The phrase "from the river to the sea" has been used both by Zionist and Palestinian advocates, usually to express the notion that the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River in its entirety, including Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, belongs to one of the peoples. The phrase is usually used by people who reject a two-state solution for either ideological or practical reasons. Many people who have used this phrase expressed opinions that are exclusionary and tend to reject the other side's right to national self-determination in the area concerned. However, the expression has also been used by advocates of a one-state solution to the conflict, who may believe that it is possible to reach a peaceful solution for the two peoples – Jews and Palestinians – in a single political entity. An example of this usage can be found in issue 6 of the Hebrew peer-reviewed journal The Public Sphere, "[One State Between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River: Pipe Dream or an Unfolding Reality](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rc9Fmp6qtnEZcxOVeH_lP-QhbhsgV2IJ/view)." The opening essay of this issue, written by Yoav Kapchuk, states the following:

"The support for the two-state option as well as the one-state option, and the opposition to them, cross political camps and ideological currents: on the one hand, it seems that both the main left-wing parties in Israel and the center-right parties in Israel support the two-state solution. The Palestinian Authority also still supports this solution. On the other hand, in recent years there have been voices from both the right and the left in Israel calling for the establishment of a single state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, or at least expressing doubt about the possibility of realizing the two-state solution" (p. 6; italics added; translated from Hebrew).

On the Jewish-Israeli side, the origin of the phrase concerns several historical events. In 1920, the League of Nations determined that the area of the British Mandate over Palestine would include areas on both sides of the Jordan River – today's Israel, West Bank, Gaza Strip, and the Kingdom of Jordan (known then as "Transjordan"). This decision listed as one of its reasons the decision of the British government "in favor of the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people," and added that "nothing should be done which might prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine." As a result, some right-wing Zionist leaders began seeing the entire area, including Transjordan, as a Jewish homeland. In 1921, however, the British divided the mandate in two, creating the "Emirate of Transjordan." Some Zionists objected to this. Famously, Ze'ev Jabotinsky wrote: "The Jordan has two banks; this one is ours, and the other one too." This position continued to be endorsed by some, including the future Prime Minister of Israel Menachem Begin, after the creation of the Hashemite Kingdom in 1946. However, public opinion among Jews changed, and most Zionists endorsed the view that the state of Israel should exist only to the west of the Jordan River. The public debate was now between those who thought the West Bank (occupied by Jordan in 1949 and by Israel in 1967) and Gaza (occupied first by Egypt and then by Israel) should be part of Israel, and those who believed it should be under Arab control as part of a peace deal. Since 1967, and increasingly since the beginning of the Oslo peace process in the 1990s, the slogan "from the river to the sea" has been used numerous times by right-wing Zionists who see the West Bank as part of Eretz Israel.

On the Palestinian side, it is unclear when the use of the slogan began. However, it has clearly been used mainly by Palestinians who reject the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.

Whether usage of the phrase should be deemed legitimate or not should be determined in context. Some people who use it not only reject the right of the other side to national self-determination but also the right of people on the other side to exist in this area. They envision transferring societies as a whole, which is a clear violation of human rights. For example, pro-Palestinian calls for freeing Palestine "from the river to the sea" are sometimes accompanied by calls to 'send Jews back to Europe'; calls for a Jewish state "from the river to the sea" are sometimes accompanied by a call to transfer the Palestinian population in the West Bank into the Kingdom of Jordan. That said, the slogan "from the river to the sea" is not in itself racist and does not necessarily call for violating human rights. However misguided such calls are (and they are indeed misguided), they may rest on the view that Palestinians and Jews are capable of peacefully sharing the area with freedoms granted to people from different nationalities and ethnicities.