

## **UKLFI CHARITABLE TRUST RESPONSE TO META OVERSIGHT BOARD**

### **REGARDING THE PHRASE ‘FROM THE RIVER TO THE SEA’**

1. On 7 May 2024, the Oversight Board for Meta announced three new cases for consideration and invited people and organizations to submit public comments regarding posts on Meta that include the phrase “*From the River to the Sea*”.
2. UKLFI Charitable Trust (“UKLFI”) is an English charity set up to advance legal education on antisemitism and to support victims of antisemitism, particularly antisemitism related to Israel. Its honorary patrons include some of the most distinguished members of the legal profession in the United Kingdom.

#### **Origin and current uses of the phrase**

3. The phrase “*From the River to the Sea*” refers to attaining Palestinian control over the entire territory from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea; territory which encompasses the current Palestinian territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as all of the territory comprising the modern State of Israel.
4. The phrase has been a rallying call for terrorist groups for decades, and was for example used as a slogan on [posters](#) produced by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (“PFLP”) in the 1970’s and 1980’s. The PFLP is designated as a terrorist organisation in the [US](#), the [UK](#) and the [EU](#). The group was [actively involved](#) in the Second Intifada, from 2000-2005, during which it carried out suicide operations and joint terror attacks with other Palestinian terrorist groups. In October 2001, the group [assassinated](#) Israel’s minister of agriculture, Rehavam Ze’evi. As recently as 2019, the PFLP carried out a [terror attack](#) that killed an Israeli teenager and injured several others.
5. The phrase is also [contained](#) in the 2017 Hamas Charter, in which Hamas completely rejects the legitimacy of the State of Israel and its right to exist, describes Palestine as extending “*from the River Jordan in the east to the Mediterranean in the west*” (art. 2), and calls for the “*full and complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea*” (art. 6). Similarly, in a [speech](#) in 2012, Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal said “*Palestine is ours from the river to the sea and from the south to the north. There will be no concession on any inch of the land.*”
6. Since 7 October 2023, the phrase has been adopted and largely used by anti-Israel protesters and Hamas supporters worldwide, including in the recent student encampments at universities in Europe and North America.

#### **Online trends in content using the phrase**

7. The phrase has also seen a surge online, in particular on social media. Here, the link between the phrase and the dismantlement of the State of Israel is clear. A [Facebook group](#) named “*From the River to the Sea*”, which has over 1,700 followers, writes in its “About” section: “*A platform to share anything about Free Palestine and to Dismantle Apartheid State and its Colonisation on Palestine*”. On the group, a member has shared a post which states that Hamas being a terror organisation is a lie, that Hamas and other “*Palestinian*

*Resistance members” are “freedom fighters” and that “Israel lied about what happened on 7 October. There were no burning of babies, rapes, etc.”:*

**From the River to the Sea**

Join Group

🔍

people outside the country.

\*Lie 5.\* Hamas is a terrorist organisation.  
 \*Truth:\* Israel is a terrorist state. Hamas and other Palestinian Resistance members are freedom fighters.

\*Lie 6.\* Hamas committed a terrorist attack on 7 October.  
 \*Truth:\*

1. Israel lied about what happened on 7 October. There were no burning of babies, rapes, etc.
2. Israel committed several terrorist attacks - in Deir Yassin (1948), Sharafat (1951), Kafr Qasem (1956), Al-Sammou (1966), Ein Al-Hilweh (1982), Sabra and Shatila (1982), Kafr Camp (1996), and many other places.

\*Lie 7.\* Israel is merely defending itself  
 \*Truth:\* Israel has been stealing Palestinian land, murdering innocent women and children, depriving Palestinians of water, restricting movement, constructing illegal settlements, demolishing homes, arresting innocent people, etc. for decades. This is not self defence, but aggression.

\*Lie 8.\* Israel is the only democratic state in the Middle East.  
 \*Truth:\* Israel has different laws for Palestinians and Jews in Israel. Palestinians are denied many rights which Israelis enjoy. Is this their definition of democracy?

\*Lie 9.\* Hamas does not want the Israeli state to exist  
 \*Truth:\*

1. There is nothing wrong with desiring the end of an oppressive, murdering apartheid state.
2. Israel does not want Palestine to exist. The founding charter of Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party states: "Between the sea and the Jordan River there will only be Israeli sovereignty."

\*Lie 10.\* Israel is an honest, truthful state that wants peace.  
 \*Truth:\* Israel has a track record of lying, dishonesty, immorality,




**About**

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

**Public**  
 Anyone can see who's in the group and what they post.

**Visible**  
 Anyone can find this group.

**Recent media**

8. On social media, use of the phrase often accompanies other calls for violence or encouragement or support for terrorist groups, such as the example above, or the spreading of disinformation about Israel and the current conflict. For example, in one of the cases included in the Oversight Board’s announcement, a community organisation in Canada had used the phrase along with condemnations of the alleged “slaughter” of Palestinians by the “Zionist State of Israel” and “Zionist Israeli occupiers”. This type of inflammatory language, which paints Zionism – the Jewish right to self-determination – in a negative light and suggests that Zionists are “slaughtering” Palestinians, alongside the phrase in question, has the potential to incite to violence against “Zionists” – reportedly 80% of British Jews.
  
9. The European Court of Human Rights (“**ECHR**”) has previously dealt with “ambiguous” calls for violence, such as the case referenced above, and has held that penalties imposed on the authors of such statements were justified, and not a violation of their freedom of expression. For example, in *Pavel Ivanov v Russia*, in which the applicant had publicly “denied the Jews their right to national dignity, claiming that they did not form a nation”, along with other racial slurs against Jewish people, the ECHR found that he had “sought to incite hatred towards the Jewish people”, against the underlying values of the European

Convention on Human Rights, including tolerance, social peace and non-discrimination. Similarly, in [Surek \(no.1\) v Turkey](#), in which a weekly newspaper had published letters condemning the military actions of Turkish authorities and “*accusing them of brutal suppression of the Kurdish people in their struggle for independence and freedom*”, the ECHR [held](#) that the letters in question “*amounted to an appeal to bloody revenge*”, stirred up hatred, and exposed certain named individuals to the possible risk of physical violence.

10. In this regard, X (formerly Twitter) has confirmed it will [suspend](#) users of the phrase “*From the River to the Sea*” from its social media platform, with Elon Musk labelling it a “*clear call for extreme violence*” and a euphemism that “*necessarily implies genocide*”.

### **Online and offline harms from use of the phrase**

11. Jewish and other human rights organisations, including the [Anti-Defamation League](#) (“ADL”) and the [American Jewish Committee](#) have labelled the phrase antisemitic, noting that it necessitates the dismantling of the Jewish state, including through the removal of Jews from their ancestral homeland, and that it is a rallying cry for terrorist groups and their sympathisers to erase the State of Israel. As the ADL has [explained](#), “*[u]sage of this phrase has the effect of making members of the Jewish and pro-Israel community feel unsafe and ostracized.*” In this [article](#) by a British Jewish barrister regarding the phrase, he writes: “*[A]s a resident of central London, I certainly feel threatened and alarmed. If the Met feels confident Jews are not being exposed to this language, it can only be because they feel too worried to venture into central London during these protests.*”
12. Indeed, the threat Jewish people feel by the use of this phrase has certainly been exacerbated by the extreme spike in antisemitic attacks worldwide since 7 October 2023. Antisemitic incidents increased 147% in the [UK](#) in 2023, and this percentage is similar in many countries around the world. For example, in the [US](#), antisemitic attacks rose 140% in 2023, and in [Canada](#), they increased 110%. Jewish people, businesses, synagogues and cemeteries have been attacked and destroyed, in the UK, the US and elsewhere in Europe and around the world.
13. Many of these attacks have taken place during anti-Israel protests and on university campuses, where this phrase is amongst those chanted. In the [US](#), antisemitic activity on college campuses increased 321% compared to 2022 and 36% of the total number of antisemitic incidents in 2023 took place during anti-Israel protests, where the rhetoric used “*included the promotion of classic antisemitic tropes, signage equating Judaism or Zionism with Nazism, unapologetic support for terrorism, glorification of terrorist groups and extreme anti-Zionism.*” During anti-Israel protests and at universities, Israeli and Jewish students have also been told to “*go back to Poland*” – an offensive and erroneous suggestion that Jewish people are not indigenous to the land of Israel and that they should go back to the country in which they were decimated in the Holocaust.
14. There have been multiple reports of online bullying and harassment against Jews, on social media and other sites, including through posts using this phrase, as shown in the examples provided in the Oversight Board’s announcement. In the [UK](#), 1,282 cases of online

antisemitism were recorded in 2023, “*more than in any previous year, and a 257% increase from the 359 online incidents reported in 2022.*”

### **Meta’s human rights responsibilities**

15. Several human rights may apply in relation to use of the phrase on Meta’s platforms, and it is Meta’s responsibility and duty to appropriately balance these rights. Meta has a general responsibility to strike an adequate balance between freedom of expression on the one hand, and the rights of other people, including the right to non-discrimination, on the other.
16. In the cases raised by the Oversight Board, when properly considered, the balance tips the scale in favour of prohibiting the public expression of this hateful phrase. This is because there are many other ways that individuals can express support for Palestine and Palestinians that does not imply violence against Jews or the eradication of their indigenous homeland. Supporting Palestinians and their rights should not be at the expense of the State of Israel or the Jewish people and should not require the removal of the State of Israel. Preventing people from using a phrase that is interpreted by the vast majority of people as calling for violence against Jewish people, contrary to the rights of Jewish people to be protected from hate speech and discrimination, does not prevent these people from expressing their support for Palestinians in other, lawful ways.
17. Moreover, the ECHR has frequently held that the right to freedom of expression will not be considered to have been violated if that which was expressed directly contravenes the values and principles of the European Charter for Human Rights, including tolerance, social peace and non-discrimination. Using a phrase that has its origin in violence against Jews and the State of Israel, and that explicitly calls for the removal of Israel and Jewish people on that territory is in direct contravention of these values and principles and cannot be protected by the freedom of expression.
18. Meta’s own policies and governing rules also indicate that content using this phrase should be taken down. Its rules on [Violence and Incitement](#) provide that users should not post “*Statements advocating for high-severity violence*” or “*Aspirational or conditional statements to commit high-severity violence*”. Additionally, the rules provide that “*Coded statements where the method of violence is not clearly articulated, but the threat is veiled or implicit, as shown by the combination of both a threat signal and contextual signal*” will be taken down if the statement is “[s]hared in a retaliatory context (e.g. expressions of desire to engage in violence against others in response to a grievance or threat that may be real, perceived or anticipated)” and “[l]ocal context or expertise confirms that the statement in question could lead to imminent violence”. The dismantlement of a State and the removal of its people can only be interpreted as “*high-severity violence*”, particularly in light of the recent State and institutional responses to the use of this phrase, as detailed below. In any event, the phrase fulfils the contextual requirements in the rules and should be removed.
19. Similarly, Meta’s rules on [Hate Speech](#) prohibit content containing “*Statements denying existence*” – the phrase in question advocates for the State of Israel and its people ceasing to exist – and content containing “*Exclusion in the form of calls for action, statements of*

*intent, aspirational or conditional statements, or statements advocating or supporting, defined as Explicit exclusion, which means things such as expelling certain groups or saying that they are not allowed.*” This is exactly the type of calls that posts containing the phrase “From the River to the Sea” advocates for.

20. Finally, Meta’s rules on [Dangerous Organizations and Individuals](#) state “*we do not allow content that glorifies, supports or represents events that Meta designates as violating violent events – including terrorist attacks, hate events, multiple-victim violence or attempted multiple-victim violence, serial murders or hate crimes.*” Calling for the replacement of Israel and its Jewish population with a new Palestinian state supports “*multiple-victim violence*”.

### **State and institutional responses**

21. Due to its genocidal and violent nature, people who have used the phrase since the 7 October massacre have faced backlash in many countries. A protester in Calgary, Canada was [arrested](#) after using the slogan, a Democratic Member of Congress in the US was [censured](#) for using the phrase in a video on social media, and Labour MP Andy McDonald in the UK was [suspended](#) from the party after using a version of the slogan at a protest.
22. In November 2023, 70 Democratic lawmakers in the US signed a statement rejecting the use of the phrase “*used by many, including Hamas, as a rallying cry for the destruction of the state of Israel and genocide of the Jewish people*”. On 16 April 2024, the US House of Representatives passed a [resolution](#) designating the phrase as “*antisemitic*” and as a genocidal call to violence to destroy the state of Israel and its people. In Austria, the use of the phrase in a protest invitation led to the protest being [banned](#), with police interpreting it in the current context as a clear call to violence, and lawmakers in the [UK](#) and the [Netherlands](#) have also called for declaring its use in protests illegal, with the UK Home Secretary [stating](#): “*I would encourage police to consider whether chants such as “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” should be understood as an expression of a violent desire to see Israel erased from the world, and whether its use in certain contexts may amount to a racially aggravated section 5 public order offence.*”

### **UKLFI’s recommendations**

23. In light of the above, UKLFI recommends that the Oversight Board overturn Meta’s decision with respect to these three cases and decide that their use of the phrase in hashtag form and otherwise violates Meta’s policies and the human rights of Jewish and Israeli people on Meta’s platforms to equality, and not to be subjected to discrimination.
24. UKLFI further recommends that the Oversight Board issues a policy recommendation to Meta that any future posts containing the phrase in hashtag form or otherwise are removed.