

Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee

Watching Brief 24-8: River to the Sea

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

Reason for this backgrounder

A popular chant at pro-Palestinian protests in Australia and around the world is 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.' There are significant differences of views about this phrase, with some groups arguing it is a call for freedom for all, and others that the phrase is antisemitic. This backgrounder shares some background and context to this phrase.

Which river, which sea, and why it matters

Geographically, 'river to the sea' refers to the Jordan River, and the Mediterranean Sea, which mark the eastern and western borders of historic Palestine.

In 1920, Britain assumed responsibility for historic Palestine under a League of Nations mandate. This ended on 14 May 1948, when amidst growing violence, Britain withdrew, and Israel declared itself a State. As a result, about 78% of Palestine was controlled by Israel, having forced some 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland. The remaining 22% of historic Palestine was administered by Egypt and Jordan. In 1967, Israeli forces seized all remaining Palestinian lands, expelling another 300,000 Palestinians.

Since 1947, the United Nations has asserted that there should be two states in historic Palestine – Israel and Palestine. However while Palestinians have limited Governance responsibilities in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel retains control over all the lands. The UN categorises the West Bank and Gaza as under Occupation.



The context of language

Palestinians around the world state the chant is a call for freedom and equality for *everyone* between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, regardless of the political structure.

The phrase has been used by the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation) since the 1960's to refer to a single democratic state for all people.

In 2012 a Hamas political leader said "Palestine is ours from the river to the sea", stating that there would be no concession of any land within those boundaries. The 2017 Hamas charter asserts Palestine is one piece of land from the river to the sea while also speaking of a two state solution.

It may come down to the word 'free'

Most analysts say different interpretations of the word 'free' are critical to understanding the nuances of and responses to the chant.

Critics of the chant assert that the word 'free' means an end to the State of Israel. At worst this would be in the form of a violent conquest. And if not violence, advocating one democratic State would mean

an end to the current State of Israel which explicitly defines itself as a State for Jews. Yehudah Mirsky, a rabbi and professor of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University in Massachusetts says “it sounds much more like a threat than a promise of liberation”. However [Em Hilton](#), a Steering Committee member of the Centre for Jewish Nonviolence says “Centering our inherited trauma of persecution when we hear the cry of ‘Free Palestine’ or ‘From the River to the Sea’ restricts our ability to build greater solidarity and joint struggle based in equality and shared humanity. When Palestinians tell us that this is a call for liberation, not genocide, we should believe them”.

Supporters of the chant assert that we cannot abide the current political arrangements, which are increasingly being called apartheid. As US Palestinian [Yousef Munayyer](#) says “The phrase “from the river to the sea” ...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.... It is this space that Palestinians call home, regardless of what anyone else calls it”. [Nimer Sultany](#), a lecturer in law at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London said it “expresses the need for equality for all inhabitants of historic Palestine. Those who support apartheid and Jewish supremacy will find the egalitarian chant to be objectionable”.

[Maha Nassar](#), an associate professor of Middle East history and Islamic studies at the University of Arizona: ‘the slogan does not conjure a specific political platform...instead it is a call for an imagined future of peace and freedom...it’s a call to end the occupation [by Israel] and a call for an ability to return from the areas which Palestinians fled or were expelled’. At the same time she warns that attacks on those who use the phrase, however well intentioned, serve to disarm Palestinians and their supporters of a powerful rhetorical tool.

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.

[Extract from a joint statement by APAN \(of which Quakers is a member\), Muslim groups, and Jewish Council of Australia](#)

US and Australian Governments’ reactions to the slogan

US Representative Rashida Tlaib, the only Palestinian American member of Congress was censured in November 2023 when she defended the slogan as ‘an aspirational call for freedom, human rights, and peaceful coexistence, not death, destruction or hate.’ The US House of Representatives passed a motion condemning the chants as seeking to deny Jewish people the right of self-determination (17 April 2024, by a vote of 377 to 44).

Australian federal Senator Fatima Payman (Labor, WA) used the phrase during a Parliamentary statement marking the Nakba (the catastrophe that displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during the establishment of Israel. She said that it means a ‘desire for Palestinians to live in their homeland as free and equal citizens, neither dominating others nor being dominated over.’ Her statement led to two days of criticism, including calls for her to apologise for ‘stoking hatred in such a vile way’ (Alex Rychin, co CEO of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry), and calls by the Opposition Leader for Senator Payman to be removed from the parliamentary foreign affairs committee and even the Labor Party. Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese have both said that they believe it goes against a two-state solution, is not appropriate, and is even “violent”.

On 16 May 2024, Senator Birmingham (Liberal, SA) moved that all senators engage in debates and commentary respectfully and to refrain from inflammatory and divisive comments, both inside and outside the chamber at all times. The motion: noted that the slogan opposes Israel’s right to exist, is frequently used to intimidate Jewish Australians, and welcomes the PM’s agreement with the Defence

Department Secretary that the slogan is 'a very violent statement...that could easily flow into actions of violence against communities in our own country'. The motion also supports respectful debate, but warns that what is currently happening is 'hatred, ignorance, divisive and doesn't have a place' [in Australia]. The motion passed 56 to 12 (Greens and Lidia Thorpe). Senator Payman was not in the chamber.

For Friends to consider

- We recognise that in this moment, people living 'from the river to the sea', both in Israel and Palestine, are living in extreme fear, intensifying historical collective traumas. We recognise that historically grievous harms have been done to Jewish people, often by Christians. We also recognise that currently grievous harms are being done to Palestinians by the State of Israel. Quakers affirm that of God in all people, and seek justice, freedom and peace for all.
- Some important advice from [Centre for Jewish Nonviolence Board Member Em Hilton](#):
 - "We must confront the intentional slandering of Palestinian activists as antisemites as yet another way to undermine their credibility in the public sphere".
 - A feeling of safety cannot be predicated on the oppression and subjugation of another people, on ethnic cleansing and state-sanctioned violence. Instead we must be bold in our vision for a just future on this land"
- Friends Committee on National Legislation in the USA have developed this toolkit [Calling for a ceasefire: advocacy toolkit](#)
- Friends might find useful [this background piece by Ali Kazak](#), the former head of the Palestinian Delegation in this region, an expert in Australian-Arab relations and affairs, and author of "Australia and the Arabs" (in Arabic) published in *Pearls and Irritations* on 28 May a historical analysis of Palestine and Israel.
- Quakers in Australia are active in seeking the end of the war and a political settlement that will respect the human rights of all in the region. [In our recent public statements](#) we have encouraged the Australian Government to take whatever steps it can to reinforce moves for a just peace, including calling for an immediate ceasefire, and to end military support for Israel. We acknowledge the support Australia gave to the UN General Assembly resolution to acknowledge Palestine as suitable for membership. Quakers have been participating in a range of protest and solidarity events calling for a ceasefire.

QPLC hopes that by providing this information, Friends will be more aware of the impact of the slogan 'River to sea Palestine will be free' in showing solidarity with and hope for the future of Palestine, while also recognising concerns held by our Jewish friends.

Resources

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