

**SOUTH AFRICAN ZIONIST FEDERATION’S (“SAZF”) SUBMISSIONS TO
THE META OVERSIGHT BOARD REGARDING THE USE OF THE PHRASE
“FROM THE RIVER TO THE SEA”**

INTRODUCTION

1. These submissions are made in response to the Meta Oversight Board’s call on 7 May 2024 for public comments on whether social media posts that include the phrase “*From the River to the Sea*” violate its Community Standards.
2. Meta refused requests by users to remove posts from Facebook containing the phrase “*From the River to the Sea*” in three separate cases. Meta determined it could not conclude that the phrase constituted either a call to violence, a call for exclusion of any particular group, nor that it is linked exclusively to support for Hamas. It concluded that the phrase did not violate its Community Standards.
3. The Meta Oversight Board will decide whether this content should be removed under Meta’s policies and according to its human rights responsibilities. The primary controversy identified by the Oversight Board is the variety of meanings that different interest groups ascribe to the phrase. These range from the notion that the phrase advocates “*for the dignity and human rights of Palestinians*” to the contention that it constitutes “*hate speech, is antisemitic and is a call to abolish the state of Israel*” thus violating Meta’s Community Standards.
4. The submissions are made by the SAZF, a non-profit organisation working proactively to reduce anti-Israel sentiment in South African political, religious and

cultural communities through education advocacy, and lobbying. The SAZF is representative of over 95 percent of the Jewish Community in South Africa,

ORIGIN AND CURRENT USE OF THE PHRASE

5. The phrase "*From the River to the Sea*" refers in a literal sense to the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. This encompasses the West Bank, Gaza and the State of Israel which is home to over seven million Jews.
6. This phrase is clearly not a benign reference to a geographical area in Israel nor a human rights call for Palestinian freedom. Embedded within the phrase is coded language that has a special meaning and context which is shared by both the users of this phrase and the targeted audience. This makes the phrase more dangerous and more difficult to identify as "hate speech" or speech that incites violence since the words themselves, without additional context, do not convey their true meaning. A prime example of this would be the phrase "Heil Hitler". On the face of it, the phrase is simply a greeting. However the meaning embedded within the words, derived from its political context during World War II, reflects support for Hitler and the Nazi Party and as such for the extermination of the Jews.
7. The true meaning behind of the phrase "*From the River to the Sea*" is thus not immediately apparent from the actual words used. The embedded meanings which are clearly understood by its Jewish or Israeli target audience include that;

- 7.1. It alludes to genocidal intentions of the terrorist organisations who have adopted the phrase as its mantra against Jewish people residing inside and outside of Israel;
 - 7.2. Its use at Pro-Palestinian and Pro-Hamas marches, and in social media, sends a specific message to its target audience that it is under threat from terrorist organisations seeking to eradicate Israel. This reality was reinforced by Hamas's massacre of Jews in Israel on 7 October 2023; and
 - 7.3. The notion of Palestine that is free from the River to the Sea is incompatible with the Jewish right to continued self-determination and a threat to continued Jewish existence. The chanting of this phrase or its use in social media posts therefore contains an embedded message to Jews that their very existence as a nation is threatened.
8. The phrase is thus universally understood by its Jewish or Israeli audience as an antisemitic call for the violent eradication of Israel and its inhabitants who are perceived as an obstacle to a free Palestine. This is borne out when one has regard to the origin of the phrase and the context in which it is currently being used as described below.
 9. Since 7 October 2023, the phrase "*From the River to the Sea.*" has gained traction as the main slogan or chant heard at any Pro-Palestinian rally during increasingly violent protests directed against Israel and its inhabitants. It has also gained momentum at the recent Pro-Palestinian demonstrations on college

campuses and is often accompanied by anti-Zionist slogans seeking to delegitimise Israel. Allowing the proliferation of the phrase “*from the River to the Sea*” in social media, permits the dissemination of impermissible hate speech directed against Jews, intimidating them and infringing their right to be protected against discrimination and be treated equally as online users.

10. The phrase has been used since the 1960’s by several proscribed terrorist organisations including the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Hamas in their calls to eradicate Israel. Each of these proscribed terrorist organisations have committed egregious acts of terrorism against Jews and have killed thousands of Jews.
11. The widely published statements of Khaled Mashaal, Hamas’s former leader, in 2012 at its 25th anniversary celebration of the founding of Hamas was that “*Palestine is ours from the river to the sea and from the south to the north*”. He also declared that “*There will be no concession on any inch of the land*” and “*the Jewish state would be wiped away through “resistance,” or military action*”, He stated “*The state will come from resistance, not negotiation. “Liberation first, then statehood.”* This is an unambiguous call for the use of violence to eradicate the Jewish state and conquer its land from the river to the sea. It is understood as such by Jews throughout the world.
12. This attitude is echoed in article 20 of the Hamas Charter of 2017 in the words that “*no part of the land of Palestine shall be compromised or conceded, irrespective of the causes, the circumstances and the pressures and no matter how long the occupation lasts.. Hamas rejects any alternative to the full and*

complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea". This clearly references the intention of Hamas's to eradicate Israel without any concessions or notions of equality.

13. Hamas's massacre of Jews on 7 October 2023, is consistent with its genocidal aim of eradicating Israel and transforming it into Palestine. Those who adopt this mantra are repeating words taken directly from the Hamas Charter and aligning themselves with antisemitic terrorist organisations who seek liberation through brutal violence rather than negotiation.
14. This meaning is also understood by Jewish civil rights organisations as well as numerous government representatives around the world. Examples of this are detailed in this submission.
15. The Anti-Defamation League, (ADL) an advocacy group devoted to identifying and fighting antisemitism, in October 2023, described the phrase as a rallying cry that has long been used by anti-Israel voices, including supporters of terrorist organizations such as Hamas and the PFLP, who seek Israel's destruction through violent means.
16. The American Jewish Committee, the global advocacy organisation for Jewish people, likewise states that this phrase symbolises the Palestinian desire to control the entire territory of Israel's borders, from the river to the sea.
17. Stakeholders have shared with Meta that the phrase is used as support for the rights of Palestinian people. These stakeholders disingenuously ignore the fact that the phrase "from the river to the sea" implies that Palestine will be free only

when Israel is dismantled. It is thus incompatible with any notion of equal rights for Palestinians.

ONLINE TRENDS IN CONTENT USING THE PHRASE

18. There is increased support for the notion that this phrase is an antisemitic genocidal call for the destruction of Israel.
19. In November 2023, Elon Musk of X referred to the phrase as a euphemism for genocide and its use being against its terms of service. He stated that using this phrase would result in suspension.
20. In a speech that led to the arrest by Canadian authorities of Charlotte Kates, the International Coordinator of Samidoun: Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network, the true meaning behind the phrase was clearly apparent. She stated in a rally on April 26 2024 in Vancouver, British Columbia that the October 7 attack changed the world because it showed that Palestine was "almost free" of Zionism, from the River to the Sea. She led the crowd in a chant: "Long live October 7!". Charlotte Kates' speech was uploaded to various accounts on X and the rally was streamed live on "Free Palestine Tri-cities BC" on Instagram. However the livestream no longer exists on the account.

ONLINE AND OFFLINE HARMS FROM USE OF PHRASE

21. Since October 7 2023, antisemitic incidents dramatically increased worldwide. In South Africa, between October 7 and December 2023, they were determined by the South African Jewish Board of Deputies to have increased by over 600 percent compared with the previous year.

22. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has confirmed that there is an unprecedented amount of antisemitism in the US, recording 8873 incidents in 2023 including 1987 Incidents at Jewish institutions such as schools or synagogues, an increase of 140 percent since 2022. According to the ADL, using this phrase has the effect of making members of the Jewish and pro-Israel community feel unsafe and ostracised.
23. On 20 May 2023 ,the ADL published updated statistics on antisemitism between October 7 and the end of December 2023 reflecting enormous increases in antisemitic incidents. Australia had a 738 percent increase in incidents, Denmark over 1000 percent increase, France a 1000 percent increase and Brazil a 961 percent increase, compared with the previous year for that same period.
24. We submit that the prevalence of increased antisemitism in the offline environment highlights Meta's responsibility not to allow the spreading of hate speech in the online environment and to prevent the publication of posts containing Hate Speech targeted at Jews.

META'S HUMAN RIGHTS RESPONSIBILITIES

25. Meta has an obligation to moderate its platforms regarding discriminatory content or hate speech, under both international and national law. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides in Articles 19 and 20 that freedom of expression is limited by advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

26. Meta has a responsibility to prevent the proliferation of the posting of Hate Speech including dangerous speech on its platforms. Meta has indicated that in determining whether content constitutes impermissible hate speech, it may have regard to whether it could constitute dangerous speech. The Dangerous Speech Project created by Susan Benesch examines the relationship between speech and the incitement to violence. Importantly she states that “*People don’t commit violence against other groups - or even condone it – spontaneously. First they must be taught to see other people as pests, vermin, aliens, or threats. Malicious leaders often use the same types of rhetoric to do this... We call this Dangerous Speech. Violence, it is stated might be prevented by making it less abundant or less convincing*”.
27. The phrase violates Facebook’s rules on safety and constitutes content that is perceived as a threat by Jews. Meta acknowledges in their rules that threatening content has the potential to intimidate and silence people and is not permissible on Facebook.
28. By failing to remove posts containing the phrase “from the river to the sea”, Meta would be providing the Pro-Hamas supporters a platform to incite violence and perpetuate antisemitism.

STATE AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

29. Various European countries have banned demonstrations using the phrase from the “*River to the Sea*” recognising it as a call for violence.
30. On 11 October, Vienna police banned a Pro-Palestine demonstration on the grounds that the organisers had included the slogan in their invitations. They

claimed “*From the river to the sea*” violated article 2 of the European convention on human rights, the right to life. Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer has stated that the chanting of “*From the river to the sea*” would become a criminal offense.

31. In the US, the crackdown on the chant has been undertaken by employers as well as by government. In 2018, Marc Lamont Hill, a pro-Palestinian political commentator and professor at Temple University, was fired from a role at CNN after he used the “*From the river to the sea*” phrase in a speech at the United Nations.
32. The former UK home secretary, Suella Braverman, commented during November 2023, after a series of UK protests after the 7 October massacre – in which thousands chanted “*from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free*” – that the slogan was “*widely understood as a demand for the destruction of Israel*”. She added: “*Attempts to pretend otherwise are disingenuous.*”.
33. Both the US government and the Australian government have recently passed resolutions condemning the phrase.
34. On 16 April 2024, a motion was passed in the US House of Representatives condemning the phrase as an “*antisemitic call to arms with the goal of the eradication of the State of Israel, which is located between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.*” It determined that the phrase “*seeks to deny Jewish people the right to self-determination and calls for the removal of the Jewish people from their ancestral homeland*”. The resolution continued stating that that it is a “*“rallying cry” that promotes violence against both the State of Israel and*

Diaspora Jewry, and “does a disservice to Israelis, Palestinians and all those in the region who seek peace.”

35. In early May 2024 Madrid’s Reina Sofia Museum controversially called a program at the museum, “From The River To the Sea”, and was requested to change its name. It changed it to “Critical Thinking Gatherings, International Solidarity With Palestine”, after the Israeli Embassy and representatives of the Jewish community said it furthered a narrative calling for Israel’s extermination.
36. The Australian Senate also during May 2024 voted 56 to 12 in favour of condemning the phrase “*from the river to the sea*” after Labour Senator Fatima Payman uttered the slogan while accusing Israel of "genocide". The motion, which was introduced by shadow foreign affairs Minister Simon Birmingham, condemns the slogan because of the insinuation that Israel should not exist labelling it as "*antisemitic*" and said it had "*no place*" in Australia.
37. Antisemitism manifests itself in many ways," Mr Birmingham told the senate on Thursday." *Attacks are often made via expressions of hatred, via threats, via intimidation. These include the use of chants and phrases like calls for intifada and the chant ‘from the river to the sea’. We have seen in our country, as in far too many other places around the world, the increasing use of these chants, of these phrases. Let us be very clear, they call for violence, they stand against the existence of the state of Israel,*
38. Executive Council of Australian Jewry co-chief executive Peter Wertheim said in this regard that “*No matter how others might try to sanitise it, this is not a call for a two-state solution, but for ethnic cleansing, or worse, genocide.*

39. United Kingdom's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has also issued warnings against protesters chanting the slogan "*From the River to the Sea*" in solidarity with Palestine . He stated that "*Those who chant from the river to the sea are either useful idiots who do not understand what they are saying, or worse, people who wish to wipe the Jewish state from the map.*" He added, "*We will have zero tolerance for those who promote or glorify terrorism or piddle antisemitism on our streets.*"

RECOMMENDATIONS

40. It is submitted that the above additional content establishes the meaning of the phrase as an antisemitic call for the violent eradication and delegitimising of the state of Israel. It thus incites violence and constitutes impermissible hate speech in violation of the Community Standards. We therefore recommend that the oversight board overturns Meta's decision with regard to the three cases complained of.
41. We recommend further that the Oversight board issues a policy recommendation that the use of the phrase in any form on its platforms is in violation of its community standards and ought to be removed.