Meaning of: From the River to the Sea

Ever since the massacre on 7 October 2023 by Hamas of 1200 Israelis and kidnapping of 252 hostages into Gaza, where 132 remain incommunicado, and ever since the resultant war which brought death and destruction onto Gaza, we have seen rallies around the globe, by those purporting to be Palestinian , that invariable call for Intifada or chant the catch-cry ‘*From the River to Sea, Palestine will be Free.’*

What the *Intifada* is is undisputed: it is the violent uprising that saw suicide bombers blow up the limbs of women and children, that brought death to thousands of civilians far from any battlefront, and which calls for more blood to be spilled; the *Intifada* was and is violent terrorism that killed (or at least maimed) the nascent Oslo peace process, the best hope the Palestinians ever had for independence since the onset of history. *Intifada* is the antithesis of peace, its very death-knell.

The other chant we hear is the seemingly innocuous chant of: ‘From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free.’ This paper analyses the issues relating to the catchcry and provide some context about the origin of the phrase and its meaning.

**Relevant Facts:**

* The river refers to the Jordan River on the Eastern side of the state of Israel
* The Sea is the Mediterranean Sea on the Western side of the state of Israel
* The West Bank was occupied by Israel from Jordan in a defensive war in 1967 and is currently under Israeli military authority and Palestinian civil authority.
* Gaza and Sinai were occupied by Egypt by Israel in a defensive war in 1967. It withdrew from Sinai in 1979 and from Gaza in 2005.

#### The first limb: From the river to the sea…

The first limb of the political slogan that refers geographically to the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, which includes the State of Israel, the West Bank (Judea and Samaria), East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip was derived from one of the following phrases:

“From the river to the sea" (Arabic: من النهر إلى البحر, min an-nahr ’ilā l-baḥr); “From the water to the water” (Arabic: من المياه للمياه, min al-mayeh lil-mayeh).



The slogan is attributed to the early Palestinian nationalist movement coinciding with the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organisation by Yasser Arafat in 1964 (three years before the 1967 war) and called for establishing a single Palestinian state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea (i.e., the current borders of the State of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza)[[1]](#footnote-1).

Islamist factions, such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, have adopted this phrase and used it to call for the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic state within the same borders.

Hamas calls for the annihilation of Israel and the killing of Jews, in its charter[[2]](#footnote-2):

* “Palestine, which extends ***from the River Jordan in the east to the Mediterranean in the west*** [...] is an integral territorial unit. It is the land and the home of the Palestinian people.”[[3]](#footnote-3)
* “Hamas believes 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[[4]](#footnote-4)****”*
* “Our struggle against the Jews is very great and very serious…[[5]](#footnote-5) Jihad is its path and death for the sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes.[[6]](#footnote-6) The Islamic Resistance Movement aspires to the realisation of Allah's promise, no matter how long that should take. The Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him salvation, has said:

*The Day of Judgement will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him…"[[7]](#footnote-7)*

Similarly, Islamic Jihad considers the entire area from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea as exclusively Arab Islamic land, rejecting any Israeli presence, stating[[8]](#footnote-8):

*"****from the river to the sea*** *— [Palestine] is an Arab Islamic land that [it] is legally forbidden from abandoning any inch of, and the Israeli presence in Palestine is a null existence, which is forbidden by law to recognize.”*

This notion is also echoed by some Islamic supporters and scholars who align with the belief that this entire region is Islamic land, as per their interpretation of Islamic eschatology, with some Islamist scholars that the Mahdi, a messianic figure, will free the lands and proclaim:

*"Jerusalem is Arab Muslim, and Palestine — all of it,* ***from the river to the sea*** *— is Arab Muslim, and* ***there is no place in it for any who depart from peace or from Islam****, other than those who submit to those standing under the rule of Islam.”[[9]](#footnote-9)*

#### The second limb: Palestine will be free

**Historical context:**

In the original version of the slogan in Arabic translated to “From the water to the water, Palestine will be *Arab*” [italics added] (“من الماء إلى الماء ستكون فلسطين عربية“) Even Yasser Arafat referenced the concept in speeches, including a speech on 7 December 1980 at the University of Beirut in which he said:

“***The victory march will continue until the*** ***Palestinian flag flies in Jerusalem and in all of Palestine - from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea and from Rosh Hanikra to Eilat*** (i.e, all of the State of Israel).”

According to the Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture as published in 1996, a popular lesson taught at Islamic schools via a rhyme that claim that all of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf. Accordingly, all of Palestine, and not just the West Bank and Gaza Strip, should be liberated from the Jews and declared an Islamic state:



“Revolt, revolt and let the revolution be Islamic

Revolt, revolt and live free for eternity

The West Bank, Gaza Strip, Occupied territories

***1967 plus 1948 equals all of Palestine***,

***Our Islamic identity from the river to the sea***.”

Faisal al-Husseini, a PLO leader and later a Palestinian Authority minister, gave an interview to the Egyptian newspaper al-Arabi in 2001 in which he said:

“our ultimate goal is [still] the for for many generations."

It is important to note that Israel completely withdrew from Gaza in 2005, forcibly removing Jewish inhabitants from the area. Despite this withdrawal by Israel from Gaza in 2005, Hamas leader, Khaled Mashaal, in an address to a cheering crowd in 2012 in Gaza City said:

“***Palestine is ours, from the river to the sea and from the south to the north***. There will be ***no concession on an inch of the land.***" "We will never recognise the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation and therefore there is ***no legitimacy for Israel, no matter how long it will take***."

**Post 7 October 2023 use and definition of the slogan:**

Following the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks, Noor Dahri, a counter terrorism expert and student of Islam, holding the title of Executive Director at Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism in the UK, posted an open letter to the UK PM on LinkedIn about behaviour being seen at Pro-Palestinian rallies. In relation to the chant, noted that:

“Chanting and Shouting “***River to the Sea***…” in public ***is a call for “the End of the Jewish state and people” through “Armed Struggle***”.

[Iranian president](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_Iran) [Ebrahim Raisi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ebrahim_Raisi) used the phrase during an address to a summit of Arab and Muslim leaders in November 2023, saying:

"***The only solution is a Palestinian state from the river to the sea***,"

It should be noted that Iran, which trains, arms and funds Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah, regularly calls for the destruction of Israel, as do its proxies.

According to The Telegraph[[10]](#footnote-10), the catch cry ‘From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free’ has emerged as the modern ‘sieg heil’, which was also known as the “Hitler Salute.”

“Nearly eight decades on from the Holocaust, “from the river to the sea” has emerged as the new sieg heil – chanted at mass rallies and blared across social media campaigns. *The term* – like its German predecessor – ***connotes state-sanctioned armed aggression, used for the goal of eradicating the Jewish people***. ***This is why both citizens and politicians view it so gravely.”***

Alexander Downer, Australia’s longest serving Foreign Minister, published a piece in the Australian Financial Review in November 2023[[11]](#footnote-11) where he describes Hamas as “highly sophisticated - and wealthy - theological extremists who believe in destroying modern societies and replacing them with a caliphate in Jerusalem. And they’re ***not interested in a two-state solution*** to the tensions in the Middle East. ***Their ambition is the total destruction of the state of Israel. To be fair to Hamas, they’ve always made this crystal clear. They have never hidden their ambitions.***” As alluded to by Mr Downer, their ambitions are very clearly set out in the Hamas Covenants.

**Curtailment of usage of the slogan since 7 October 2023:**

There are many examples around the world of use of the slogan ‘From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free’ being curtailed due to the general understanding that the slogan has anti-semitic and/or genocidal meanings, including:

* On 11 October 2023, Austrian authorities banned a pro-Palestinian protest rally citing the fact the phrase "from the river to the sea" was mentioned in invitations and characterising it as a ***call to violence.***[[12]](#footnote-12)
* On 30 October 2023, Britain’s Labour Party ***suspended*** Andy McDonald, one of its own parliamentary members, after he used the phrase at a pro-Palestinian protest in London.[[13]](#footnote-13)
* UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman warned that the slogan should be interpreted as “***an indication of a violent desire for the elimination of Israel***”.[[14]](#footnote-14)
* The Football Association in the UK has **banned** players from using the slogan on their ***private social media accounts.***[[15]](#footnote-15)
* Berlin (Germany), has ***banned “from the river to the sea” and made it an indictable offense***. According to a German Press Agency report, the slogan violates Paragraph 130 of German law because ***it negates Israel’s existence***. ***The anti-incitement law bans hatred “against a national, racial, religious group, or a group defined by their ethnic origins.”*** The prosecutor’s office says the anti-Israel slogan meets this criteria. The criminal penalty for incitement to hate can be a prison term or a fine.[[16]](#footnote-16)
* In the US, Rashida Tlaib, a Democrat member of US Congress, was ***censured*** on 7 November 2023 (punishment one step below expulsion from the House), for the promotion of antisemitic rhetoric, including her frequent use of the slogan ‘From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free’[[17]](#footnote-17).
* Elon Musk confirmed on his X account on 18 November 2023 that “As I said earlier this week, “decolonization”, “***from the river to the sea***” ***and similar euphemisms necessarily imply genocide. Clear calls for extreme violence are against our terms of service and will result in suspension*.**”[[18]](#footnote-18)
* On 16 April 2024, a motion condemning the slogan as ***antisemitic, divisive, rejecting peace and perpetuating hatred against Israel and Jews***, was passed in the US House by an overwhelming majority of 377 to 44. The text of the motion read as follows:

“Whereas this slogan has been used recently by violent protestors throughout the United States and the world: Now, therefore, be it Resolved,

That it is the sense of the House of Representatives that—

(1) the slogan, “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free”, is *outrightly antisemitic* and must be strongly condemned;

(2) this slogan is ***divisive*** and ***does a disservice to Israelis, Palestinians, and all those in the region who seek peace***;

(3) this slogan ***rejects calls for peace, stability, and safety*** in the region;

(4) this slogan ***perpetuates hatred against*** the State of ***Israel*** ***and*** the ***Jewish people***; and

(5) ***anyone who calls for the eradication of Israel and the Jewish people are antisemitic and must always be condemned***.” [[19]](#footnote-19)

* In response to events occurring at the Monash University encampment in May 2024, a spokesman for Monash University, an Australian University ranked in the top 50 universities globally, ***said any language which “goes beyond lawful freedom of speech” could result in academic penalties***. Monash University Students for Palestine said the campus’ head of security warned them they could be ***punished for chants including “from the river to the sea”.***[[20]](#footnote-20)
* Australian Prime Minister **Anthony Albanese** says the statement “from the river to the sea [Palestine will be free]” ***is extremely violent***, according to former treasurer **Josh Frydenberg** in a Sky News Australia documentary. Frydenberg continued: ***“I also put to him, ‘So it has no place on our streets?’ He replied, ‘I agree.’”***[[21]](#footnote-21)
* The Australian Senate (Upper House of Government) voted by overwhelming majority of 56 to 12[[22]](#footnote-22) in May 2023 to pass the following motion:
* that *the slogan* “***from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free***” ***opposes Israel's right to exist***, ***and is frequently used by those who seek to intimidate Jewish Australians via acts of antisemitism***;
* welcomes Prime Minister Albanese agreeing with comments from former Defence Department Secretary Dennis Richardson calling the slogan “***a very violent statement” which could “easily flow into actions of violence against communities in our own country”***;
* agrees with Prime Minister Albanese that “***it is a slogan that calls for opposition to a two-state solution", and that "those people chanting, they're saying that one state should be Palestine***”.
* concurs with Prime Minister Albanese’s statements in relation to recent university protests that “it’s important that there be respectful debate in this country and ***what we're seeing at the moment… what is hatred, what is ignorance, what is divisive***…***and it doesn’t have a place***”; and calls on all senators to engage in debates and commentary respectfully, and to refrain from inflammatory and divisive comments, both inside and outside the chamber at all times.[[23]](#footnote-23)

**Conclusion:**

The phrase ‘From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free’ is widely understood to be both anti-Zionist and anti-semitic - a demand for the abolition of Israel as a Jewish state, and the removal of Jews that live within its borders. In either case, whether by ethnic cleansing or genocide to ultimately achieve these aims, these would amount to war crimes and/or crimes against humanity.

The American Jewish Committee (AJC) highlights that:

“There is, of course, nothing antisemitic about advocating for Palestinians to have their own state. However, ***when protesters chant “From the River to the Sea,” they are rejecting Israel’s right to exist, by indicating that the entire land of Israel should be freed from Jews. Calling for the elimination of the Jewish state denies Jews the right to self-determination*** [in their ancestral homeland]. This saying is a historic call-to-arms for terrorist groups and their sympathizers, from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) to Hamas.”

The replacement of Israel with a Palestinian state would, by definition, mean the abolition of the Jewish state, which denies the Jewish people their legitimate right to self-determination.

There are often disingenuous efforts made to explain much of the rhetoric as only ‘Anti-Zionist’ and not ‘anti-Semitic’. However, anti-Zionism becomes anti-Semitism when all Jews are held responsible for the actions of Israel, when the Jewish right to inhabit their ancestral homeland is refuted, or when Israel is denied the right to exist as an equal member of the global community.

It should be noted that in the wake of widespread protests and claims on social media across the Western world, possibly to make the phrase palatable in the West, several pro-Palestinian advocates have claimed the chant “From the River to the Sea” does not imply a goal of eradication of Israel.

However, the repeated usage of the phrase “From the River to the Sea” over decades by Palestinian leadership has revealed their unequivocal understanding of the meaning of that phrase, which is ***the eradication of Israel by violent means***. This is supported by many examples of censure, condemnation or prohibition by various Western politicians, governments, social media platforms and universities.

In conclusion, it is irrefutable that the motto “*From the river to the sea*” is an unambiguous call for the elimination of Israel and thus a dog whistle for violent rhetoric and action against Jews. Any platform seeking to guard against hate speech and antisemitism should prohibit the proliferation of this slogan.

Yours sincerely,

Lawyers for Israel



1. Yasser Arafat, in a speech at the University of Beirut (Sawt Falastin, 7 December 1980) “The victory march will continue until the Palestinian flag flies in Jerusalem and in all of Palestine - from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hamas 2017 Charter, Article 2 <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full>> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hamas 2017 Charter,  Article 20 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hamas 1988 Charter <<https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp>>, introduction [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, Article 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, Article 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [Islamic Jihad Movemment](https://www.aljazeera.net/opinions/2004/10/3/%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%82%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3-2), Al Jazeera (3 Oct 2004) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.google.com.au/books/edition/Contemporary\_Muslim\_Apocalyptic\_Literatu/5PjkU1gfTxIC?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA137&printsec=frontcover [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/us/comment/2023/11/08/rashida-tlaib-anti-semitism-israel-house-censure/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/activists-should-know-they-are-marching-to-destroy-israel-20231115-p5ek32> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.reuters.com/world/from-river-sea-prompts-vienna-ban-pro-palestinian-protest-2023-10-11/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/31/from-the-river-to-the-sea-where-does-the-slogan-come-from-and-what-does-it-mean-israel-palestine> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/oct/30/uk-ministers-cobra-meeting-terrorism-threat-israel-hamas-conflict-suella-braverman#:~:text=In%20remarks%20that%20have%20prompted,Israel%20erased%20from%20the%20world>. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/sports/english-football-body-bans-pro-palestine-river-to-the-sea-phrase-on-social-media/3040749> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/europe/1699528989-berlin-criminalizes-slogan-from-the-river-to-the-sea-palestine-will-be-free#:~:text=The%20British%20home%20secretary%20Suella,to%20pretend%20otherwise%20are%20disingenuous.%E2%80%9D> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://apnews.com/article/congress-house-censure-resolution-tlaib-8085189047a4c40f2d44ada4604aa076> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1725645884409401435?lang=en> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-resolution/883/text [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <https://www.aap.com.au/news/university-pro-palestine-encampment-ordered-to-disband/> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <https://www.crikey.com.au/2024/05/08/josh-frydenberg-israel-palestine-electric-vehicles-same-sex-books/> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/politics/senate-votes-5612-in-favour-of-condemning-from-the-river-to-the-sea-following-labor-senator-fatima-paymans-use-of-phrase/news-story/e4902cb251aff76bafbe53f53a49fd73> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. <https://www.aph.gov.au/~/media/8735D2EB863C43A29951C94C82EAECC5> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)