



ANTI-SEMITISM IN FRANCE

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Jean-Marie Le Pen's first round victory over the socialists in the French presidential election struck many as the final confirmation that virulent anti-Semitism has returned to France. Charles Krauthammer proclaimed an anti-Semitic renaissance in France, noting that, historically speaking, it is the fifty year lull in anti-Semitism following the holocaust that is anomalous.¹ A *New York Times* editorial similarly warned against the revival of an "ancient hatred" in France and Europe and criticized the "resurgence of the violent hatred that caused the holocaust."² Although these observations reflect France's checkered history of anti-Semitism, they provide little insight into French society today. Recent anti-Semitic violence has little relation to the traditional, right wing anti-Semitism that underpinned the fascist French regime during the Holocaust. Instead, the recent incidents stem from new sources that reflect the changing nature of French society. In particular, it demonstrates the growing tension between the large Jewish and Muslim communities in France and the growing frustration of the economically disenfranchised *Maghrebin* (North African) youth.

The confusion of American observers about French anti-Semitism is understandable. The month preceding the electoral success of Le Pen saw a spike in attacks on Jewish places of worship and property, including the firebombing of a suburban Marseilles synagogue. (See table 1) The perceived anti-Israel sentiment of the French government was summed up in a supposedly off-the-record comment by the French ambassador in London, Daniel Bernard, to the effect that Israel was a "s---y little country," that did not merit putting the world "in danger of World War III." Around the same time, an internal Socialist Party memo, disclosed in the press, recommended a firm pro-Palestinian stance to garner French-Arab votes.³ In December, the Israeli government condemned France as the "worst Western country" in terms of anti-Semitism and worried that the 600,000 Jews there might be in "great danger." The surprise electoral success of Le Pen, who seems to have successfully unified most of the diverse strands of French rightists' traditions, cemented the image of a newly anti-Semitic France. Le Pen is a genuine anti-Semite in the traditional mode. He is known for his trivialization of the holocaust and his ethno-centric nationalism and has repeatedly accused his rival, President Jacques Chirac, of being "owned" and "held hostage" by the Jewish organization B'nai B'rith.

¹ See Charles Krauthammer, "Europe and 'those people': anti-Semitism rises again," *Washington Post*, 26 April 2002, p.A29

² "The Return of an Ancient Hatred," *New York Times*, 20 April 2002, p. A16.

³ Elie Barnavi, "A propos d'un 'ami' français, par Elie Barnavie" *Le Monde*, 7 August 2001.

Table 1: Anti-Semitic Incidents in France September 2000 – November 2001		
Organization Reporting Threats	Incidents	
SOS-Racisme and the Union des Étudiants Juifs	405	
Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France	330	
Commission Consultative des Droits de l’Homme	146	773
Interior Ministry(i)	163	555
(i) Statistics do not include “insults and graffiti” since those perpetrators would not appear before a judge.		

Despite the coincidental timing of these developments, much distinguishes anti-semitic expression in France today from traditional French anti-Semitism. French Jews are now seen by more than two-thirds of those polled as fully French; Jews hold important positions in all aspects of public life and can openly practice their religion. The perpetrators of today’s anti-semitic incidents are not natives protecting an ideal of “Frenchness” from Jewish contamination but members of another immigrant minority group whose own place in French society has been frequently questioned. The 400 or so anti-Semitic incidents documented in the last year and a half have mostly been attributed to youth of *Maghrebin* origin living in the economically depressed neighborhoods that ring large French cities, the *banlieues*. In the housing projects of these areas, immigrant youth feel trapped, as education and employment opportunities are slim.

Table 2: Is France Anti-Semitic?	
<p>“Those who attack rabbis today are the same people who attack firemen, police and teachers in the <i>banlieues</i>. Anti-Semitism is the refusal of Jews as normal and equal – it is an aggravated form of xenophobia. This is not what’s going on in the <i>banlieues</i> today... I do not sense any intrinsic hatred for Jews.”⁴ – Théo Klein, former president of CRIF</p>	
Percentage agreeing with statement “Jews have too much power in France” 1988 2000	Source : N.Mayer, “La France n’est pas antisémite,” <i>Le Monde</i> , 4 April 2002, p.18
“completely disagree” 52% 55%	
“mostly agree” 20% 34% (Leftists 19% 27%) (Rightists 30% 50%)	
“completely agree” 10% 10%	

That this anti-semitic violence has not been the work of the extreme right is of little comfort to Jews. French Jews today often find themselves at odds with disaffected Muslim immigrants, the traditional targets of Front National prejudice. Indeed, the increasing feeling of insecurity among Jews has had the effect of confusing the traditional Jewish stance vis-à-vis the French far right. Some Jews apparently felt safer with a candidate like Le Pen who promised greater security and protection from urban delinquency. Assumedly for this reason, Le Pen has toned down remarks that might be offensive to French Jews, avoiding repetition of his more famous lines on the gas chambers. Roger Cukierman, president of the main Jewish council, Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives (CRIF), said after the first round that he both “understood and deplored” the French vote because of today’s “security problems.” He even suggested that Arabs in France should consider Le Pen’s high score in the first round as a “warning.” He clarified while waiting

⁴ *Le Monde*, 3 December 2001; *Libération*, 5 February 2002.

for the second round that he did not expect “French Jews to be duped by a racist and anti-semitic party.”⁵ But “traditional extreme-right anti-Semitism has not gotten worse in France – anti-Jewish acts committed for the last year have clearly been situated in areas where Muslim and Jewish communities are neighbors.” In response to Israeli Prime Minister Sharon’s statement this past December that Israel was preparing for French Jews’ arrival, Cukierman said pointedly that Israel’s need for Jewish immigrants “did not concern France.”

Nonetheless, the tensions between these communities play little direct role in French elections. Jews do not represent a numerically large voting block. Studies by Sylvie Strudel largely dispelled the myth of a “Jewish vote,” noting that they tend to be split along socio-economic and professional lines much like the general population.⁶ At most, Le Pen’s anti-immigrant rhetoric may have attracted some marginal anti-Arab Jewish votes.⁷ The Muslim vote has not been really studied, but although about half of the 5-6 million Muslims hold French citizenship, only 1.5 million are of voting age. But on the whole it seems that these two communities are unified in their rejection of the Front National.

French politicians are still faced with something of a dilemma as Muslim and Jewish associations lobby and demonstrate to push their respective agendas with the French political élite. These demonstrations do generate political pressure through negative press and in some cases, urban unrest resulting in property damage and violence. The CRIF President told the assembled ministers at his council’s annual dinner that he “feared for the safety of Jews in France.” Street demonstrations on behalf of Palestine or Israel have remained peaceful, though chants like “death to the Arabs,” “death to the Jews,” or “*Israël, Assassin*” have been heard at both, to the dismay of organizers. One banner at the main pro-Israel demonstration in Paris on April 7, 2002, touted French Jewish integration, comparing it favorably to the French-Algeria soccer match last fall when immigrant youth whistled and booed at the French national anthem: “*nous on chante la Marseillaise, on ne la siffle pas*” (we sing the Marseillaise, we don’t jeer it).

A Tale of Two Communities

As these incidents imply, the anti-Semitic incidents in France today stem from relations between the Jewish and Muslim communities. In many ways these communities are similar, Their levels of religious observance and organizational levels are comparable. About a fifth of each community prays regularly and a similar proportion are members of a Jewish or Muslim association. Indeed, 60% of French Jews today are second-generation immigrants themselves from the same North African countries as their attackers.

The main differences between the communities are visible in their access to government officials. Jews were made full citizens in 1791 and Napoleon forcefully organized French Judaism in a centralized *Consistoire* in line with institutional arrangements for Protestant and

⁵ Roger Cukierman, "Ne soyons pas de dupes," *Le Monde*, 27 April 2002.

⁶ Sylvie Strudel, “Vote juif ou vote des Juifs? [XXème siècle]”, *Les Cahiers du judaïsme* 3, automne 1998; *Votes juifs: itinéraires migratoires, religieux et politiques*, Paris: FNSP, 1996.

⁷ See: “Dans la cite du Val-Fourré : ‘soit on va voter, soit on fait nos valises’ », *Le Monde*, 29 April 2002, p. 5.

Catholic churches. Two other centralized Jewish associations – the CRIF and the Fonds Social Juif Unifié (FSJU) - in charge of political and social representation, respectively, of French Jews were founded after the end of the Occupation. The annual dinner of the CRIF has invited the Prime Minister as the guest of honor for the last several years, and this past December Lionel Jospin came accompanied by ten other government ministers. During the recent presidential campaign, the President and government ministers visited synagogues and met regularly with Jewish leaders. Jospin met with the CRIF president and held a joint press conference with him after the arson attack in Marseilles. When individual acts of property destruction began to form a trend, leaders of all political parties spoke out against anti-Semitism. The government deployed thousands of extra police officers around Jewish community establishments in the fall of 2000 and the spring of 2002, the high points of the violence and made an effort to balance their remarks on the Middle East. In contrast, the interior ministry's on-and-off, ten-year old consultations with Muslim associations and leaders are set to give way to the first election of an Islamic council after legislative elections for the *Assemblée Nationale* this June. At present, there are 500 synagogues and more than 100 religious schools for France's 600,000-800,000 Jews and more than a thousand Muslim prayer spaces for its 5-6 million Muslims – but fewer than ten were actually built to serve as mosques.

Table 3: Jewish Population in France ⁸		
1789	40,000	Includes many Jews of Spanish and Portuguese descent in France since the sixteenth century
1808	50,000	
1851-1897	75,000	Loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany compensated by arrival of Jewish migrants from Russia, Poland, Belgium and Holland
1918	150,000	Return of Alsace-Lorraine and continued pre-war immigration
1939	300,000	Includes 70,000 eastern European (many Poles) Jewish immigrants and 50,000 refugees fleeing Nazi Germany
1944	220,000	After deportation and death of 76,000 French Jews (two-thirds of whom were foreign-born)
1960	360,000	Between 1956-1962: 200,000 Jews from Algeria (French citizens), Morocco and Tunisia (non-French citizens)
2002	600,000 -800,000 ⁹	60% are of north African origin; 40% Ashkenazim Jewish Community represents about 1% of the total French population

Tensions between the groups have been present for the last 15 years, though they have rarely turned violent. One source of this tension is the greater economic and educational success of Jewish *banlieues*-dwellers compared to their Arab neighbors. Fears of drugs and of street violence have led the wealthier Jewish community to construct numerous Jewish schools. As a consequence, many young Jews are more isolated from their environment than their neighbors. Both communities see themselves as victims, and both identify strongly - and without much subtlety- with each of the combatant sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The climax of the anti-Semitic attacks in October 2000 and early April 2001 match the peaks of the second Palestinian *Intifada* and Israeli military incursions in the Palestinian-controlled territories.

⁸ D.Bensimon and S.della Pergola, *La Population Juive de France: Socio-Demographie et Identité*, The Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Division de demographie et de statistique/CNRS, 1984. These numbers cannot be exact, as the last census that inquired into religion was in 1872.

⁹ High estimate from website of Ministère des Affaires Étrangères:
<http://www.france.diplomatie.fr/culture/france/ressources/letour/gb>

This has led some observers, such as Théo Klein, former president of the CRIF, to claim that unlike previous anti-Semitism, this wave will likely end as abruptly as it began once the Middle East becomes more peaceful. Some teachers' testimonials in *Le Monde*, however, suggest a strong and widespread anti-Semitism among high school students of Arab origin that may not go away anytime soon.¹⁰ Some students have expressed impatience with history coursework on the holocaust, for example. This development might signal the importation of popular anti-Semitism from the Arab world.¹¹

On the Jewish side, some extremists have recently become more active. Right-wing groups such as the French branch of Israel's *Likud* party or the Zionist organization *Hérout* fall outside the CRIF umbrella organization and openly voice dissent with what they see as a soft policy towards the Palestinians. Young activists from the Jewish Defense League and *Béтар*, the youth group of *Hérout*, seem to have been involved in unprovoked attacks on bystanders at an early April pro-Israel demonstration near the *Bastille*, where one policeman was seriously injured.

A Reason for Hope

Traditional French anti-Semitism was a dispute over the identity of French Jews and of the role of French state. Today that issue is essentially resolved. While it is disturbing to see the Middle East conflict overflow onto the streets of French cities, this situation is not unique to France. Scholars have demonstrated how "homeland" wars are often imported into immigrant communities whose political incorporation is incomplete.¹² Kurdish-Turkish tensions, for example, have simmered in Germany for years.

Indeed, there is some reason to hope that the conflict between these communities will move toward resolution, despite the real and continuing tensions described above. Muslim leaders have come out publicly against the violence even while reserving strong criticism for Israeli policies. "The Jews of France are not the soldiers of the Israeli Army," said the leader of the *Jeunes musulmans de France* at the outbreak of the second *Intifada* in fall 2000. Dalil Boubakeur, the rector of the Grande Mosquée, and his ally Soheib Bencheikh, Mufti of Marseilles have condemned the anti-Semitic attacks. In time, as more community links and contacts with the state are created for French Muslims, the community may find non-violent institutional channels for its views.

¹⁰ I. Roder, "Antisemitisme à l'école," au courrier des lecteurs, 10 April 2002, *Le Monde*, p.17

¹¹ This new anti-Semitism was named "judeophobie" (Jew-phobia) by the sociologist Pierre-André Taguieff and this new term is now widely used to define it. See: P.-A., Taguieff, *La nouvelle judéophobie*, Paris, Mille et une nuits/Fondation du 2 mars, 2002.

¹² See R.Koopmans and P.Statham "Challenging the Liberal nation-state? Postnationalism, Multiculturalism and the Collective Claims-Making of Migrants and Ethnic Minorities in Britain and Germany," *American Journal of Sociology* Vol.105, no.3 (2000).

