

Don't blame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for Muslim anti-Semitism in France

Historian Maud Mandel argues that attacks against Jews by Muslims from Parisian suburbs hearken back to the way France departed its colonies in North Africa.

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"Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict," by Maud Mandel

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For many Jews, in both Israel and the global Diaspora, the open hostility to Israel expressed by European protesters and some politicians during this summer's Gaza operation reinforced their sense of the continent as an eternally anti-Semitic place (however pleasant it might be to visit) and of its Jews as being under siege. Israeli government officials and diplomats, including the current Israeli ambassador to Germany, have openly suggested parallels between Europe of the 1930s and today, as did Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently, reacting to the European Union's decision to remove Hamas from its list of terrorist organizations.

Yet the focus of attention and concern these days is not Germany — or even Greece or Hungary, both of which have resurgent and openly anti-Semitic parties in their parliaments — but France. Indeed, last summer's violent demonstrations in Paris are perceived by many as the culmination of a series of events that includes the kidnapping, torture and murder of Ilan Halimi in Paris in 2006; the terrorist murders of Jews in Toulouse in 2012 and the attack in May at the Jewish Museum of Belgium, in which four people were murdered and for which a man with French and Algerian citizenship was arrested.

When the Jewish Agency announced in September that France was on course in 2014, for the first time ever, to become the leading source of immigrants to Israel, the anecdotal sense of a French Jewish exodus seemed to gain statistical credibility. One might point out that when immigrants from the countries of the former Soviet Union are looked at together, the overall number of people leaving those countries is still considerably larger, or that economic factors such as high unemployment and low growth are fueling French emigration — Jewish and otherwise — to several countries. One might also point out that no matter how many analogies are made to Europe in the 1930s, the rather significant difference exists that the state — in France and elsewhere — is firmly on the side of the Jews and the liberal order that protects them. These points aside, perceptions are indeed important when it comes to where people are prepared to live or not live. And in the narrative being constructed today, Paris is old Europe's new capital of anti-Semitism.

France has a long tradition of right-wing nationalist anti-Semitism that is still extant, but today it is tensions between Muslims and Jews that are more visible and that serve as a comparatively greater source of concern for French Jewry. The prevailing narrative about Muslim-Jewish conflict in France presumes that the riots in the streets of Paris and the current sense among Jews of a pervasive French anti-Semitism are byproducts of the unresolved conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. A new book, however, suggests that anti-Semitism in France has much less to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict, or even with pre-existing French distrust of Jews (not to mention more traditional French-Catholic antipathy for Judaism), than it does with the ghosts of French decolonization in Morocco, Tunisia and, most significantly, Algeria.

In "Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict," Maud Mandel argues that between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, the social, economic and legal inequalities that existed between Jews and Muslims in the French colonies of North Africa were replicated in the cities of France, where many of those same Muslims and Jews became neighbors once again. These inequalities, and in particular the perception that Jews enjoyed greater economic opportunities, caused deep resentment among French Muslims toward the state, anger that came to play out — and that French Muslims came to project — as opposition to Israel.

According to Mandel, while the Palestinian cause has rarely been a primary concern to the majority of Muslim immigrants from North Africa, it became a potent outlet for expressing Muslim and Arab solidarity against both their own state and a geopolitical system many believed was rigged against them. The labels "Muslim" and "Jew" became binary political symbols that could be interchanged easily with "Palestinian" and "Israeli," and the narrative of conflict between the two sides became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Citizens since 1870

Jewish migration from Morocco and Tunisia to France and Israel began significantly in 1948 and surged in the years leading up to and immediately following independence of the former two in 1956. The majority went to Israel, often via Marseille, but tens of thousands remained in France.

It was different with the Jews of Algeria. Because they already held French citizenship, and had done so since 1870 (to the chagrin of many of that country's Muslims and Christians), nearly 90 percent of them — at least 140,000 — chose "repatriation" to France, along with the "returning" European colonists (the so-called *pieds-noirs*).

Israel's independence in 1948 became a focus of anger, and indeed an obsession, throughout the Muslim world. As the Jews and Muslims who remained in North Africa came to support opposite sides of a conflict with religious and national significance, the issue of Jewish migration to Israel only contributed to tensions. Nevertheless, Mandel argues that the nearly wholesale evacuation of the Jews from French North Africa was less a consequence of the Arab-Israeli conflict than it was a result of Jews fearing, and fleeing, the breakdown of French colonial rule.

In Morocco and Tunisia, Jews faced serious economic problems, sometimes violent hostility and an uncertain future, without a French presence to guarantee their economic security and wellbeing. In contrast to those countries, which were French protectorates until their negotiated decolonization in 1956, Algeria was a French *département* that gained independence only after a long and bloody war. Beginning in the late 19th century, Algerian Jews became associated with French control of trade, the economy and government, yet until the 1930s, the Algerian anti-Semitism that existed came from the French settlers rather than from Algerian Muslims. When the anticolonial insurrection spread, the Jews' complex position of mediating Arab and French culture put them between the two sides.

Jews' insistence on maintaining their French citizenship met resistance from Algerian nationalists who wanted to claim them as Algerian, which would have made them allies in the national struggle against European colonialism. While the independence movement, the Front Libération Nationale, promised Jews equality in a free Algeria, its leaders demanded in return that Jews demonstrate their loyalties by giving up their French citizenship.

But why would they do that when, in the period leading up to independence, Jewish life in cities such as Algiers, Oran and Constantine looked bleaker and less secure every year? After all, many Muslims were also wary of decolonization, and moved from North Africa to France even without having citizenship.

When North African Jews and Muslims moved, it was often into the same Paris and Marseille neighborhoods. As citizens (a privilege not even extended to the Arab auxiliary soldiers known as harkis), Jews found it easier to integrate into French society than the Muslims. They generally arrived with more education than Algerian Muslim immigrants — though less than the native French population — and they could count on help from Jewish social welfare agencies. Jews had more of a political voice, too, and the support of the French political class.

‘The Six-Hour War’

In the years following Algerian independence, despite the fact that the structure of French society advantaged the Jews in the metropole in much the same way as it had those in the colony, Jews and Muslims from North Africa continued to live and work together amicably in France, with even the Six-Day War in 1967 having little tangible effect on daily relations between them. While tensions did mount in Marseille and on university campuses during the war, Arab and Muslim opposition to Israel still had little influence on the wider French public, which polls showed was overwhelmingly pro-Israel in sympathies.

Everything changed, however, in 1968, when students, radicals and other members of the New Left fully embraced the Palestinian cause as an anti-imperial struggle. On June 2, 1968, a card game in Belleville, a Paris neighborhood with many Tunisian Jews and Algerian Muslims, got out of hand and escalated into street battles between Muslims and Jews, and then outright riots. Taking place just a few days before the first anniversary of the Six-Day War, the Belleville riots were quickly dubbed the “Six-Hour War.” In fact, the mass civil unrest all over France in May 1968, which had been orchestrated by students, workers and socialist groups, was far more relevant to the timing of the Belleville riots than the anniversary of the Six-Day War.

During the year between June 1967 and June 1968, students had stoked discontent among Muslims in Belleville. Anti-Jewish riots in Tunis during the Six-Day War brought to the neighborhood new Jewish immigrants, harboring visceral resentments. And as Mandel points out, whatever the external factors that influenced the Belleville riots, the fact remains that they were fought between angry neighbors, and therefore could only have happened in an environment where lives were intertwined.

1968 was a turning point, because the French radical left managed to exploit the Palestinian cause and the growing tension between Jewish and Muslim North Africans in France by connecting the two as the link between anti-imperialism abroad and class conflict at home. Radical student and socialist organizations played a leading role in the late 1960s and through the 1970s in using opposition to Israel to galvanize the French Left in general, and not only Muslims. Mandel does not shy away from emphasizing that Jews were over-represented in French radical politics, especially among the Maoist faction, and that for many, anti-Zionism was a central component of their ideology.

Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a prominent activist in the student protests and a key figure in the Maoist movement *La Guache prolétarienne*, later joked that members of the group’s leadership could have used Yiddish as their common language. Mandel suggests that these students’ sympathies were shaped by their backgrounds as the children of Holocaust survivors, which endowed them with a heightened distaste for all forms of nationalism. The over-representation of Jews in radical politics, including in the most extreme forms of anti-Zionism, she argues, reflects a diversity of Jewish public opinion about the conflict in Israel and the wider Middle East.

Yet there was nothing particularist or Jewish about these radicals’ use of anti-Zionism; many children of Holocaust survivors drew a very different lesson from their parents’ experiences. Rather, I would argue that anti-Zionism among Jewish radicals was utilitarian, employed in the service of their greater goal of socialism (or less charitably, self-promotion). Jewish anti-Zionists of the radical left internalized anti-Semitic tropes linking the Jews to world capital, conspiracy and imperialism in much the same way that other Jewish radicals had done long before them, and still others continue to do today. It is also worth noting that we cannot draw conclusions about Jewish public opinion as a whole from the fact that many of the most radical socialist and communist student organizations were led by Jews (just as the number of Jews in the Bolshevik leadership in Revolutionary Russia tells us nothing about the depth of Jewish support for Communism at that time). As Cohn-Bendit’s joke about Yiddish suggests, anti-Zionist activism among Jews was limited mainly to those of Eastern European origins, and a small number of them at that; Yiddish was not widely spoken among Jews from North Africa. Where Mandel is no doubt correct is that these radicals helped plant the seeds of what would later become a bitter harvest by placing Israel at the center of their struggle.

During a brief period in the 1980s of government-supported pluriculturalism (a term that, in the case of France, referred to the active bridging of differences between groups) and the rise of a common enemy in the far right, Muslims and Jews cooperated in organizing SOS Racisme, the movement to counter discrimination. Mandel suggests that the coalition between Jewish and Muslim youth organizations was always unstable, because Jews could separate the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians from the struggle for religious tolerance in France, whereas the Muslim groups could not. The first Gulf War, in 1991, marked an end to the idea of pluriculturalism among Jewish and Muslim youth and the final triumph of the binary narrative of Jews versus Muslims — of us versus them.

Mandel ends her study in 2000, and the question remains as to how much the atmosphere has changed in the past 14 years — a period shaped by the second intifada, the precipitous decline of hope for a peaceful settlement between Israelis and Palestinians and, perhaps most important, the rise of political Islam. An argument can be made that much has changed, especially due to the corrosive effect of virulent Islamic anti-Semitism on French republican ideals and even on the French model of integration.

Certainly pessimism can spur immigration, and immigration can spur more pessimism and more immigration. Nonetheless, there remains a tendency to oversimplify both how we arrived here and where we are going. For example, writing in *The New York Times*, the historian Deborah Lipstadt claimed this summer that she had begun to think twice about the reassurances she makes to her friends that Europe today is not Europe in the 1930s and instead concluded her list of “Why Jews Are Worried” with the troubling and ambiguously unhelpful assessment, “This is not another Holocaust, but it’s bad enough.”

How should one understand such warnings and how should one act on them? Presumably, any anti-Semitism is bad enough, and a not-quite-a-Holocaust is still cause for real alarm. For those who prefer thoughtful historical analysis to slogans, Mandel’s book is one place to turn. What one finds is that post-war Jewish life in Europe in general, and France in particular, belies the tidy narrative still being constructed.

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