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Digital Rights Foundation’s Comment Posts that include “From The River To The Sea”

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In November 2023, following the events of October 7th there was a surge in posts online containing the phrase “[From the River to the Sea](#)” - a phrase used by people across the world to show their support for Palestine. The complete slogan, “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be Free” is a reference to the land across the historical state of Palestine from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. The slogan has been used since the 1960s by Palestinian nationalist and resistance groups such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Hamas. Over time the phrase has become increasingly popular among [Palestinians](#), and Palestinian diaspora around the world as it speaks to their personal ties to the land. Many identify themselves strongly with the village or town they or their ancestors come from, stretching across the land, from Jericho and Safed near the Jordan River, to Jaffa and Haifa on the shores of the Mediterranean sea.

As the phrase is used globally by different actors, the context and intent varies depending on who is using it. Despite that, the chant is mostly used to support and [empower](#) the struggle of all Palestinians, regardless of religion, striving for a free and sovereign homeland. However, there have been instances where variations of the phrase have been used to support the movement for a Greater Israel. For example, the founding charter of Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud party states: “Between the sea and the Jordan River there will only be Israeli sovereignty”. In 1977, their platform called for Israeli sovereignty over the land between Jordan and the Mediterranean sea, openly demanding complete annexation of the [West Bank](#).

The [chant](#) can be equated to the commonly supported ideology for a ‘Greater Israel’ - an Israeli Jewish state that extends from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. If we consider Palestinian usage of the chant for liberation as a call for the expulsion of Jews from the region, then in all fairness, the same should hold true for a call for a Greater Israel. It is no secret that the current Israeli government and those that came before have supported the complete annihilation and expulsion of Palestinians from the land. Supporters of the Zionist ideology perceive the chant as a violent call because it threatens their vision of a solely Jewish state. The liberation of Palestine means that Israel will have to treat Palestinian Arabs and Israelis as equal citizens, adding millions of Palestinian Arabs to their citizenship rolls - a decision that goes against their aim of establishing a Greater Israel, diminishing the “Jewishness” of the state.

In the past claims have been made that the slogan is antisemitic, however in truth the slogan and its use reflect a long history of attempts to silence Palestinian voices and those speaking in solidarity. Palestinian-American writer Yousef Munayyer argues that those who perceive “From the River to the Sea” to have genocidal connotations or any desire for the destruction of Israel, were simply reflective of their own [Islamophobia](#). He argues that the phrase was instead merely used to express people's desire for a state where “Palestinians can live in

their homeland as free and equal citizens, neither dominated by others nor dominating others.” Some Palestinians say that the slogan refers to a [single state](#) where Palestinians and Israelis can live together, and not as a call to remove anyone from the region. According to Rama Al Malah, an organizer with the Palestinian Youth Movement, the chant in no way calls for the killing of Jewish people but is a way for them to say that they want liberation from 75 years of occupation, and to advocate for the return of refugees who have been forced out of their land from 1948 till now.

Now that the intended use of the phrase through online and offline platforms is established, it is important to highlight how Meta’s policies and content moderation practices have been heavily [censoring](#) content relating to Palestine since October 7th, 2023. Users across the globe have reported that the content they share that is pro-Palestine is being ‘shadow-banned’, limiting their reach and engagement on the platforms. Users have also reported the removal of pro-Palestine content from the platform after being flagged for ‘violating community guidelines’. When content regarding conflict areas is [removed by Meta](#) from its platforms, the risk of erasure of crucial evidence to be used in international criminal courts for prosecuting perpetrators increases. In addition to silencing voices that advocate for Palestinian rights, the deletion of the phrase “From the River to the Sea” among other pro-Palestine content creates gaps in potential [digital evidence on human rights violations](#). [As per Leiden guidelines](#), digitally derived evidence including photographs, social media content and videos is being increasingly used as documented evidence in international criminal prosecutions. [The UN Fact-Finding](#) mission using Facebook posts as evidence in the case of brutalities against Myanmar’s Rohingya population is one such example that signifies the crucial role played by social media platforms for the preservation of records. Similarly, Meta’s removal of content related to the Palestine-Israel conflict, in any capacity, creates a dent in the repository that has the potential to serve as crucial evidence for legal decision-making against violations within conflict zones.

According to a report by [Human Rights Watch](#) from October to November 2023, there have been 1050 takedowns on Instagram and Facebook relating to Pro Palestinian content. Of the 1050 takedowns, written primarily in the English language from over 60 countries, 1049 cases contained peaceful content in solidarity with Palestinians. Since the October 7 conflict, there has been a surge in hateful content against Palestinians on social media platforms. [7amleh](#)’s AI-powered language model has been monitoring the spread of hate speech in Hebrew against Palestinians and pro-Palestine users on these platforms. Since October the model has classified 6,026,492 hateful and violent cases on platforms. The distribution of violence according to the tool has been the highest on X (79.7%) followed by Meta platforms (19.1%). Additionally, it is difficult to overlook Meta’s biased approach towards pro-Palestinian content on the platform when in October 2023 Meta started inserting the word [‘terrorist’](#) into profile bios of Palestinian users on Instagram; later issuing an apology stating that the platform was experiencing a bug in auto-translation on Instagram. Previously, Meta’s track record in the May 2021 crisis between Israel and Palestine showed a similar pattern when Palestinian voices were censored and shadow-banned on the platform, as was later confirmed by the [Sustainable Business Network and Consultancy \(BSR\) report](#). The continuous removal of pro-Palestine content on the platform indicates that Meta has repeatedly censored the voices of users on its platform even before the events of October 9. Post-October 9, the censorship has been further aggravated by big tech platforms.

Meta's handling of [Palestinian content](#), particularly [the removal of pages](#) such as Eye of Palestine and the suspension of Palestinian journalist [Motaz Azaiza](#)'s account, raises serious concerns about the platform's commitment to human rights and freedom of speech on the platform. Despite Meta's newsworthy policy, which protects journalistic content, these accounts have faced undue restrictions and reach limitations. This biased enforcement is in stark contrast with Meta's approach during the Russia-Ukraine conflict, where the platform displayed [clear bias](#) by promoting content [favoring and showing solidarity](#) with Ukraine. This discrepancy underscores [an inconsistency](#) in Meta's content moderation practices, undermining principles of freedom of expression, freedom of association, and equality and non-discrimination. Although Meta has since issued [an apology](#) for its unfair treatment of Palestinian solidarity voices, the platform persists in limiting content that supports Palestine, further perpetuating [digital apartheid](#) and the use of social media algorithms that disproportionately impact marginalized voices. This ongoing issue highlights a significant gap between Meta's stated policies and its actions, calling into question its commitment to upholding human rights responsibilities.

In its recent policy changes, Meta has introduced new default limits on political content, weakening free expression online by disproportionately affecting political content from [marginalized groups](#). The time and context of this particular policy raise questions about the potentially biased approach of the platform in controlling narratives. This not only undermines democratic values of free speech and association but also exacerbates existing inequalities, particularly for voices supporting the Palestinian plight. The biased application of Meta's policies reflects a broader trend of [digital discrimination](#), where algorithmic decisions and content moderation policies reinforce existing power imbalances and suppress dissenting voices. Meta's inconsistent and biased handling of Palestinian content, coupled with its preferential treatment of other geopolitical issues, not only raises grave concerns around adherence to global human rights principles but also potentially undermines systematic freedom of expression, freedom of association, and non-discrimination. Tech platforms need to create more transparent and equitable content moderation policies that are sensitive to contextual nuances.

Meta's response to the phrase "From the river to the sea" on its platform revolves around several key human rights principles. Facebook, as a platform with 3.03 billion monthly active users, has the responsibility to protect the fundamental human rights of its user base. This includes allowing individuals to express political opinions, advocate for political changes, express solidarity with a cause and ensure equality and non-discrimination. The cases highlight contexts where the aim of the phrase "From the river to the sea" is to advocate peacefully for Palestinian civil rights without promoting violence or hatred towards people under protected characteristics. Upon reviewing the content mentioning the phrase on Meta platforms, it was found that a large majority of it only mentions and sympathizes with Palestinians with no discussion being anti-semitic or anti-Israel. The question that arises is in a case where the world has seen the extent of atrocities that Palestinians have been subjected to, are expressing personal opinions around the current crisis considered promoting terrorism on platforms? Many Palestinian activists have expressed that the complete phrase "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" does not insult or violate the sovereignty of the state of Israel, the Jewish community, or Meta's content moderation policies. Through a more subjective perspective where the phrase is used critically against state institutions, Meta does not categorize the use of the phrase as hate speech, particularly when the phrase is against state institutions rather than any specific recognized individuals. In all three cases, the phrase has been provided more context

with additional text, for example “#DefundIsrael”, “Zionist State of Israel”, and “Zionist Israeli occupiers”, highlighting the cases as an association with a political cause rather than to support any dangerous organizations (as categorized by Meta and/or the United States Government). Although the cause is controversial in the current global political landscape, the phrase and its use in these cases do not violate Meta’s community guidelines on “[Hate speech](#)”. The first case where the user claimed the phrase “violates Meta’s policies prohibiting content that promotes violence or supports terrorism” refers to Meta’s rules on “[Violence and incitement](#)”, “[Dangerous Organizations](#)” and Individuals. The phrase “From the river to the sea” is used to show solidarity with Palestinians in general, rather than an affiliation with any political or resistance group. None of the cases presented by the Oversight Board insinuate or show affiliation and alliance, or promote dangerous organizations. Moreover, Meta’s categorization of dangerous organizations needs further transparency and context. The issue of contextual categorization of keywords and associations has been a long-standing debate, especially with Meta’s content moderation policies. For a platform that deems its policies global and standardized for every country, specifically using “United States designated terrorist organizations” contradicts their global policies agenda. These policies need more robust and inclusive parameters to be globally inclusive throughout different regions. Moreover, the categorizations of “Dangerous organizations” should be transparently communicated with Meta’s trusted partners to make them aware of the kind of content that should be escalated to Meta.

These cases are a testament to addressing the contextual application of Meta’s community standards. Ideally, there should be no room for specific targeting of any religious groups thus anti-semitic content should be taken down right away, however in cases where the content is associated with a peaceful socio-political movement, the content should be left up as it does not go against any of Meta’s content moderation guidelines. Hence, the three cases should not be removed from the platform as long as they have been posted in solidarity with a political cause and are categorized as freedom of speech and freedom of association.

The use of the phrase has also been widely scrutinized at the state and educational institutions level. The phrase was labeled [antisemitic](#) by the US House of Representatives in a resolution that was passed with a 377 majority against 44 who voted against it in January 2024. US Representative Rashida [Tlaib](#) was censured by the House of Representatives through a resolution as a consequence of her using the phrase on social media. Several House Republicans and Democrats came together to condemn the pro-Palestine statements of the only Palestinian-origin representative. According to them, the phrase’s genocidal nature encourages the eradication of the state of Israel. It is important to note that the resolution was [passed](#) and supported by the majority of House Representatives despite Tlaib clarifying on the House floor that her criticism is targeted at the Israeli government, not the people. In the UK, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak [condemned](#) the slogan and called the people who use it either gravely misinformed or supportive of the threat that the slogan signifies towards Israel’s existence. Last year, Pro Palestine [rallies](#) across the UK were condemned by former Home Secretary Suella Braverman. She was of the opinion that the rallies were “hate marches” against Jewish people and the state of Israel, encouraging the police to use brute force with zero tolerance. [Braverman](#) has repeatedly expressed her contention with the rallies and the phrase asking why it has been justified under claims of religious struggle. She has also proposed to alter the Terrorism Act 2000 as in its current state, evidence of incitement and encouragement of terrorism is required to charge the protestors, calling for laws to tackle “mass extremism” on the UK streets. Individuals holding

office encouraging the police to take strong action against protestors without distinguishing between peaceful and non-peaceful elements is deeply concerning as it paves the way for influencing and forming a collective narrative that eventually infiltrates the general public. The encouragement of violence against the protestors in itself comes off as a threat to people's right to protest and freedom of expression; just as Rashida Tlaib's clarification on her stance being against the Israeli government and not the people was ignored, condemning her pro-Palestine stance.

The pro-Palestine student [protests](#) taking place across university campuses have been labeled anti-semitic resulting in several students being arrested by the police. Upon being asked about the phrase being used, the Columbia University President pointed out that although she feels that the phrase is antisemitic, there are people who do not hold the same opinion. Since April 18, the [arrests](#) have taken place at 40 different US campuses resulting in more than 2100 students being arrested. The arrests and the administration's sympathetic stance towards anti-protestors have widely challenged freedom of speech and expression where students are being penalized for voicing out their opinion and publicly protesting against a genocide. Such practices are discriminatory and promote a greater divide within the community.

Censoring public opinions on platforms is not only an undemocratic practice but also sets a questionable global precedent where silencing the masses becomes an acceptable norm. Although drawing a clear binary between free speech and hate speech is important, institutions and government bodies need to demarcate through careful consideration. As mentioned earlier, the particular phrase under scrutiny is used during peaceful pro-Palestine protests to showcase solidarity with Palestinians and their struggles. It is more to sympathize with them than it is to acts of terror. As the binary is defined, it is important to remember that calling out states participating in genocide cannot and should not be categorized as hate speech let alone students being penalized for the same. Several universities including New York University and Columbia University have barred graduating students from attending their graduation ceremonies as a consequence of their participation in the protests. This has led the protesting students to create their own events under the name of "The People's Graduation" to provide support to the barred students by celebrating their achievements together. In addition, faculty members have also come forward to protest and in support of the protesting students, the same can however not be said about university administrations.

Beyond the right to protest, students and other migrants relocate to countries like the US and the UK to improve their quality of life which includes their right to stand up for and against different causes that resonate with their identities as an ethnic, religious, or social community. When influential countries take a draconian position that advocates for the suppression of free speech, in addition to alienating the victims, they invalidate the individual right to democratic expression and legitimize all forms of oppression citizens and marginalized groups face in authoritarian states.

While the intended use of the phrase at large is to advocate for the freedom of Palestinians, some perceive it as a threat to a state. By censoring pro-Palestine content, big tech platforms play a role in the erasure of digital evidence against human rights atrocities in addition to curbing free speech online. At the state and educational institutions level, the opposition to the phrase emphasizes the increased suppression of marginalized communities and their voices. To

ensure equitable justice and access to information on online platforms through content regulation, it is important to not engage in disproportionate assessment of certain cases. To maintain their global status, platforms need to ensure that the criteria to flag specific content should be gauged not in line with regulations within specific countries, for instance, the US or the UK as discussed above, but per global majority countries.