



A JCRC Bay Area Guide to Recognizing Problematic Rhetoric

Many of the chants and slogans used at rallies contain harmful subtext that is not always well understood by the general public. We are providing this guidance to help the public better understand the impact of this terminology on the Jewish community.

COMMONLY USED CHANTS AND TERMS

“From the river to the Sea, Palestine will be free”

The “river” refers to the Jordan River and the “sea” refers to the Mediterranean Sea. The land between those two bodies of water includes the State of Israel (i.e. the land inside the “[Green Line](#)”), the West Bank, and Gaza. To many Jews, this is heard as a call for the destruction of the world’s only Jewish state and making it “free” of Jews. Especially when it is accompanied by pictures of the entire State of Israel, West Bank and Gaza labeled as “Palestine” on signs and shirts and in literature. Given this context, this chant can come across as aggressive or threatening.

“Free Palestine”

Some activist using this phrase believe it is calling for human rights for Palestinians, or for an end to the occupation of the West Bank. However, it is often used by individuals and groups who don’t believe that Israel has a right to exist (“anti-Zionist”). Therefore, to many Jews, it means removal of Jews from the land and destruction of the State of Israel, replacing it with a Palestinian state. This language is also a rejection of the two-state solution. Many Jews find this language aggressive and threatening, and for those with Israeli family and friends, even more so.

“Intifada, intifada” or “Long live the intifada”

Intifada means “uprising” in Arabic. Some activists may state that this is simply a non-violent nationalistic call. However, the last intifada occurred in the early 2000s when Palestinian terrorists attacked Jewish civilians inside of Israel, using suicide bombers in buses, cafes, nightclubs, and other locations. Many Israelis died or were injured. This call to “intifada” evokes those murders and does not represent a call for peaceful or civil protest. Instead, whether intentionally or not, it is an inciting call to violence against Jews. Some protests even have signs calling for a “global intifada,” which implies that American Jews are targets, as well. Many Jews find this language aggressive and threatening, and for those with Israeli family and friends, even more so.

“75 years of occupation”

This phrase rejects the legitimacy of Israel as it was established by the United Nations’ Partition Plan in 1947. Referring to the “occupation” as starting 75 years ago is referring to the creation of the State of Israel. Not only is this a factually inaccurate read of history, but when someone calls for an end to

the occupation starting in 1948 that is a call for the destruction of Israel. From 1948-1967, Jordan occupied the West Bank and Egypt occupied Gaza. Israel only gained control of those territories after a defensive war, the Six Day War, against the surrounding Arab countries in 1967. Those using this language want the entirety of the land that is today Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza to be replaced by a Palestinian state.

“Zios”

This is a derogatory term popularized by white supremacist David Duke that is increasingly being used by far-left activists to target Jews. Sometimes it’s combined with another word in phrases such as “Zio-Nazi” or “Zio-occupied America”. The term is a shortened version of the word, “Zionist” which may be used by some as a pejorative or as a dog whistle (code word) for Jews. When discussing Zionism or talking about Zionists it’s critical to clarify the meaning of the word as it has been weaponized and misrepresented in a variety of ways. The most common definition of Zionism is support for Jewish national self-determination in their ancient homeland of Israel—realized when the State of Israel was created. The vast majority of Jews—89% in the Bay Area according to recent data—support Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state – a modern expression of Zionism. While context matters, word “Zionist” or “Zionism” should not be used pejoratively as Israel is an important part of Jewish identity for many (though not all) Jews.

“Apartheid Israel” or “Israel is an Apartheid state”

This is an accusation leveled at Israel regarding its policies toward Palestinians for the purpose of making an analogy between Israel and South Africa and promoting a boycott. Israel may not always live up to its ideals, but it cannot be an “apartheid state” by definition since minorities are part of its democratic system and represented in the Knesset (Israeli parliament). Of course, this doesn’t mean that there isn’t discrimination. Regarding the situation in the West Bank, the area is a military occupation with partial Palestinian self-rule, and its status is complicated. Regardless, many Jews see this label as an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the State of Israel.

Further, accusing Israel of “apartheid” or even “occupation” in Gaza is even more inaccurate. Israel withdrew all soldiers and civilians from Gaza in 2005. No Israelis have lived there since then. Hamas, a terrorist organization which also runs a political party, won local elections in 2006. In 2007, it took over full control of Gaza, violently removing the rival Fatah faction (which heads the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank) and setting up an autocratic system in Gaza. The Israeli government has no control over Gaza’s governance, although it and Egypt have maintained a blockade of Gaza to try to limit weapons from entering the territory since Hamas took over. Hamas has used its control of Gaza, despite the blockade, to stockpile rockets and other weapons and build an extensive underground network of tunnels to smuggle, hide fighters, and attack Israel.

“Settler colonialism”

Calling Israel a “settler-colonialist state” (or sometimes a “European-colonialist state”) refers to the idea that Israel “colonized” or “stole” the land, which is false for several reasons:

1. Jews who settled in what was then part of the Ottoman Empire in the late 1800s and early 1900s purchased land from the land owners. They did not attack or steal the land. Israel was established in 1948 following the United Nations’ partition plan, which defined two states, one Jewish and one Arab.

2. Additional land was gained by Israel in a defensive war after Israel declared independence and was attacked by surrounding Arab countries. The West Bank was occupied by Jordan and Gaza by Egypt from 1948 until the 1967 war, when Israel gained control over them, as well as the Sinai Peninsula. Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt as a part of a peace agreement in 1979. In 2005, Israel pulled all soldiers and civilians out of Gaza and turned the territory over to the Palestinian Authority. Various unsuccessful attempts have been made to reach a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians to create a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.
3. Jews were never acting on behalf of a European colonial power. Instead, they were fleeing discrimination from Europe and were part of a nationalist movement called Zionism, which supported self-determination for Jews in their ancestral homeland of Israel – where small communities of Jews have always lived.
4. Over half of the current population of Jewish Israelis were not from Europe but came as refugees from Middle Eastern or North African countries, where their families had lived for centuries. After the creation of Israel, most Jews were kicked out or fled these countries due to persecution.

Note: Sometimes, the statement that “all Israelis are settlers” is heard, meaning that all Jewish Israelis, including those living inside the State of Israel, i.e., not just those living in the West Bank, are considered “settlers.” This essentially denies Israel’s legitimacy and right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state. It also is used to justify terrorism against Israeli civilians by dehumanizing them as “settlers.”

Charges of “genocide” or “ethnic cleansing” in Gaza

Genocide is an internationally recognized crime where acts are committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Israel’s response to the terrorist attacks by Hamas are aimed at ensuring the safety of the Israeli people by removing Hamas’ ability to launch attacks and remove them from power. Israel’s target is not the Palestinian people. Civilian casualties are a tragic part of war, and of course any country and its military is subject to scrutiny about how it conducts itself. However, the Israeli army often warns civilians that it is about to strike an area in order to avoid harming them. Hamas and other terrorist groups hide their weapons and fighters among civilian populations—in homes, schools and hospitals—making it even more challenging. On October 7, Hamas deliberately targeted Israeli civilians, including children and the elderly, committing murder at point blank range, and other atrocities such as rape, torture, and hostage-taking. The charge of genocide against Israel did not start in 2023 in response to the current war—there have been false accusations for decades, some of which have been reminiscent of classic antisemitic tropes.

The charge of **ethnic cleansing** in Gaza is also false. Israel unilaterally withdrew its citizens and military from Gaza in 2005 and has not made any efforts to repopulate the region with Israelis. Israel’s response to Hamas’ attacks are not aimed at removing Palestinians from Gaza. They are aimed at ending Hamas’ ability to launch attacks on Israeli citizens of all backgrounds. Statements regarding rebuilding settlements or transferring Palestinians from Gaza coming from a few extremist members of Israel’s government do not represent the will or intentions of all Israelis or its government.