

# The Jewish Argument Against Zionism

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# Historical Overview of Jewish Opposition to Zionism



## 01

# Historical Overview of Jewish Opposition to Zionism

Since the first Zionist arguments in favour of colonising Palestine, Jews around the world have argued against Zionism.<sup>1</sup>

In 1912, the National Federation for Combatting Zionism was established in Germany in the office of the Association for Liberal Judaism.<sup>2</sup> A short time later, it was renamed the Anti-Zionist Committee (AZK).<sup>3</sup> AZK stressed that German Jews were a part of German culture, German society, and even Germany itself, while also warning against the Zionist movement, which it argued seriously endangered the steps towards emancipation that German Jews had achieved to date.<sup>3</sup> AZK believed that Zionism viewed German Jews – similar to the anti-Semites – as “*fremdlinge*” (foreigners) within their country.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in the early 20th century, many American liberal Jews critiqued Zionism, most famously articulated by Elmer Berger and the American Council for Judaism.<sup>5</sup> They feared that Zionism would be considered a kind of dual loyalty; that it would open Jews up to the antisemitic claim that they were not real Americans; and that it would actually frustrate their attempts to assimilate into mainstream American culture.<sup>6</sup>

The Jewish Fellowship in the UK also rejected political Zionism and the foundation of a Jewish state because it would create a divided loyalty for Jews living in the diaspora.<sup>7</sup> They argued that this divided loyalty would not only call into question the successes of the emancipation and integration processes but would also result in an increase in antisemitism.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, many of the Jewish on the political left in the 1930s and 40s critiqued Zionism on two grounds: a critique of nationalism and a critique of colonialism.<sup>9</sup>

1. They understood Zionism as right-wing nationalism and, in that sense, bourgeois.<sup>10</sup> They saw it as in-line with other forms of nationalism—an attempt to align the working class with the interests of the bourgeoisie.<sup>11</sup> The Jewish political left in general saw Jewish nationalism as a right-wing formation trying to create a unified, militaristic culture that aligns working-class Jewish interests with the interests of the Jewish bourgeoisie.<sup>12</sup>
2. Jewish leftist pamphlets and magazines and speeches in the 1930s and 40s saw that Zionists were aligning themselves with British imperialism.<sup>13</sup> They were very aware that the Middle East was colonised, first by the Ottomans and then by the British.<sup>14</sup> They saw the Palestinian struggle for liberation as part of a global anti-imperialist movement.<sup>15</sup>

Following the creation of the state of Israel, some Iraqi Jews converted to Islam to remain in Iraq, so opposed were they to being forcibly relocated to Israel.<sup>16</sup> Other Arab Jews opted to relocate to Europe and North America instead of becoming part of Israeli society.<sup>17</sup>

## Historical Overview of Jewish Opposition to Zionism continued...

Anti-Zionist Jews have historically worked with Palestinian leadership. Indeed, Yasser Arafat had a Jewish adviser at one time, the Orthodox anti-Zionist Rabbi Moshe Hirsch.<sup>18</sup> When the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) entered negotiations with Israel, orthodox Jews wanted to break off relations with them, because they believed that the PLO had betrayed the anti-Zionist cause.<sup>19</sup>

As recently as 2017, an anti-Zionist Jew claimed asylum in the UK due to his beliefs.<sup>20</sup> In a court statement, he said: “What the Zionist movement has done is sinful because it has returned Jews to the

Holy Land against God’s will and in the process has forcibly displaced the indigenous Palestinian people and stolen their land [...] The Zionists have engaged in theft and mass killing to create their Zionist state. They have rebelled against God in the gravest way. I am afraid of being forcibly conscripted into the military which would go against everything that I stand for ... the State of Israel practices apartheid and is routinely involved in war crimes against the Palestinian people. I cannot serve in such an immoral army that carries out such atrocities on a daily basis”.<sup>21</sup>

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# Jewish Arguments Against Zionism on Religious Grounds





# Jewish Arguments Against Zionism on Religious Grounds

Orthodox Jews who criticise or oppose Zionism maintain that Israel can only be regained miraculously. These Jews view the present state as a blasphemous human attempt to usurp God’s role, and many actively work to dismantle the secular State of Israel.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike non-Jewish anti-Zionists, Jewish anti-Zionists usually firmly believe in the Jewish right to the Land of Israel, but only at the future time of redemption.<sup>23</sup> The best-known group of the Jewish religious anti-Zionists are the Neturei Karta.<sup>24</sup>

Two Jewish religious grounds are typically given for anti-Zionism:

1. Today’s Zionism is a secular Zionism, packed with non-Jewish influences, and lacking key features like Mashiach and the rebuilt Temple.<sup>25</sup> The principal theological argument of the *haredim* is that the Zionists have transformed the religious messianism implicit in Judaism into a political nationalism and tried to replace the religious definition of Jewish identity with one that is secular and political.<sup>26</sup>
2. The second reading is that the Talmud (Meseches Kesuvos, 111a), as part of a discussion of certain Torah verses mentioning oaths, states that when Israel went into the second exile, there were three vows between Heaven and Earth:<sup>27</sup>

- a. Israel would not “go up like a wall”, meaning conquer the land of Israel by force.<sup>28</sup>
- b. God made Israel swear that they would not rebel against the nations of the world, by obeying their governments during their exile.<sup>29</sup>
- c. God made the nonJews swear not to oppress Israel “too much”.<sup>30</sup>

In the words of the Midrash (as expounded by Rashi), the people were adjured not to “hasten the End.”<sup>31</sup> In short, they were required to wait for the heavenly, complete, miraculous, supernatural, and meta-historical redemption, distinct from the realm of human endeavour.<sup>32</sup> This waiting for over two millennia manifests their faith in divine providence, in the assurance of the prophets, and in messianic destiny.<sup>33</sup>

According to the *haredim* then, the return of the Jews to the Holy Land is a messianic promise: it will take place as God’s doing, not be the result of a political movement or, even less, of military action.<sup>34</sup>

These Jews see Zionism’s attempt to hasten the ‘End’ and return by physical power as a collective revolt against the kingdom of heaven, an aggressive aspiration to overstep human boundaries into the realm reserved for God, just like the deeds of the generation of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).<sup>35</sup> They see Zionism as an act of the devil, which is ultimately doomed to failure, regardless of their human deeds: “The Lord shall rebuke you—the Satan who has chosen Jerusalem” (paraphrasing Zechariah 3:2).<sup>36</sup>

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# Jewish Arguments Against Zionism on Principled Grounds





## 03

# Jewish Arguments Against Zionism on Principled Grounds

Some Jews oppose Zionism because it is counter to their belief in justice, equality, and freedom for all people.<sup>37</sup> These Jews oppose Zionism because it is a settler-colonial movement, and established an apartheid state where Jews have more rights than others.<sup>38</sup> Those who maintain this perspective understand that Palestinian dispossession and occupation are by design, and reject a political ideology founded upon erasure.<sup>39</sup>

Jews opposing Zionism on principled grounds also believe that Zionism has harmed Jewish people.<sup>40</sup> They believe that Zionism has led Jews in Israel to treat their neighbours with suspicion, to forget the ways Jews built home and community around the world, especially the long and integrated histories of Jews in the Arab world, living among and sharing community, language, and custom with Muslims and Christians for thousands of years.<sup>41</sup> By creating a racist hierarchy with European Jews at the top, they see how Zionism erased those histories and destroyed those communities and relationships.<sup>42</sup>

Anti-Zionist Jews reject Zionist interpretations of history that portray Jewish people as alone, that to remedy the harms of antisemitism, Jews must think of themselves as always under attack and that they cannot trust others.<sup>43</sup>

Rather than accept the inevitability of occupation and dispossession, anti-Zionist Jews advocate for solidarity, collective liberation, and a future where everyone - including Palestinians and Jewish Israelis - can live their lives freely in vibrant, safe, equitable communities, with basic human needs fulfilled.<sup>44</sup>

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# Contemporary Jewish Organisations Against Zionism



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## Neturei Karta

Neturei Karta is a religious group of Haredi Jews founded in 1935, that actively opposes Zionism and advocates for the “peaceful dismantling” of the State of Israel.<sup>45</sup> They believe that the Jewish people are strictly forbidden from re-establishing sovereignty in the Land of Israel until the arrival of the Messiah.<sup>46</sup> The group’s members believe that the existence of a Jewish state is a rebellion against God as it did not occur with divine intervention through the Messiah.<sup>47</sup> As a result, the Neturei Karta are a regular sight at pro-Palestinian protests in Europe and North America.<sup>48</sup>

Since the start of the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the group’s spokesman expressed their “strong denunciation of the practices of the Israeli occupation army in Palestine”.<sup>49</sup> He stressed that the group opposes Zionism in all its forms, and organises demonstrations against “the Israeli occupation”, whilst seeking “to build bridges of reconciliation between Jews and Arabs”.<sup>50</sup>

## Jewish Voice for Peace

Jewish Voice for Peace is the largest progressive Jewish anti-Zionist organisation in the world.<sup>51</sup> The organisation describes itself as a grassroots, multiracial, cross-class, intergenerational movement of U.S. Jews into solidarity with the Palestinian freedom struggle, guided by a vision of justice, equality, and dignity for all people.<sup>52</sup> They have organised several pro-Palestine campaigns, including *Deadly Exchange*, *No Tech for Apartheid*, and *Not On Our Dime*.<sup>53</sup>

## Jewdas

Jewdas is a Jewish diaspora group based in London.<sup>54</sup> It describes itself as a “radical Jewish diaspora group” and is known for its far-left anti-Zionism.<sup>55</sup> It has a satirical-communal website and stages events in London and elsewhere.<sup>56</sup>

## Edah HaChareidis

The Charedi Council of Jerusalem is an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish group that believes the establishment of the state of Israel to be a rebellion against God.<sup>57</sup> The group refuses to receive any state funding from the Israeli authorities, or to endorse voting in the elections, relying on donations from fellow anti-Zionist Haredi Jews abroad and its own income.<sup>58</sup>

## International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network

The International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN) is a network of anti-Zionist Jews pledged to oppose Zionism and the State of Israel.<sup>59</sup> The IJAN views Zionism as a racist movement, and Israel as an apartheid state.<sup>60</sup> The charter of the organization states: “We are an international network of Jews who are uncompromisingly committed to struggles for human emancipation, of which the liberation of the Palestinian people and land is an indispensable part. Our commitment is to the dismantling of Israeli apartheid, the return of Palestinian refugees, and the ending of the Israeli colonization of historic Palestine.”<sup>61</sup>

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