

# Meta Oversight Board Says 'River To The Sea' Not Inherently Hate Speech



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In a development that will be cheered by those who promote open discourse on social media platforms and condemned by ardent supporters of the State of Israel, **Meta's independent Oversight Board for Instagram and Facebook on Wednesday ruled that the controversial slogan "from the river to the sea" is not inherently hate speech** in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, and should therefore not be subjected to automatic deletion.

"The majority of the Board notes **the phrase has multiple meanings and is used by people in various ways** and with different intentions," the board [wrote](#). A minority argued that, since the slogan appears in the 2017 Hamas charter, Meta should automatically consider it to be the "glorification of a designated entity...unless there are clear signs to the contrary."

True to its approach that parallels court procedures, the board's decision came in a ruling that spanned a whopping [32 pages](#). **The board's review centered on three cases that arose in November 2023** -- a month after the stunning, violent Hamas invasion of southern Gaza that led to the deaths of at least [1,189](#) people at the hands of [both](#) Hamas militants [and](#) Israel's [own military](#). In each Facebook situation at issue, a user included the phrase in a post or comment, and other users reported them to the platform for allegedly violating its rules.



**Backers of Israel say this decades-old slogan is inherently genocidal**

(Mark Kerrison/In Pictures via Getty Images and [The Week](#))

In its long form, the slogan is "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free." Referring to the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, **it's been [used for decades](#) by a variety of people advocating for a change to the political order** in the land that is currently controlled by the State of Israel -- which includes not only Israel proper but also the West Bank and Gaza. Notably, **a similar phrase has appeared in the platform of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party**, declaring "[between the Sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty.](#)"

**Many proponents of the State of Israel say the phrase is inherently a call for violence, ethnic cleansing and/or genocide.** However, some who call for a new order -- among them, prominent Jews like long-time Israel proponent-turned-critic [Peter Beinert](#) -- entertain the possibility of a peaceful, one-state solution with equal rights and privileges granted to all [7.5 million Jews and 7.5 million Palestinians](#) who live between the river and and the sea, along with Christians and other minorities.

The Anti-Defamation League rejects the Meta oversight board's assertion that the slogan can be used innocently. In a tweet-thread condemning the ruling, the ADL wrote:

***"From the river to the sea' is an antisemitic charge denying the Jewish people's right to self-determination...[Usage of this phrase has the effect of making members of the Jewish and pro-Israel community feel unsafe and ostracized.](#)"***

However, the [22-member Oversight board](#) -- after deliberations that included the review of 2,412 public comments from around the world -- ruled that the slogan shouldn't be construed as inherently malevolent, writing:

***"The Board finds there is no indication that the comment or the two posts broke Meta's Hate Speech rules because they do not attack Jewish or Israeli people with calls for violence or exclusion, nor do they attack a concept or institution associated with a protected characteristic that could lead to imminent violence. Instead, the three pieces of content contain contextual signals of solidarity with Palestinians."***

**One of the scrutinized posts portrayed "a generated image of floating watermelon slices that form the words from the phrase, alongside 'Palestine will be free',"** the board wrote. (Because of similarities between the colors of watermelons and those of the Palestinian flag, watermelons have become a pro-Palestinian symbol.) In reviewing the post at the time, Meta concluded the usage couldn't be construed as a call for violence, or an explicit endorsement of Hamas. The oversight board validated that conclusion.

"From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

Sen. Marsha Blackburn just accused Rep. Rashida Tlaib of calling for genocide for invoking this chant—But is it a slogan inherently demanding mass murder as so many claim?

Short Answer: No 🙅 [pic.twitter.com/PDj26vgNYI](https://pic.twitter.com/PDj26vgNYI)

— System Update (@SystemUpdate\_) [November 7, 2023](#)

**Another post with the phrase condemned the "senseless slaughter" of Palestinians by "Zionist Israeli occupiers."** The third encouraged people to "speak up," using hashtags #ceasefire, #freepalestine and #DefundIsrael, along with heart emojis in Palestinian-flag colors. The board's ruling allowing all three posts to remain on the platform will also license other Facebook and Instagram users to use the slogan, provided there's no context that otherwise violates Meta policy -- such as calls for violence or removing people from a territorial area.

In November, **Elon Musk -- who purchased Twitter with a stated goal of promoting open discourse -- declared the slogan inherently genocidal** and said those who use it would face suspension. In a possible sign he may have subsequently decided context should be considered, the phrase can [still be widely found](#) on X.

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. <https://t.co/1fCFo5Lezb>

— Elon Musk (@elonmusk) [November 17, 2023](#)

The Meta oversight board's ruling may prevent posts from being deleted and users suspended, but it can't guarantee people in some parts of the world won't face government prosecution for merely saying the phrase. For example, in a heavy-handed attempt to eradicate the slogan, **Germany threatens those who dare utter or write "from the river to the sea" with up to three years in prison.**

After a Palestinian-American woman in Germany posted “Pursue your passion & you'll end up enjoying life ... From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!!”, she and her husband were [subjected to a 6 am police raid](#) by 11 cops who seized her iPad. More than three months later, they still have her iPad and she's still uneasy and uncertain what if any punishment awaits her.