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THE NATIONAL FRONT AND ANTI-SEMITISM IN FRANCE

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The coincidental timing of two phenomena - an increase of anti-Semitic violence since October 2001 (with a peak in April 2002) and the surprise success of Jean-Marie Le Pen of the far right National Front Party in the presidential election – has fixed in the mind of many observers the image of a fiercely anti-Semitic France. In the U.S. press, for example, France has been described as the most fertile ground in Western Europe for racism and for far right extremism. Some journalists and columnists of the New York Times and of the Washington Post have even compared contemporary France to the Vichy Regime that implemented anti-Jewish laws during World War II.¹

Meanwhile, on 1 May in Paris, 1.3 million people demonstrated against Le Pen with the majority of them similarly expressing a fear of a revival of traditional French anti-Semitism and making allusions to fascism and Nazism. Various French commentators made reference to Germany in 1933 during their coverage of Le Pen's surprise showing in the election. Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Daniel Melchior described France as the most anti-Semitic country in Europe while Prime Minister Ariel Sharon declared that the 600,000 French Jews (the largest such group in Western Europe) might be "in great danger."²

All of these statements, both in France and abroad, assume that Le Pen's success in the first round of the presidential election and the rising tide of anti-Semitic incidents (including the firebombing of Synagogues in Marseille and Paris suburb) both stem from traditional French anti-Semitism. Should we accept the conventional wisdom that "4.5 million National Front voters means 4.5 million anti-Semitic voters?" This analysis brief will argue that the answer to that question is a firm no.

The National Front no longer needs to exploit traditional anti-Semitism in order to strengthen its electoral basis. Indeed, Le Pen's most recent attempts to do so were detrimental to his electoral prospects because traditional anti-Semitism has been in

¹ See as examples, the editorial "The return of an ancient hatred," *New York Times*, 20 April 2002; Marlise Simons, "The Mideast in Marseille," *New York Times*, 8 April 2002; Charles Krauthammer, "Europe and 'those' people': anti-Semitism rises again," *Washington Post*, 26 April 2002; George F. Will, "'Final Solution,' Phase 2," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2002.

² Both are quoted in "Sharon's anti-semitism accusations 'odious' – French Government," *Agence France Presse*, February 21, 2002.

continuous decline in France since World War II. Instead of relying on anti-Semitism, the National Front has expanded its traditionally narrow core constituency by capitalizing on other anxieties, particularly national identity, personal security, immigration, European unification, and unemployment.

While the National Front cannot be blamed (directly) for the recent anti-Semitic violence, several distinct, yet still disturbing, trends are responsible. The violence has been principally attributed to young North African immigrants who suffer themselves from racism and xenophobia (the so-called “mirror effect.”) This growing xenophobia was popularized by the ideological and political impact of the National Front during the 1980’s and the 1990’s (“the circle effect.”)

This new form of anti-Semitism (dubbed “la nouvelle judéophobie” or new Jew-phobia in recent book a by Pierre-André Taguieff)³ has its roots in the current crisis of French society. The new Jew-phobia is one manifestation among many of the urban violence that plagues French cities and is the result of the social and spatial segregation of the North African immigrants. Jew-phobia is unique only in that it is also influenced by events abroad, particularly the second Palestinian Intifada that began in September 2000 (See Table 1). To that extent, the same societal tensions that propelled Le Pen into the second round with 18 percent of the vote also explain the growing tension between the Jewish and Muslim communities in France (“the boomerang effect”). The results of these various trends sometimes seem paradoxical. For example, some French Jews felt safer with Le Pen who, despite his anti-Semitism, promised greater security and protection from urban delinquency and consequently anti-Semitic violence.

Table 1: Recent Anti-Semitic Threats and Incidents

	Anti-Semitic threats	Anti-Semitic violence	Xenophobic violence
1995	86	3	39
1996	89	1	31
1997	83	3	33
1998	74	1	26
1999	60	9	31
2000	603 (85% after September 28 - outbreak of the Second Intifada)	116 (96% after September 28)	30

³ Pierre-André Taguieff, *La Nouvelle Judéophobie*, Paris: Fayard, 2002.

The National Front no longer needs to exploit traditional anti-Semitism in order to achieve its main objectives

Anti-Semitism played a major role in the creation of the National Front, its party organization and its political agenda. The National Front was officially created in 1972 but it was not created from whole cloth. Rather, it inherited a number of older tendencies from a variety of French far right movements (e.g. Action Française, the Vichy regime, the Pujadiste movement, Organization de l'Armée Secrete, Occident, Ordre Nouveau). All of these previous political experiences were intimately connected with traditional French anti-Semitism. Because of its direct links to earlier far right organizations, the National Front's initial recruitment efforts were confined to the traditional anti-Semitic, neo-militaristic margins of society (for example, former Waffen SS, former members of the Vichy Milice like François Brigneau and neo-Nazis like François Duprat.)

With the party's development, Le Pen had to bring together many different and sometimes antagonistic new tendencies (for instance, the Catholic traditionalists such as Romain Marie and the neo-paganism of the former Club de l'Horloge) and to attempt to create a coherent force. Indeed, one of Le Pen's major achievements was his ability to manage the coexistence of various, often conflicting traditions within his single party. Despite its internal contradictions, the National Front now speaks with one voice, especially after the split of 1998. The one common obsession of these various tendencies has been (and still is) anti-Semitism. This ideological convergence explains why anti-Semitism was among the main priorities on National Front's early political and electoral agenda, but with little result in terms of electoral success.

The National Front's political agenda since the 1980's has emphasized new themes such as national integrity, national identity, anti-Maastricht propaganda, anti-establishment discourse, supported by slogans such as "3 million unemployed is 3 million immigrants too many! France and the people of France first." As a result, the National Front has attracted widespread electoral support for its ideas and policies. Its stance on the immigration issue has found significant popular backing because on the narrow issue of immigration policy its popularity is supplemented by an ability to appeal to voters beyond its natural "far right" constituency. An opinion survey published by *Le Figaro* in 1990 reflected this point. Thirty-one percent of all voters indicated that they were in accord with the National Front on the immigration issue. In other words, the use of the immigration issue (and of the concepts related to it: insecurity, unemployment, and national decline) for electoral purposes has proven to be much more effective for Le Pen than the narrow issue of traditional anti-Semitism.

This does not mean that the National Front is no longer anti-Semitic. In speeches by National Front leaders and through its various press outlets, (*National Hebdo*, *Minute*, *Présent*) the National Front continues to make France's Jewish community a scapegoat. It still refers to the "Jewish lobby," the "political and media manipulation of the government by the Jews," and "the Jewish conspiracy." But it is nonetheless remarkable that Le Pen's public pronouncements have become somewhat less crude lately, probably because his

most recent displays of blatant anti-Semitic feelings have proved to be counterproductive and have undermined the electoral success of the National Front.

None of this means that anti-Semitism no longer exists in France. The number of threats and incidents of anti-Semitism, combined with the impact of revisionism and post-revisionism in France, clearly demonstrate that French political culture provides a hospitable environment for continuing anti-Semitism. Studies of the National Front electorate have also demonstrated the enduring influence of the “ethnocentric and authoritarian syndrome” in French politics.⁴ Furthermore, Le Pen’s recent success might hasten the acceptance of a sort of soft anti-Semitism, that is an “everyday anti-Semitism.” Without a doubt, there is still a high degree of passive acceptance of a certain level of anti-Semitism in France.

Nonetheless, the political resonance and social impact of the National Front reflects a crisis that goes far beyond the single issue of anti-Semitism. This is not even the most prominent issue in the priority rankings of National Front voters. The emergence and then the development of the National Front can only be explained with reference to a variety of other factors. Finally, the issue of anti-Semitism is much more complex than the simple equation of anti-Semitism with the National Front. It is certainly part of the National Front’s traditional stock and trade, but French society also has to face new forms of anti-Semitism that have little relation to the traditional far right anti-Semitism of the National Front.

Traditional and new forms of anti-Semitism

Traditional anti-Semitism can be defined as the end result of the layering of various successive strata of hatred throughout French history. Anti-Semitism has been part of the French political culture since the dawn of the French nation and has played a major role in political contests since the Dreyfus Affair at the end of the 19th century. As Table 2 indicates, far right movements never had a monopoly on anti-Semitism. Even recently, there are many examples of collusion between the neo-Nazi skinheads and pro-Arab activists (for instance, the firebombing of *La Tribune Juive* in December 1996).

⁴ Nonna Mayer, *Les Français qui vote FN*, Paris: Flammarion, 1999.

Table 2: Traditional Anti-Semitism in France

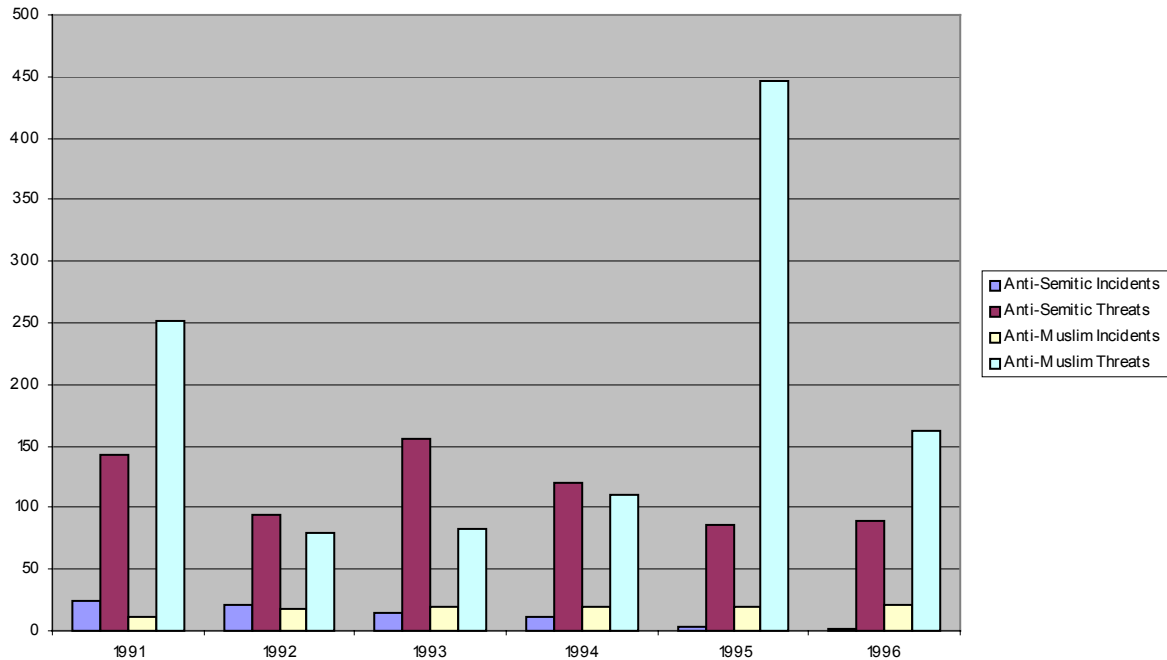
	(Far) Right	(Far) Left
Anti-Judaism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19th Century: Abbé Barruel, Joseph de Maistre, Bonald • Today: Comités Chretienté-Solidarité, AGRIF (Alliance générale contre le racisme et pour le respect de l'identité française) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19th Century: Voltaire, Polier de Bottens
Economic and Social Anti-Semitism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19th Century: Drumont, Gustave Tridon, Auguste Chirac, Urbain Gohier • Today: National Front 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19th Century : Fourier, Toussenel, Pierre Leroux, Proudhon • Today : radical leftist movements (related to anticapitalism, tiers-mondisme, radical ecology)
Racial anti-Semitism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19th Century : Vacher de Lapouge, Gobineau • 20th Century : Maurras, Daudet, Montherlant, Rebatet, Drieu la Rochelle, Brasillach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19th Century : Jules Soury, Gustave Théry
Institutional anti-Semitism (the Vichy regime)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Xavier Vallat • Déat (former socialist) • Doriot (former communist) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Syndicats</i> (ex-CGT) • Charles Spinasse (<i>Rouge et Bleu</i>)
Anti-Zionism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jeune Europe • Front Européen de Libération • National Front 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Garaudy (abbé Pierre) • Jean Brière (former ecologist)
Revisionism (Holocaust Denial)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bardèche • François Duprat • B.Notin • National Front 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pierre Guillaume • Paul Rassinier, • Serge Thion • Faurisson

However, as previously mentioned, traditional anti-Semitism is declining in France. Only 10 percent of the French agree with the statement “the Jews have too much power in France.”⁵ One might argue that 10 percent is still a very large number, but that should not obscure the fact that, in France, it is much easier to be Jewish than to be North African. In contrast, 33 percent of the French public agree that “North African immigrants can’t be

⁵ Nonna Mayer, “La France n’est pas antisémite,” *Le Monde*, 4 April 2002, p.18.

integrated,” 41 percent that “Frenchness is threatened by immigration” and 56 percent that “there are too many immigrants in France.” As figure 1 implies, in normal times, Muslim immigrants are now the main targets of xenophobia and racist violence in France.

Figure 1: Anti-Semitic and Anti-Muslim Incidents in France



Source: Commission consultative des droits de l’homme

There is moreover a link between anti-Muslim prejudice and anti-Semitic violence. A growing number of anti-Semitic incidents are due to members of immigrant minority groups. As Jonathan Laurence and Jean-Marc Dreyfus recently pointed out, “the perpetrators of today’s anti-Semitic incidents are not natives protecting an ideal of Frenchness from Jewish contamination but immigrants of Maghreb origin whose own place in French society has been frequently questioned.”⁶ Of course, the fact that this anti-Semitic violence has not been the work of the extreme right is of little comfort to its victims and to Jews that fear such violence in the future, but it should cause us to re-examine the nature, causes and consequences of anti-Semitism in France.

The new “Jew-phobia” as Pierre André Taguieff calls it, can be defined as a mixture of old and new ingredients. Among the old ones are traditional anti-Zionism, related to anti-Imperialist propaganda, anti-Americanism and anti-capitalism, *tiers-mondisme* (third-world-ism). The new ingredients include the emergence of the apparently oxymoronic

⁶ See Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Jonathan Laurence, “Anti-Semitism in France,” May 14, 2002 at http://www.brook.edu/fp/cusf/analysis/dreyfus_20020514.htm

“anti-Semitic anti-racism,”⁷ caused in part by the takeover of anti-Israeli movements around the world by radical Islamists.

In *La Nouvelle Judéophobie*, Taguieff clearly analyzed the mechanisms and the content of this new Jew-phobia. He argued that France is particularly sensitive to this new Jew-phobia because of the legacy of its traditional anti-Semitism. Indeed, the number of Anti-semitic threats and incidents is increasing in France. In the last part of his book, Taguieff accused French politicians (with the exception of Jean-Pierre Chevènement) of being blind or even accommodating towards the new Jew-phobia because of their “political correctness.” These politicians do not want to blame North African immigrants for the violence either because they fear that would play into the hand of the National Front or because of their “*beurophilie*,” (love of Arabs) largely motivated by the growing number of Muslim voters in France.

Despite this somewhat cynical conclusion, there are reasons to be more optimistic about the negative impact of the new Jew-phobia on French political culture. The Muslim vote has not really been studied, but the large majority of the 5 to 6 million Muslims who hold French citizenship is against anti-Semitism and the 1.5 million Muslims who are of voting age vote overwhelmingly against the National Front. Moreover, many Muslim leaders have regularly condemned the anti-Semitic violence and the influence of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the violence in French urban areas.

At the same time, it also possible to be more pessimistic than Taguieff, who only gives a very general analysis of what is really the main issue: why do even a limited number of young North African immigrants feel the need to subscribe to the new Jew-phobia? Why do they identify themselves with Khaled Kelkal, who was responsible for a series of terrorist attacks in France in 1995, or more recently with Osama Bin Laden? For Taguieff, the main reason for the propagation of what he calls the “*culture de la haine*” (culture of hatred) is the failure of multiculturalism in France. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. To the factors that explain the persistence of the National Front we should add many other elements related to the origins and effects of a new “reverse discrimination,” that is exclusion (in this case, anti-Semitism) exerted by excluded groups (North African immigrants). Violence of this sort reinforces the exclusion of North Africans within French society, which, in turn, only propels them toward more violence, creating a vicious circle of violence and self-victimization.

⁷ This doctrine holds that the Jews and their supporters are anti-Islamic and therefore racist. Thus, the defense of Islam against Jews is anti-racist.