruction of Israel.

We do not believe that Meta should impose a blanket ban on the use of the phrase on Facebook. Instead, we recommend that Facebook employs several safety features to discourage use of the slogan. For example, adding an automated prompt when the use of the phrase is recognised, that explains to users the meaning of the slogan and urges them to reconsider using it. If a user still chooses to use the phrase, an automatic explanation could appear alongside the post, so those viewing it can gain a better understanding of the slogan and consider how they wish to respond to it. Doing this could discourage users from employing the slogan, express their views in a different way that does not violate Meta's policies or encourage them to clarify what they mean when they are using the phrase.

We further recommend that on occasions when the slogan is posted in conjunction with additional text, an image or a video that show that the intended message is in fact support for terrorism or promoting the annihilation of the state of Israel, that such content be removed swiftly, before it gains public exposure.

This is an example of the use of the phrase 'From the River to the sea' that was posted online (on this occasion, on 'X') with a background image of armed PLO terrorist Leila Khaled. This is something that we believe should fall under Facebook's policy of Violence and Incitement and Dangerous Organisations and Individuals:



There are several public Facebook groups that use the slogan in their title. One calls to ‘dismantle apartheid state and its colonisation of Palestine’ which may fall under Facebook’s policy against Violence and Incitement:



From the River to the Sea

Public group · 1.6K members

Join

About

A platform to share anything about Free Palestine and to Dismantle Apartheid State and its Colonisation on Palestine

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We are extremely concerned by the high level of antisemitism online. This has the effect of radicalising users, increases divisions, creates a toxic environment and contributes to anti-Jewish racism online and offline. We hope that our insight and recommendations will help the board decide how to moderate the phrase in a way that encourages a less toxic discourse rather than phrases that incite harm.