

## Neturei Karta supports Ahmadinejad at Columbia

By Divya Gupta  
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Dressed in long black robes and hats, a group of rabbis huddled together at a street light near Columbia University on Monday. Some of them were returning home after a day that started with a meeting with the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Amidst the specter of wide-ranging protest and opposition to Ahmadinejad's much publicized and talked about appearance at Columbia, there was at least one unlikely group of people that had come to show their support for the Iranian leader - Orthodox Hassidic Jews who are members of an organization called the Neturei Karta.



Members of the Neturei Karta International who are orthodox hasidic Jews stage a counter-protest outside Columbia University in support of Ahmadinejad.

**Photo:** Neturei Karta International Website

"Today we came to express our opinion that being anti-Israel does not mean you are anti-Semitic," said Rabbi Mordecai Weberman, a spokesman for the group, Neturie Karta International, which is based in New York.

The Neturei Karta, Aramaic for "Guardians of the City," believe that according to their religion they are forbidden to have a state or sovereignty. They are therefore opposed to Zionism and call for the peaceful dismantling of the state of Israel, for handing over to the Palestinians.

Earlier in the day, 11 senior members of the Neturei Karta, met with Ahmadinejad at InterContinental Hotel on 51st Street and presented him with an inscribed silver bowl as a token of their appreciation, said Weberman.

"He's a man who has many times shown concern to his own Jewish community," said Rabbi Yisroel Dovid Weiss, in a phone interview. Weiss is one of the leaders of the Neturei Karta International, which is headquartered in New York City.

There was heavy security at the meeting, said Weberman. It was arranged with assistance from the U.N. Mission of Iran in New York, which could not be reached for comment.

After the breakfast meeting with Ahmadinejad, most of the 11 members proceeded to an intersection near the United Nations building to join a larger group where they staged a counter protest in support of the Iranian president, said Weberman.

The group's third stop for the day was at Columbia University. Approximately 45 members of the group had lined up at about 3:45 p.m. at the corner of Broadway and West 115th Street, outside the university campus, said Weberman. They all bore a similar look with long beards and a distinctive hairstyle. The front portion of the mane was partitioned down the middle and curled up in two ringlets, dangling from each side of their faces.

Many of them held placards with slogans that read, 'End of Zionism Equals Peace' and 'Zionism: A Cancer for the Jewish People,' said Weberman. The group attracted a range of reactions from passers-by and other protestors, he added.

"They tried to surround and harass us by coming close to us," said Weberman, referring to a few heated moments during the protest. "One person shouted out, 'You should have been killed by Hitler.'"

There was a person holding a portrait of Hitler on one side and a Swastika symbol on the other, which was a caricatured version of the Iranian president, said Weberman. The four loose ends in the symbol were painted as Ahmadinejad's arms and legs, he added.

In the speech Ahmadinejad delivered at Columbia University, the responses that elicited the strongest reactions from the crowd were on the topics of homosexuality and the Holocaust. The group had not heard nor seen the speech delivered at Columbia, but Weberman said he and the Neturei Karta supported the Iranian president's views on both counts.

"The Iranian president was not questioning that the Holocaust happened," said Weberman. "He just asked for more research into it."

On homosexuality, Weberman said that the Jewish people are against it as well.

"It's against God's will. Each and every religion is against that, so why shouldn't it be prohibited. It's disgraceful to humanity," said Weberman.

A student, Elyssa Brent, was sitting across from Weberman on a park bench at Barnard College, located opposite Columbia University. She wore an angry look and threw disapproving glances in his direction. A white flag with a blue imprint of the Star of David was draped across her knees and legs.

"In the Jewish community - orthodox, reform or conservative - those men are shunned," said Brent, clasping the flag in a tight grip. "I don't care how they are dressed or how they look, but they are not religious men."

John Berliner, president of Yavneh, which is a group of 400 Orthodox Jewish students at Columbia University, echoed Brent's views.

"They are excommunicated by their own community", said Berliner, referring to members of the Neturei Karta as a small group of ultra-Orthodox Jews.

In the New York metropolitan area, members of the Neturei Karta are estimated at 4,500 and they are mainly concentrated in Williamsburg in Brooklyn, Monroe in Orange County, Westchester County and in Rockland County, said Weberman. Internationally, he added, the membership is estimated at about 9,500, including representation from Palestine.

Ari Goldman, an Orthodox Jew, professor of religion and journalism at Columbia University and author of the book, "The Search for God at Harvard," offered a brief comment.

"The Neturei Karta is a fringe group. The vast majority of Orthodox Jews support the state of Israel," said Goldman.