



23 May 2024

OVERSIGHT BOARD

POSTS THAT INCLUDE "FROM THE RIVER TO THE SEA"

SUBMISSIONS FROM THE AUSTRALIAN MUSLIM ADVOCACY NETWORK LTD

1. INTRODUCTION

The Australian Muslim Advocacy Network Ltd (AMAN) works to prevent the harms of systemic racism, online hatred and Islamophobia through policy engagement and law reform.

AMAN recognises the work of many human rights lawyers who've penned correspondence to universities in relation to the phrase 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.' That work is drawn upon in this submission.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 We support Meta's original decision that the phrase 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free' does not violate policies against promoting violence, supporting terrorism, hate speech, or antisemitism.

2.2 We recommend removing "from the river to the sea" as a content moderation signal. Similar to the Oversight Board's evaluation of "Shaheed," such a policy could lead to excessive enforcement across Meta's platforms.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Autodetection content moderation systems cannot adequately contextualise this phrase.

(a) The phrase must be understood within the context of its long usage within the Palestinian struggle for liberation and the global solidarity movement in support of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, as well as the particular circumstances of current protest action against Israel's military action in Gaza since October 2023, which has resulted in over 35,000 Palestinians killed and unfathomable destruction of Palestinian civil infrastructure, housing and communal life in Gaza.

Indeed, the International Court of Justice in January 2024 found that Palestinians in Gaza currently face a "real and imminent risk" of genocide as a result of Israel's lethal military action.

While it is beyond the scope of this submission to detail its long and intricate history, we note that the struggle for Palestinian liberation and global solidarity movement in support of the Palestinian people has always been diverse and pluralist while nonetheless united in respect to certain key principles such as the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination; the right of return for Palestinian refugees,

the right of the Palestinian people to popular resistance to foreign occupation; and the principle of unity of the Palestinian people. As Mazin B. Qumsiyeh writes in *Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment* (Pluto Press, 2011):

‘the reality is that popular resistance in Palestine developed indigenously, organically, naturally and beautifully. And it has accelerated in the past two decades ... This resistance was and continues to be against the Zionist goal of transforming a central part of the Arab world from a **multi-ethnic and multi-religious society** into a Jewish state’ (pp. 1-2).

Similarly, in *Palestinian Popular Struggle: Unarmed and Participatory* (Routledge, 2019), Michael J. Carpenter stresses that:

‘Palestinian popular struggle ha[s] a long history and [has taken] many forms (Dajani 1995; Darweish and Rigby 2015; Qumsiyeh 2011). Among the most ubiquitous was *sumoud*, or ‘steadfastness,’ which meant holding fast to the land, working and living on the land despite pressures to give way before expanding Israeli settler colonialism. **The popular struggle also included classic methods of civil resistance, such as protests, marches, boycotts, work strikes, student strikes, hunger strikes, tax strikes, sit-ins, land defence camps, and building alternative social and political institutions.** Palestinians ha[ve] been using these methods to varying degrees since before the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, when Britain controlled the country, and before that, against Ottoman rule. ... While practices and conceptualizations of popular struggle changed over time, and in some ways remained contentious, they generally came to signify unarmed action and participatory organization’ (pp 2-3).

As we detail below, key slogans in support of the Palestinian people must be understood within this longer history of the Palestinian anticolonial liberation struggle, and global solidarity movement in support of this struggle, including the animating principles of self-determination, freedom from oppression, and ethnic and religious pluralism.

3.2 The suggestion that such phrases should be banned fundamentally misrepresents the Nature of this phrase in the Global Solidarity Movement in Support of Palestine

The phrase “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” is a common slogan used by protestors to express opposition to Israel’s occupation of Palestine, to call for the ending of Israel’s regime of racial apartheid within historic Palestine and to demonstrate support for the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination, as

recognised under international law.¹ It is an antiracist slogan that calls for the liberation of Palestine as an inclusive project that guarantees equality, dignity and rights to all inhabitants, including Jews. It has historically been understood as such and remains so now.

The phrase “from the river to the sea” that makes up part of the slogan denotes the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea that constituted historic Palestine. Indeed, many Palestinians today consider the entirety of this territory to denote the boundaries of Palestine and the homeland of the Palestinian people. This is expressed through the two Arabic phrases: *min al-bahr ila al-nahr* (from the Sea to the River) and *al-mayyah ila al-mayyah* (the water to the water).

Associate Professor Maha Nasser at the University of Arizona, an expert in the twentieth-century Arab world with a focus on Palestinian history, has detailed that the phrase “from the river to the sea” is based on Palestinians’ long-held opposition to the division of their homeland that has resulted in Palestinian past and ongoing expulsions from their lands, homes, and communities, and present-day Palestinian oppression and inequality within historic Palestine:

‘What Palestinians do want is equal rights. They want to be able work hard to achieve their dreams without being discriminated against. They want to be able to live where they choose without being told they can’t because of their ethnicity or religion. They want to be able to choose the leaders who control their lives. **In other words, they want freedom.** ... Most troubling for me, the belief that a “free Palestine” would necessarily lead to the mass annihilation of Jewish Israelis is rooted in deeply racist and Islamophobic assumptions about who the Palestinians are and what they want.’²

Similarly, the Hearing Palestine Initiative at the University of Toronto explains in its Primer on the slogan that:

‘Historians who have carefully considered the origins of the phrase, and later the political slogan, in Palestinian movements note that the historical meanings are complex and have shifted [over time]. However, all are in agreement that for Palestinian movements the slogan is not primarily a political program (e.g.,

¹ There is a growing consensus in the international human rights community that Israel’s regime of control over Palestinians meets the definition of apartheid under international law: See [Israel’s 55-year occupation of Palestinian Territory is apartheid – UN human rights expert | OHCHR](#); [Report: Israel’s apartheid against Palestinians, a look into decades of oppression - Amnesty International Australia](#); [This is apartheid: The Israeli regime promotes and perpetuates Jewish supremacy between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River | B’Tselem \(btselem.org\)](#); [A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution | HRW](#)

² Maha Nasser, ‘‘From The River To The Sea’ Doesn’t Mean What You Think It Means’, *The Jewish Daily Forward* (3 December 2018) <https://forward.com/opinion/415250/from-the-river-to-the-sea-doesnt-mean-what-you-think-it-means/>

two-state solution, one-state solution, confederation, etc.), but rather a Palestinian expression for liberation, freedom, and equality given the on-going context of colonization and military occupation.³

The claim that the slogan “From the river to the sea” amounts to hate speech against Jewish people is a perversion of its actual meaning. As Yousef Munayyeh, Head of the Palestine/Israel Program and Senior Fellow at Arab Center Washington DC, explains:

‘The claim that the phrase “from the river to the sea” carries a genocidal intent relies not on the historical record, but rather on racism and Islamophobia. These Palestinians, the logic goes, cannot be trusted—even if they are calling for equality, their real intention is extermination. In order to justify unending violence against Palestinians, this logic seeks to caricature us as irrational savages hell-bent on killing Jews.’⁴

Munayyeh further explains why the slogan is such a powerful and necessary call for Palestinian liberation and freedom in the context of Israel’s regime of racial apartheid:

‘The phrase “from the river to the sea” captures this future as no other can, because it encompasses the entire space in which Palestinian rights are denied. It is in this space that Palestinians seek to live freely. It is across this space—and across the political and geographic divisions that Israeli rule has imposed—that Palestinians must unite to create change. It is this space that Palestinians call home, regardless of what anyone else calls it.

“From the river to the sea” is a rejoinder to the fragmentation of Palestinian land and people by Israeli occupation and discrimination. Palestinians have been divided in a myriad of ways by Israeli policy. There are Palestinian refugees denied repatriation because of discriminatory Israeli laws. There are Palestinians denied equal rights living within Israel’s internationally recognized territory as second-class citizens. There are Palestinians living with no citizenship rights under Israeli military occupation in the West Bank. There are Palestinians in legal limbo in occupied Jerusalem and facing expulsion. There are Palestinians in Gaza living under an Israeli siege. All of them suffer from a range of policies in a singular system of discrimination and apartheid—a system that can only be challenged by their unified opposition. **All of them have a right to live freely in the land from the river to the sea.**⁵

³ <https://palestinstudies.artsci.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023-12-20-FRTS-Primer.pdf>

⁴ <https://jewishcurrents.org/what-does-from-the-river-to-the-sea-really-mean>

⁵ Ibid.

In the Australian context, a coalition of peak Palestinian, Muslim, Christian and Jewish organisations have issued a joint statement confirming that:

‘the phrase has been associated with the Palestinian cause for self-determination and statehood. The phrase is rooted in an aspiration for freedom for all people, irrespective of their background, faith or nationality. **It is a vision that encompasses the right of all individuals to live in peace and dignity within the lands stretching from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.** It should not be controversial that Palestinians reject their oppression or aspire to their own liberation and life in their homeland, free from Israel's racist systems and laws of control.’⁶

Given this expert opinion, an objective assessment of the nature of this phrase, its history and its political uses and connotations, must construe it as properly located within the Palestinian people’s struggle for equality, justice and freedom within the territory of historic Palestine.

3.3 This phrase is not racist or antisemitic, but banning it does promote anti-Palestinian racism.

Labelling this phrase as Antisemitic as such is premised upon the racist idea that Palestinians are inherently violent and that calling for Palestinian self-determination and freedom is a threat to Jewish communal life. Such assumptions perpetuate anti-Palestinian racism and have been used in order to attempt to shield the State of Israel from legitimate criticism. It also denies the agency of Jewish people who also use the phrase.

The leading argument as to why anti-zionism is anti-semitic, is that anti-zionism denies Jewish People the right to self-determination.⁷ This is painted as discriminatory on the basis that it is a global right for other groups of people to have a state of their own.⁸ However, this argument has been criticised as many groups of people, including Kurdish, Uyghurs, Catalan, and many more, do not have a state of their own. Those who oppose it are not accused of being ‘anti’ self-determination for that group of people.⁹ Moreover, it is highlighted that ethnic nationalism is not the sole method for upholding public order and individual freedom.¹⁰ It is more beneficial to adopt a civic nationalist approach, which prioritises inclusive identity above heritage-based divisions.¹¹

⁶ https://www.instagram.com/p/C7F_Zorhjee/

⁷ Peter Beinart, ‘Debunking the myth that anti-Zionism is antisemitic,’ *The Guardian* (Webpage, 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/mar/07/debunking-myth-that-anti-zionism-is-antisemitic>>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Furthermore, another aspect of this debate is that while it may not be anti-zionist to oppose the Jewish people's goal of self-determination, it becomes so when seeking to dismantle an established state, such as Israel, which has currently evolved its own distinct national identity.¹² This is countered by critics who have spotlighted the historical precedents, as seen in the transformation of apartheid South Africa into a civic nationalist state that adopted all races.¹³ They have argued that this provides a model for addressing ethnic divisions within states.¹⁴

Those who supported the motion have adopted the pro-Israel lobby's racially biased perspective on Palestinian Australians and their allies.

The pro-Israel lobby interprets the slogan as violent and oppressive, reflecting their own chant, "from the river to the sea, the [Israeli flag] is all you'll see." Likud, Israel's long-time ruling party, openly advocates annexing all Palestinian territories to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state. Their efforts to project such a meaning on the Palestinian freedom chant are made in bad faith and are a particularly egregious form of gaslighting the victims of Israel's crimes. In genocide prevention studies, the technique is known as 'accusation in the mirror'¹⁵ and has been used throughout historical genocides—accusing victims of genocide of genocidal tendencies to help pave the way for public acceptance of violence against them.

"From the River to the Sea" is a call for freedom from Palestinians and their allies, fundamentally different from the annexation and colonisation promoted by Likud under the same phrase.

As Nasser Mashni, President of the Australian Palestine Advocacy Network, states,

“Palestinians don't deny Jewish indigeneity. We just don't think it's superior to ours. Jewish connection and the Zionist enterprise of the state of Israel today are two separate connections. The desire for a Jewish homeland, I get it. I've got 100 years of trauma and not hundreds, but if a Jewish homeland, is predicated firstly on my dispossession and then my continued oppression then that is unacceptable to me and it should be unacceptable to anyone.”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Leader Maynard, Jonathan and Benesch, Susan (2016) "Dangerous Speech and Dangerous Ideology: An Integrated Model for Monitoring and Prevention," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 9: Iss. 3: 70-95.