



JCRC GUIDE TO INFLAMMATORY RHETORIC

Polarization and antisemitism are at record levels in the U.S., and inflammatory language is contributing to this climate of division and intolerance. JCRC Bay Area believes it is critical to engage across political differences and to do so with civility, nuance, and consideration. This guide is intended to help explain the impact of certain problematic rhetoric on the Jewish community.

The terms and slogans listed below, which are used on social media and chanted at rallies, contain subtext not well understood by the general public. Depending on context, usage, and/or word-origin, they may come across as demeaning or threatening to Jews. Some have interpretations that impact Jews negatively regardless of intent.

The use of inflammatory language shuts down effective communication and, unless the intent is to sow discord, there is no need to use words that wound or inflame.

“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 West Bank, Gaza, and the State of Israel (i.e. the land inside the “Green Line”). To many Jews, this is therefore heard as a call for the destruction of the world’s only Jewish state in order to make it “free” of Jews. This is especially true when it is accompanied by pictures of the entirety of the region labeled as “Palestine.” Given the context, this chant can come across as aggressive or threatening, especially to those who have Israeli family and friends.

“Free Palestine”

Some activists using this phrase believe it is a call for human rights for Palestinians, or for an end to the occupation of the West Bank. However, it is also used by individuals and groups who don’t believe that Israel has a right to exist (“anti-Zionists”). They use it to mean the removal of Jews and replacement of Israel with a Palestinian state. This comes across as threatening to many Jews, especially those with Israeli family and friends. Additionally, sometimes this phrase is directed toward Jews randomly and out of context, such as while walking to synagogue or talking about celebrating a holiday online.

“Intifada, Intifada” and “Globalize The Intifada”

Intifada means “uprising” in Arabic. The last (second) 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 during this time. Some activists state that it is simply a non-violent nationalistic call, but intentionally or not, a call to “intifada” evokes violence. In the case of the phrase “globalize the intifada,” it is heard as a call to commit terrorist attacks against Jews internationally as a form of collective retribution. This is especially disquieting in the context of the violent antisemitism that has been occurring across the world.

“Resistance by any means necessary” or “When people are occupied, resistance is justified”

When referring to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this phrase or chant is an endorsement of the use of violence and terrorism against Israeli civilians as a strategy of “resistance.” It has been heard more frequently following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, with some activist groups explicitly supporting the mass murder of civilians committed by Hamas and the use of violence generally. Regardless of how one views the conflict and Israel’s actions, violence against civilians is never acceptable.

“Zios”

This is a derogatory term popularized on the far right by white supremacist David Duke that is increasingly being used by the far left to demean Jews. Sometimes it’s combined into phrases such as “Zio-Nazi” or “Zio-occupied America.” It’s a shortened version of “Zionist,” which is often similarly used by some as a pejorative or as a code word (“dog whistle”) for Jews.

The term Zionism has been weaponized and misrepresented in a variety of ways. The 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. Israel is an important part of Jewish identity for many (though not all) Jews. The vast majority of Jews—89 percent in the Bay Area according to recent data—support Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state. While context matters, “Zionist” or “Zionism” should never be used as an insult.