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U.S.-FRANCE ANALYSIS SERIES

March 2004

MUSLIM AND JEWS IN FRANCE: COMMUNAL CONFLICT IN A SECULAR STATE

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Fears of anti-Semitism are rising again in Europe. They have been stoked in particular by a growing number of verbal and physical attacks on Jews not only in France, but also in Britain, Belgium and elsewhere in Europe. As both French government and Jewish leaders have been quick to emphasize, such incidents are not the product of traditional, right-wing anti-Semitism. A report commissioned by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) confirmed what had been widely asserted by French commentators: the perpetrators of the attacks have overwhelmingly been Muslim youths, usually second-generation immigrants.² France is now seen as a new battleground in the communal conflict between Muslims and Jews, effectively extending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into the heart of Europe.

The perception of a Jewish-Muslim communal conflict, however, has been highly exaggerated. Indeed, Jewish community leaders in the suburbs of Paris and other large French cities—where Jews and Muslims live side by side—tend to give a very different interpretation of these events. “Physical or verbal aggressions [towards Jews] may happen daily,” according to the former President of the Jewish community of Sarcelles, a city north of Paris, “but they are not serious. ... In 2001, a small commission was set up in which cooperation between community leaders and the government functions perfectly.”³ Thus, for example, when a school was ransacked in Sarcelles on July 28, 2001 and April 1, 2002, no generalized ethnic strife followed. Violence, including anti-Semitic violence exists, but that violence does not come from organized groups and does not represent the sentiment or even the strategy of either community. All the mainstream groups and the leaders of both communities condemn the violence and, as the situation in Sarcelles demonstrates, are taking concrete and genuine steps to limit it.

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² For the EUMC-commissioned report, see http://www.crif.org/index.php?menu=5&dossier=33&id_doss=2021&PHPSESSID=54d8972b2e4f95ab3e4e39f153be8dc6

³ Marc Djebali, “Le laboratoire sarcellois,” *Information juive*, n° 233, November-December 2003, p. 34.

Why, then, has the debate provoked such a furor in France and elsewhere, and why now? The most basic reason is that the Israeli-Palestinian violence of the last three years is often seen as pitting Jew against Arab everywhere in the world. There is a widespread assumption that the sporadic Jewish-Arab violence in France forms a European extension of that conflict. On one level, this is undeniable: the majority of the anti-Semitic violence in France has been committed by young North Africans who have been influenced by images of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seen on national television and on Arab satellite channels as well as by the sermons of radical imams. But looking at the issue more deeply, the violence perpetrated by Muslims in France is more an expression of the general and unfocused discontent present in the French Muslim community. That discontent stems not essentially from concerns over Palestinian suffering but rather from the difficult process of political, social, and economic integration into French society. In a similar fashion, the Jewish reaction to the violence has less to do with Israeli-Palestinian conflict or indeed with their fear of the Muslim community than with their general fears of a resurgence of latent anti-Semitism within the larger French population.

The Source of Jewish Discontent

The reason that Jews have begun to worry about anti-Semitism in France again is a very stark and objective one. Not since 1945 have there been as many anti-Semitic acts as there have been since October 2000, though the numbers are down strongly from their peak in 2001-2002. More importantly, from the time the anti-Semitic attacks began in October 2000 until the French Presidential election in April 2002, the French government essentially refused to acknowledge the existence of anti-Semitic violence in France. The French Jewish community deeply resented the silence of then Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, felt abandoned by the French Republic, and thus began to question many of the gains they felt they had made in exterminating anti-Semitism from mainstream French life since the end of the World War II.

The new center-right government, however, chose another approach when it took office in May 2002. In one of his first speeches, Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin officially asserted that to attack the Jews is to attack the French Republic itself. This new government attitude helped, but it did not reverse the deep discontent of the Jewish community. Part of the reason for this can be found in the awareness that the Jewish community developed around this time of the growing importance of the "Muslim vote." This idea, paradoxically, accorded with the ideas of the extreme right on the threat immigrants pose to French culture. As a result, arguments attributed to people such as Pascal Boniface, a prominent Socialist political scientist, that the left should pursue policies in the Middle East that would help win over the "Muslim vote," caused a great stir in the Jewish community.⁴ There are about six million Muslims in France while the Jewish community amounts to only 600,000 people. In fact, ethnic voting blocs do not exist in France,

⁴ Pascal Boniface is the President of the Institut des Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (Institute for International and Strategic Relations) in Paris. In an April 2001 letter to the Socialist party, Boniface asserted that the French socialist government's accommodating attitude towards Israel might lead to an electoral disaster in the 2002 Presidential election. From interview and survey research, he had concluded that many ethnic Arab voters would not vote for the Socialists specifically because of Socialist policy in the Middle East.

but the myth of a Muslim vote provoked a panic among many Jews who felt that their influence would pale compared to the growing Muslim community.

At the same time, Jewish angst rose with the growing success of both the extreme left (three Trotskyite parties together got 12% in the last presidential election) and the anti-globalization movement. All of these movements are strongly, even violently, anti-Zionist, to the extent that their statements strongly recall anti-Semitic and even occasionally become anti-Semitic rhetoric reminiscent of times past.

Finally, the violence of the second Intifada and the widespread critiques of Sharon government policy also made the French Jewish community very sensitive and defensive. Although Jews in France are profoundly divided on the wisdom of current Israeli policy, the violence of the Intifada encouraged both Jews and Arabs to take extreme positions. The majority of critiques addressed to the Jewish community about their supposed support of the Sharon government were reflexively labeled as attacks on the right of Israel to exist or as anti-Semitism. In the context of this corrosive dynamic and the simultaneous, albeit sporadic, incidents of anti-Semitic violence, French Jews began to seriously question their future in France.

The Source of Muslim Discontent

On the Muslim side, the most important factor for explaining anti-Semitic violence is the ongoing and highly fraught effort to integrate Muslim immigrants into France. Ethnic North Africans in France no longer believe, as their parents once did, that their families will someday go back to Tunisia, Algeria or Morocco. They now see no choice but to fully integrate into French society. But over the past few years, French society's misgivings about the North African community have increased. In part, this is because the ethnic origin of suspects in petty crimes, violence or terrorism is often released in the press, although French law forbids releasing such information. Many press reports also claim that French citizens of North African origin feel as if they are under permanent suspicion, that the society at large does not consider them fully French and that their ethnicity limits their economic and political opportunities in France.

As a result, many in France now assert that the French model of integration no longer works. To be more precise, they suggest that it does not work with regard to the first, second, or even third generation Muslim immigrants of North African extraction. This feeling that the French integration model does not work as quickly or as well for Muslims as it did for other waves of immigrants represents a profound challenge for French society, which has long clung to a belief in its ability to integrate all immigrants. Reflecting that challenge, Nicolas Sarkozy, the Interior Minister, called in early December for an open debate on affirmative action, in this case, measures to achieve equal opportunities for North African immigrants. Such measures included the designation of priority areas for education funding and reserved places in French universities for students from underprivileged neighborhoods. Currently, affirmative action toward any group is forbidden by law, a reflection of the traditional French refusal to recognize sub-national group rights.

It is, however, not clear that such drastically "un-French" measures are necessary. More careful studies of the French North African community do not reflect the view that they are failing to integrate. Indeed, the figures suggest the opposite: 91% out of the 1.7 million women of North

African descent living in France claim that they feel well integrated into French society.⁵ The studies also show that the North African community holds similar attitudes as French society at large on such issues such as divorce, desired family size, contraception and abortion. Looking even more closely, one quickly understands that the Muslim North African community and the wider Muslim community is anything but socially and politically homogenous and a great part of it has already joined the French middle class. Today, individual strategies for political and economic enfranchisement have replaced the old militancy that hoped to use ethnic political groups to secure a place in French politics.⁶

Despite these developments, some individuals and groups within the Muslim community are profiting from the general impression that Muslims are not integrating well to call for a more visible, more faith-based Muslim identity within France. Certain social activists promote Islamism in France and seek to cast the social and economic difficulties faced by the Muslim community as religious. Thus, for example, teachers and school principals trying to cope with the issue of veils in the classroom—controversial for the last 15 years—often find that the families of such students have legal advice and support from Muslim clerics. Ultimately, these voices demand that French Republic adapt to Islamic customs.

The Rise of Muslim Orthodoxy

The efforts of some Islamic groups to profit from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to gain influence on young Muslims can be seen in numerous public institutions, including in the universities. In this context, anti-Israeli, and even anti-Semitic, rhetoric can be quite useful in motivating Muslim youth that have little intrinsic interest in Muslim orthodoxy but for whom the Israel-Palestinian conflict generates a sense of anger and identity. For example, in March 2003, the General Union of Tunisian Students and the Palestinian Student Union at the University of Paris 8 (Saint-Denis) near Sarcelles—tried commit to force the university to allow depictions of Palestinian suicide-bombers as martyrs on the walls of the institution. Jewish students, although not physically harassed, face well-organized anti-Israeli movements. As a result, most of them now choose higher education in universities located in the center of Paris, avoiding the universities with “too many” Muslim students.

Perhaps the pre-eminent example of this phenomenon and its effect on Arab-Jewish relations in France is Tariq Ramadan, a Muslim theologian who has suddenly become very well known in France after years of developing a network of young Islamic supporters. Ramadan, a Swiss citizen and high school teacher, advocates a religious form of Islam that would nonetheless fit within European society. Together with strict observance of Islamic religious rituals, including

⁵ Ifop polls ordered by *Elle* magazine, December 15, 2003.

⁶ Karim Bourtel, “Franco-Arabs Turn to the Right,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2003.

the wearing of the veil, he recommends that European Muslims integrate into European society in order to gain influence from within.⁷

In November 2003, Ramadan was invited to give a talk at the European Social Forum in Paris, a large, well-publicized gathering of the heterogeneous anti-globalization movement. In order to announce his participation in the Forum in the French national press, Ramadan submitted to prominent French newspapers an article that criticized French Jewish intellectuals, formerly universalist thinkers, as having begun to “develop analyses motivated by concerns for their community” and implicitly for Israel. The article also contained a list of these intellectuals, including—oddly—many non-Jewish thinkers. For the French press, this was reminiscent of anti-Semitic condemnations during the German occupation of the 1940s. None of the papers agreed to publish the article. Nonetheless, Ramadan still appeared at the European Social Forum, whose organizers had apparently not seen anything wrong with his essay.⁸ The following week, he was invited to face Nicolas Sarkozy in a prime time television debate. Sarkozy effectively confronted Ramadan with the contradictions and intolerances inherent in his doctrine. But at the same time, the very existence of a debate between the Minister of the Interior and this radical Islamic theologian encouraged the notion that Ramadan’s view represented general French Muslim opinion.

The Consequences of Confusion

In this way, Ramadan and others—such as Fouad Alaoui, general secretary of the Union of French Islamic Organizations (UOIF) and Mahmoud Kalkoul of the Young Muslims of France (JMF)—have profited from the anti-Semitic acts committed by young Muslims to confuse the issues of Arab-Jewish relations in France and the question of the integration of Muslims and Islam into France.

The debate on the integration of Islam and its adaptation to the rules of the French Republic is an old one and even goes back to the times of the French colonial empire.⁹ The debate changes frequently, but today it mixes a diversity of social, economical, political issues connected to, but hardly identical to, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in France and to the fear of a spillover of Middle Eastern violence into Europe. It is not at its root a debate that pits French Muslims against French Jews. Anti-Semitic acts in France, while almost always committed by young

⁷ For more on Ramadan’s philosophy, see Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). On Ramadan’s career and personality, see Christophe Ayad, “L’ascension d’un musulman européen,” *Libération*, November 15, 2003, p. 10; Xavier Ternisien, “De Genève à Saint-Denis, le parcours controversé d’un ‘théologien de terrain’,” *Le Monde*, November 15, 2003.

⁸ See for example Bernard-Henry Lévy, “L’autre visage de Tariq Ramadan,” *Le Monde*, November 1, 2003, p. 16; Rémi Barroux, Xavier Ternisien, “Tariq Ramadan, intellectuel contesté, en vedette d’un jour,” *Le Monde*, November 15, 2003, p. 8; Didier Hassoux, “Le show de charme de Ramadan,” *Libération*, November 2003, p. 11.

⁹ See Alexis De Tocqueville, *Writing on Empire and Slavery*, Edited and translated by Jennifer Pitts, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

Muslims, have not been organized in any sense by the Muslim community. There have been no large-scale expressions of inter-communal hatred—no attacks by mobs, no large demonstrations or riots, no boycotts of Jewish businesses. Anti-Semitic political statements may emanate from within the Muslim community, but those who express them are still considered fringe elements, and they do not represent the feelings or aspirations of the mass of the Muslim community.

Indeed, the majority of anti-Semitic acts, particularly verbal attacks on Jewish students, take place in schools. It is not a coincidence that following this type of violence, a national debate was launched on making schools safe from religious and communal violence. In a sense, the new law that will prohibit the wearing of all religious symbols in schools—aimed principally at the wearing the Muslim headscarf—is a signal by the French state to the Muslim community. Integration into French society also depends on the respect for other communities and on the condemnation of anti-Semitic acts.