

CULTURE

What is Neturei Karta, the Orthodox group at all the pro-Palestinian protests?

The fringe Haredi sect is staunchly anti-Zionist, but far from beloved by other Jews

By [Mira Fox](#) November 22, 2023



Members and supporters of Neturei Karta take part in a "March For Palestine" in London in October. Courtesy of Getty Images

Photos of pro-Palestine rallies in the U.S. since the outbreak of the war often feature a group of Orthodox Jewish men, wearing the long black coats and fur hats of the Haredim, with large signs across their body. Haredi Jews are a rare sight at protests of any kind, but the group has shown up at protests in Boston, in Jersey City, in Montreal, in Washington, D.C., in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

They're not counterprotesters; instead their signs castigate Israel in the harshest terms, blaming all of the violence of the war on Israel and promoting the complete eradication of the Jewish state, stances generally associated with only the farthest left groups — and almost never with Orthodox groups, who align with Israel.

“Torah demands all Palestine be returned to Palestinian sovereignty,” reads a typical sign. “Torah true Jews oppose the aggression in al-Aqsa and the occupation of all Palestine,” says another. “State of ‘Israel’ does not represent world Jewry!”

At the bottom of each sign is a website address that leads to the barely functional homepage of Neturei Karta, a fringe Haredi sect. A small, pixelated .gif of an Israeli flag crossed out with a large red cancel sign waves from the top corner.

What is Neturei Karta?

Neturei Karta was founded by Amram Blau in Jerusalem in the late 1930s, and became distinguished by its strongly anti-Zionist stance. The group split from the Orthodox umbrella group, Agudat Israel, when the previously anti-Zionist group began to work with the state of Israel.

Despite its stance against the Israeli state, the bulk of Neturei Karta’s members live in Jerusalem, though there are also communities in other metro areas, including Brooklyn.



Neturei Karta members marching through Jerusalem on Israel's Day of Independence. *Courtesy of Getty Images*

The group is not alone in its anti-Zionism; some Haredi sects, most famously the Satmar, also oppose the secular state of Israel. Both groups believe that Jews were exiled from Israel by God as punishment for sins, and God will reestablish the nation only during the Messianic era; for humans to do so before then is an

affront to God. Leaders from both have even taken the extreme stance that the Holocaust was a form of divine retribution.

But Neturei Karta's anti-Zionism is even more extreme, so much so that most Orthodox groups, including the Satmar, have disavowed them. While most Haredi denominations accept the secular state of Israel, even as they don't endorse it, Neturei Karta actively works to undermine it and advocate for its dismantling, and have allied themselves with enemies of Israel, including those that have voiced open antisemitism, such as Iran and Hezbollah.

Controversial tactics

Neturei Karta has a long history of attending anti-Israel events, and lending support and publicity to various factions, including Iranian and Palestinian leaders, who support the destruction of Israel. They routinely burn the Israeli flag at demonstrations, especially on Purim, laid a wreath on the grave of Hezbollah's founder and have made headlines by showing up to high-profile anti-Israel events.

One of the group's leaders, Yisroel Dovid Weiss, posed for photos at the 2004 vigil around Yasser Arafat's deathbed in Paris. This was apparently not merely a PR stunt; *The New York Times* reported that Arafat had given \$30,000 each month to Moshe Hirsch, the head of Neturei Karta at the time; Hirsch attended the Palestinian leader's funeral in Ramallah.



Members of the Neturei Karta burn the Israeli flag at a protest in Jerusalem on Israel's Independence Day. *Photo by Getty Images*

Neturei Karta representatives have additionally met with leaders of Hezbollah and, on several occasions in both Tehran and abroad, with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and have proclaimed their support for Iran's efforts against the "Zionist regime."

Most famously, Weiss also attended a 2006 conference on Holocaust revisionism, hosted by Iran; white supremacist David Duke and other noted Holocaust deniers also came.

In 2014, the Shin Bet arrested Neturei Karta member Yitzchak Bergil and charged him with spying on Israel for Iran after, according to Israeli intelligence, Bergil went to the Iranian embassy to volunteer his services.

In January of this year, Neturei Karta members met with members of the terrorist group Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Jenin, in the West Bank. They were praised by PIJ for their refusal to acknowledge the state of Israel, and wore kaffiyehs, the symbol of Palestinian liberation, during their visit.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrations

Neturei Karta has been taking part in pro-Palestinian rallies and marches for decades; they are a nearly guaranteed presence at any demonstrations against Israel, and regularly attend campus demonstrations and teach-ins against Israel.

In recent weeks, the group has been regularly marching with pro-Palestinian activists, often making speeches at the events. While they occasionally reference Neturei Karta's stance that Jews cannot return to the land of Israel until God decrees it, the bulk of their



Neturei Karta members at a cease-fire vigil. *Courtesy of Getty Images*

statements sound closer to those made by more visible, secular leftist Jewish groups such as IfNotNow and Jewish Voice for Peace.

Their statements at rallies since Oct. 7 have focused on the difference between Judaism and Zionism, and comparisons between the plight of Palestinians in Gaza and Jews during the Holocaust; they refer to Israel's founding with the Arabic term "Nakba," which means "catastrophe."

"It was our families, our communities who suffered in the Holocaust, and we don't want to see this happen to anyone," Rabbi Dovid Feldman recently said at a rally in Montreal.

The violence endured by Palestinians, and the idea that Zionism is a corruption of true Judaism, have been Neturei Karta talking points for decades. But since the war, the speeches have also often focused on recent rising rates of antisemitism around the war, arguing that Israel is the root of increased violence toward Jews.

"The state of Israel, with its occupation, with its foot on the neck of the people of Palestine, you are building buckets and buckets of antisemitism, you are exacerbating antisemitism," Weiss said at a gathering in Jersey City. "Step back and think what's causing this antisemitism?"

The response to Neturei Karta

Given Neturei Karta's extreme tactics in the past, many Jews, even passionately anti-Zionist ones, are wary of allying with the group because of their stances on the Holocaust, and their connections with Iran, Hezbollah and PIJ.

Jewish groups have often accused the Neturei Karta of "selling out their fellow Jews" by allying with antisemitic groups, as well as using their appearance as "currency" to present themselves as the spokespeople for Jews. Numerous academic articles reference their tactics of showing up to major events attended by journalists, relying on their Orthodox dress to gain attention to their cause. Neturei Karta had not responded to a request for comment on their protest goals by time of publication.

The Anti-Defamation League's page on Neturei Karta notes that the group is widely repudiated by Jews of all varieties, but that their regular speeches at demonstrations likely convince passersby that their stance against Israel is widespread among religious Jews.

And indeed, the group has featured in Getty Images' photos from protests. Pro-Palestine social media have, in recent weeks, used photos of the men to support the argument that many Jews oppose Israel. Activists have invited them to speak on campuses and at rallies.

There, Neturei Karta has focused less on their theological stance about the state of Israel, and avoided mention of their support for Hezbollah or Iran. Instead, they've concentrated on stances the gathered activists usually agree on. In Boston last week, a Neturei Karta representative led the crowd in a loud chant: "Judaism yes, Zionism no. The state of Israel has to go."

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