

*Don't Buy the Right-Wing
Disinformation Campaign on
From the River to the Sea*

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A pro-Palestinian activist holds up a sign reading 'From The River To The Sea Palestine Will Be Free' during a sit-down protest inside Charing Cross railway station to call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza on November 4, 2023, in London, United Kingdom. * MARK KERRISON / IN PICTURES VIA GETTY IMAGES**

This phrase was never about killing Jews. It emerged in the 1960s as a call for equal rights within a democratic state.

By Stephen Zunes / TRUTHOUT

The wave of pro-Palestinian protests sweeping American campuses was triggered by Columbia University President Minouche Shafik's order to forcibly clear a peaceful encampment on April 18. Her decision came as a direct result of her grilling the previous day before a House committee in Washington investigating alleged antisemitism on U.S. campuses: At the hearing, she pledged to take action against protesters.

A major focus of the interrogation was the slogan, popular among pro-Palestinian protesters, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-New York), in reference to a resolution passed by the House three days earlier, pressed Shafik to acknowledge that "377 members out of 435 members of Congress, condemns 'from the river to the sea' as antisemitic." Shafik said she agreed with the statement, that she had made clear that the slogan was unacceptable, and that "we have some disciplinary cases ongoing around that language."

In the last few weeks, that slogan has been used to discredit the nationwide protests, primarily focused on demands that campuses divest stockholdings in corporations supporting the Israeli occupation and genocide in Gaza. Members of Congress have insisted that student protesters who use the slogan are expressing support for the mass killing of Jews, and Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has issued an executive order declaring the slogan inherently and self-evidently antisemitic and promising that students using it will face disciplinary action.

The House resolution referenced in the Shafik hearing, passed on April 16, declared that the phrase is "antisemitic," "perpetuates hatred" against Jews and constitutes a call "for the removal of the Jewish people from their ancestral homeland."

For the vast majority of Americans who use that slogan, however, "river to the sea" has a very different meaning.

The phrase originally came from secular Palestinian nationalists in the 1960s calling for a democratic secular state within the boundaries of what was the British Mandate for Palestine, encompassing Israel, the then-Jordanian controlled West Bank and the then-Egyptian administered Gaza Strip — that is, the lands between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) adopted it soon after Israel conquered the remaining parts of Palestine in 1967, though they subsequently recognized Israeli control over 78 percent of the territory.

There are no indications that any more than a tiny minority using the slogan support the killing or ethnic cleansing of Jews from what is now Israel. The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, signed by hundreds of scholars of antisemitism and widely acknowledged as one of the definitive definitions of antisemitism, particularly in regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, explicitly states that the phrase is not antisemitic.

Since so many American Jews have been manipulated into thinking that calls for a free Palestine from the river to the sea really are calls for genocide, some pro-Palestinian activists have urged the broader movement for Palestinian liberation to consider alterations to the slogan to help push back against the rampant disinformation about it. It's true that something along the lines of "from the river to the sea, we want full equality!" could be harder for the right to spread disinformation about than "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!" But given the slogan's deep historical roots, it is unlikely that the entire Palestine solidarity movement will suddenly decide to drop it in order to ward off right-wing disinformation campaigns.

The main sponsors of the House resolution and the harshest interrogators in the committee hearings were Republicans whose apparent goal is to drive a wedge between elements of the Jewish community and progressives, and to distract attention from the real antisemitism coming out of the Trump wing of the party. These white conservative Christians are trying to frighten Jews into thinking that people expressing

solidarity with Palestine aren't demanding equality but are instead trying to kill them. They are essentially trying to convince Jews, many of whom have been in the forefront of movements for equality for centuries, that demands for equality are somehow a threat.

These disingenuous and misleading efforts to equate advocacy for a democratic system of "one person, one vote" in all of Palestine with advocacy for the killing of Jews are reminiscent of the similarly ludicrous claims made in 1980s by proponents of South African apartheid who insisted that the similar "one person, one vote" demands made by the anti-apartheid movement actually were a call for the killing of white South Africans. In both cases, what these critics are actually opposing is the concept of equality. The Republican sponsors of the current "antisemitism" resolution are well-known anti-Arab bigots who are cynically manipulating Jewish fears for their right-wing agenda.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of House Democrats appear to be in on this effort as well — only 44 of 213 Democratic House members voted no.

The wording of the House resolution, moreover, makes clear that its intention was not to defend Jews against a supposedly antisemitic slogan, but to promote a right-wing narrative about Israel and Palestine. It contains a series of extraneous clauses having nothing to do with the slogan, including the long-discredited claim that Hamas "beheaded dozens of babies," as well as the false charge that Hamas intentionally located "its military weapons supply depots and intelligence outposts directly under" the Al-Shifa Hospital.

The principal author of the resolution, Rep. Anthony D'Esposito (R-New York), has referred to Democrats who support conditioning military aid to Netanyahu as "pro-Hamas." The fact that 162 out of 213 House Democrats would take his word about what has transpired in Israel and Gaza over independent investigations and believe his interpretation of what pro-Palestinian demonstrators mean over what they themselves — the majority of whom presumably vote Democratic — actually say is indicative of just how far to the right the Democratic Party has gone under Biden.

Back in November, the House of Representatives passed a rare motion of censure against Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib (D-Michigan) for using the phrase. Written by Georgia Republican Rich McCormick, it claimed that the phrase "river to the sea" was "a genocidal call to violence to destroy the state of Israel and its people." The resolution condemned what they claimed was her "falsely describing 'from the river to the sea' as 'an aspirational call for freedom, human rights, and peaceful coexistence' despite it clearly entailing Israel's destruction." It seems that in Congress — like everywhere else — older white men are quick to believe that young women of color don't really know what they are saying, so it's up to them to explain to the world what young women of color really mean.

By contrast, there have been no motions of censure against Rep. Andy Ogles (R-Tennessee) who, in response to an activist's concerns about Israel killing Palestinian children replied, "I think we should kill 'em all," or Rep. Brian Mast (R-Florida) for saying "there are very few innocent Palestinian civilians," or Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) calling on Israel to "level the place" as Israel initiated its bombing campaign of Gaza or Rep. Tim Walberg (R-Michigan) for saying, in reference to Gaza, "It should be like Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Get it over quick." For Congress, such genocidal calls are not as problematic as the call for a democratic binational state.

Ironically, it is Israel — not the PLO, the Palestinian Authority or the majority of American solidarity activists — which is calling for the supremacy of one people over the other from the river to the sea. The platform of Likud, the party of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the largest party in the ruling coalition, explicitly states that "between the Sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty." And, on January 18, Netanyahu reiterated that there would be no Palestinian state. "And therefore I clarify that in any other arrangement, in the future, the state of Israel has to control the entire area from the river to the sea."

In his speech before the UN General Assembly in September, Netanyahu held up a map that showed Israel controlling all the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean.

The overwhelming majority of the House resolution's cosponsors agree with the Israeli government that there should be a Jewish Israeli state in all of historic Palestine and have expressed their opposition to even a Palestinian mini-state in the West Bank. So, in an Orwellian attempt to cover up their own bigotry, they claim that those who want equal rights from the river to the sea are actually the bigots.

Indeed, there have been no congressional resolutions condemning calls for Israeli Jewish supremacy to reign "from the river to the sea," only condemnation of the phrase in the context of equal rights for all.

Support for a democratic secular state in all of Palestine is not a radical position. A recent poll showed that about three-quarters of Americans, including 80 percent of Democrats and 64 percent of Republicans, would support a democratic state for all peoples should a two-state solution prove impossible (which is looking increasingly likely.) Only a small minority would support the status quo of Israeli Jewish domination throughout the entire territory.

Antisemitic extremists who want to kill or expel Jews do of course exist in this world. Indeed, some of the most powerful antisemitic forces in the world are Christian Zionists who actively want Jews to continue colonizing Palestine, in pursuit of bringing about an Armageddon which neither Jews nor Muslims would survive.

However, the efforts to criminalize "from the river to the sea" do not come out of a genuine concern about such instances of actual antisemitism worldwide but out of an effort to discredit legitimate protests.

As a result, it is critically important to push back against such disingenuous scaremongering.

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