

Guide to Recognizing & Discussing Problematic Rhetoric

Words hold power. In today's context, certain phrases, especially those related to Israel and geopolitics, can unintentionally cause harm. They can also lead to violence. **This guide aims to shed light on how we interpret the meanings of these phrases.** We also encourage you to **familiarize yourself with pivotal events** in Israeli history; [see here](#). For effective dialogue, consider asking, “Why do you think that?” or “Where did you learn that?” to foster mutual understanding. For guidance in these discussions, reach out jcrc@jfedcin.org.

First: What is Hamas?

Hamas, founded in 1987, **is a designated terrorist organization** by both the US and EU. Its [original charter calls for the destruction of Israel](#) (the region's sole democracy), emphasizes jihad, and includes antisemitic components. While Israel advocates for a two-state solution, Hamas continues to **opt for hostility over peaceful** negotiations. In the current conflict, it is important to remember that **Israel is at war with Hamas, not the Palestinian people**.

“Gaza is an open-air prison controlled by Israel.”

Hamas governs Gaza and is responsible for its citizens, **not Israel**. Israel left Gaza in 2005 to try to allow peace. In 2006, **Hamas was elected to serve as Gaza’s governing authority**. Unfortunately, **most or all aid** into the territory intended for civilians has been **used to fuel its military**. Israel and Egypt have had security blockades at their borders with Gaza to protect their citizens since Hamas' takeover to prevent transportation of weapons. Israel, with international cooperation, is currently [permitting](#) supply entrance and water flow into Gaza. Fuel imports are limited due to Hamas diverting them for illicit uses. In “normal” times, Israel provides Gaza with 10% of its water and half its electricity, with other sources covering the balance.

“From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free.”

Hamas wants to take the land “From the River to the Sea” referring to the Jordan “River” and the Mediterranean “Sea.” The land between those two bodies of water includes the State of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. **This chant is not a compromise position** of creating a two-state solution. Instead, [as the AJC describes](#), it suggests a **desire to “free” Israel from Jews and make all of it a Palestinian state**.

“75 years of occupation”

Labeling the event from 75 years ago as the “occupation” refers to Israel's inception, which misconstrues history and suggests **a call for Israel's dissolution—replacing all of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza with a Palestinian state, questioning Israel's 1947 UN recognition**. From 1948-1967, Jordan held the West Bank, and Egypt, Gaza. Neither aimed to form a Palestinian state. Israel obtained them after the defensive 1967 Six Day War with surrounding Arab nations.

“Israel is an Apartheid state.”

Although some human rights groups label Israel's policies as apartheid, a significant number of international law experts, organizations like Anti-Defamation League ([ADL](#)), the Biden administration, the US House of Representatives, and the European Commission challenge this characterization. These entities emphasize the International Criminal Court's (ICC) definition of apartheid, which underscores "systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group" as its central feature. The crux of their argument is that the **Israeli government's policies are primarily driven by security concerns, not by racism**. As such, classifying the state as practicing apartheid is problematic. And, although Israel is not perfect, Israeli-Arabs are a part of Israel's democratic system, are represented in its parliament, and sit on its supreme court.

“Israel is committing genocide or ethnic cleansing.”

The term '[genocide](#)' or '[ethnic cleansing](#)' when used in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is misleading. It's worth noting that Gaza's population has increased from 1.3 million in 2005 to 2.1 million today, a statistic not indicative of genocide. Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer, introduced the term 'genocide' in 1944, primarily in response to the Holocaust, making such associations especially distressing for the Jewish community. Genocide entails deliberate actions aimed at exterminating a racial, ethnic, national, or religious group. Israeli activities don't align with this criterion. While there may be critiques of certain Israeli measures concerning Palestinians or its Arab citizens, there's no evidence that Israel has ever intended to wipe out the Palestinian populace; their actions stem from security concerns. Alarming, Israel is often the only nation singled out for such grave allegations, reflecting a one-sided view.

“I'm not antisemitic. I'm just anti-Zionist.”

There is room for nuance in this conversation—a minority of Jews themselves even eschew the label Zionist. Nevertheless, most Jews consider themselves Zionists in one fashion or another, and Zionism, at its core, is merely the Jewish expression of longing for a safe home in Jews' ancestral homeland. **Zionism has been part of Judaism for thousands of years**. Expressions of Zionism are diverse; however, denying Jews a right to feel pride in their Zionism (or equating Zionism with racism) vilifies an aspect of many Jews' religious identity.

“Israel is a European settler-colonialist country.”

Calling Israel a European “settler-colonialist state” refers to the idea that Israel “colonized” or “stole” the land, which is false for three main 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 landowners**. Israel was then established in 1948 following the United Nations' partition plan, which defined two states, one Jewish and one Arab. Additional land was later gained by Israel in a defensive war after Israel declared independence and was attacked by surrounding Arab countries.
2. Over half of the current population of Jewish Israelis **are not from Europe** but came as refugees from Middle Eastern or North African countries.
3. Jews were never acting on behalf of a European colonial power. Instead, **Jews were fleeing discrimination** from Europe and were part of a nationalist movement called Zionism, seeking self-determination in their ancestral homeland.