



## Language around the war in Gaza

June 2024

The following information is for:

- those concerned about the current war in Gaza that has resulted in tens of thousands of deaths, most of whom are Palestinian civilians; and
- those who have previously not taken a strong interest in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to assist with considering terms used around the conflict and how different audiences perceive them.

The current conflict has polarised those supporting each side. Those who have taken the side in supporting armed conflict often seek to control the narrative and language around the conflict. Readers who have followed the conflict for a long time may likely have formed their own views about the terms outlined below.

The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania resolved its understanding on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in 2002. A summary of the key elements of this are:

- To affirm the rights of Israelis to live in safety and security within the internationally recognised borders of Israel's pre-1967 territory. That means the Synod recognised the State of Israel but opposed Israel expanding its borders into Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem;
- The Palestinian people also have a right to live in safety and security within a viable state within internationally recognised borders in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 242. Thus, the Synod supported the recognition of a state of Palestine and a two-state solution, meaning Israel and Palestine existing side by side;
- An end of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, entailing the withdrawal of military forces and installations as well as the withdrawal of Israeli civilian populations in the illegal settlements;
- That Israeli and Palestinian authorities end the cycle of violence and use every possible measure to prevent their civilian populations and armed forces from engaging in acts of brutality and breaches of human rights;
- Support for Palestinian self-determination within a Palestinian state; and,
- To support measures to end the armed conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

The Synod's position is to support all people, Palestinians and Israeli Jews, who seek a just and lasting peace through non-violent means. That position is at odds with those that declare themselves either pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli and support the use of killing by either side in the conflict.

In addition to the position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the Synod has resolutions against anti-Semitism from 1988 and 2010 and opposing discrimination against Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from its 2010 Synod meeting.

The following terms will have different meanings depending on who uses them and what the audience is. Thus, if you are using these terms, it would be wise to be clear about what you mean by them and your purpose in using the term in question. The use of some terms is likely to provoke accusations of “anti-Semitism” from those supporting the Netanyahu Government or the Israeli armed forces. Refusing to support the use of some terms can provoke accusations of “appeasement” and being a “Zionist” among those who see themselves as pro-Palestinian, especially those who believe Palestinians should be conducting war against the Israeli Jewish people.

**Terms to consider the use of** include the following:



**From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free** – The phrase has drawn much attention in the media. It has been commented on by the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and a range of Australian political and media commentators. The phrase refers to the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. The phrase is for an English-speaking audience, as it does not rhyme in Arabic. Users of the phrase vary in their meaning. For some, it does mean the violent destruction of the state of Israel. Others use the phrase to mean support for Palestinian self-determination without explicit or implicit support for the destruction of Israel. Understandably, many members of the Jewish community in Australia fear the term implies support for the ethnic cleansing of the Israeli Jewish people and thus regard its use as anti-Semitic. A more detailed summary of the use of the phrase has been provided by SBS <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/from-the-river-to-the-sea-what-does-the-pro-palestinian-chant-mean-and-why-is-it-divisive/hrdrq9jul>

Thus, if you choose to be associated with the phrase, be clear about what you mean.

**Zionism** – Many people taking a pro-Palestinian position state they are anti-Zionist. However, Zionism has an extensive range of meanings in its use. As Professor Raimond Gaita outlined in a lecture at the University of Melbourne, Zionism can mean anything from a belief that the Jewish people should have a right to self-determination and culture to those racist Israeli Jews who use it to mean they have the right to violently drive Palestinians out of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. There are also plenty of interpretations in between. For example, the acceptance that a state of Israel does exist is a version of Zionism. By that definition, the Uniting Church in Australia and the World Council of Churches are Zionist.

Professor Gaita raised the concern that some people are using being anti-Zionist as a mask for what is anti-Semitism.<sup>1</sup> The mainstream Jewish Community Council of Victoria has stated publicly that Jewish people have a right to call themselves Zionist. Again, if you state you are pro- or anti-Zionist, it would be wise to be clear about how you are defining Zionism.

**The right of return for Palestinians** – The concept relates to the right of Palestinians to be able to return to the land they were forcibly driven from by the Israeli armed forces since 1948. The armed conflict that resulted in the establishment of the state of Israel from 1948 to 1949 drove up to 750,000 Palestinians from their homes. The Palestinians refer to the event as “Nakba”, meaning “Catastrophe”. “The right of return” is used by some as a cover for seeking the violent expulsion of the Israeli Jewish people and the destruction of the state of Israel. However, the right of return for refugees does exist in international law and conventions. In practice, the return of people who were historically forcibly displaced has been complex, and the return has been limited in places such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda and Cyprus. At the same time, it is entirely reasonable to argue that a “right of return”, which may be in the form of just reparations rather than physical return, should be part of any eventual negotiations of a just and lasting peace. A very helpful piece on the “right of return” was published in 2020 by The Century Foundation: <https://tcf.org/content/report/neither-intractable-unique-practical-solution-palestinian-right-return/>

Again, if you use the “right of return”, be clear about which version you mean.

**Apartheid** – There is overwhelming evidence that Palestinians and Arabs are discriminated against under Israeli law, both in the law itself and its application. The Israeli human rights organisation, B’Tselem, has provided details on the institutional racial discrimination <https://www.btselem.org/topic/apartheid>. The caution in using the term is the appropriation of the experience of black Africans from South Africa who suffered under Apartheid. In the past, some black South Africans have expressed reservations about the use of the term in the case of Palestinians under Israeli control. However, against such reservations, in February 2024, the South African Government argued that Palestinians were enduring an “extreme form of Apartheid” at the hands of the Netanyahu Government.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Professor Raimond Gaita, “The Urgency of Ethical Challenges Facing the World”, lecture at the University of Melbourne, 8 May 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Marlise Simons, “South Africa says Palestinians are enduring ‘Extreme Form of Apartheid’”, *The New York Times*, 20 February 2024.