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COMMENTARY

# Immigrant Prejudice, French-Style

■ Hatred comes in many forms in France; anti-Semitism is but one.

By TONI L. KAMINS

**The spate of anti-Jewish violence in France is frightening, and the reaction of some of France's leaders, who seem to be in denial, is even more so. Does this mean France is rife with anti-Semitism? The answer is not simple.**

**Yes, France has had a terrible history with Jews. Jews have lived in France roughly since the 5th century, and for most of that time they were subject to government-sponsored vilification of their faith, mass expulsions, forced conversion to Roman Catholicism, crippling taxation, humiliating legal oaths, segregation in cramped ghettos, proscriptions from living in France's major cities and both systematic and random violence and murder.**

**The end of the 19th and early 20th centuries brought the Dreyfus affair, World War II and the German occupation and saw France collaborate with the Nazis in committing heinous crimes against Jews. Despite all that, it is France's disgraceful relationship with its Muslim population that in large part accounts for the current violence.**

**For decades, Muslims from France's former colonies in North Africa have settled in France. But the French, who are loath to accept anyone or anything they perceive to be non-French, have not made them welcome, to say the least.**

**The French don't want North African immigrants in France. They have relegated them to living in what are known as the banlieue, or suburbs. But if this term conjures up bucolic bedroom communities within easy reach of Paris, Lyon or Marseille, think again. The banlieue are largely made up of government housing projects, soulless places where the residents have little contact with the rest of French society except for cohorts of a mind-numbing bureaucracy. Unemployment is high, education is an afterthought and being arrested for suspicion of this or that is common.**

**The disdain and contempt in which these people are held by French society is palpable. The level of alienation that exists in the banlieue simply cannot be overstated, and it is difficult for those unfamiliar with France to understand it.**

**While Jean-Marie Le Pen of the far-right National Front, who will face incumbent Jacques Chirac in a presidential runoff next month, is an anti-Semite, he is above everything else anti-immigrant. And in France anti-immigrant means anti-North African Muslim.**

**Also resident in the banlieue are Jewish immigrants from North Africa. They are victims of many of the same social forces as the Muslims, but a well-**

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developed Jewish communal infrastructure helps to mitigate those forces.

**The violence against Jews and Jewish establishments occurs against this backdrop and in the banlieue, not in the middle of Paris. The anti-Jewish character of the violence is there, but to say that it is strictly an expression of Muslim anti-Semitism obscures the complex nature of the situation.**

**The synagogue firebombings and attacks on soccer players and school buses are as much anti-social, anti-establishment and anti-French as they are anti-Jewish.**

**The Jewish community should not ignore what is going on in France, and along with the French government it should ensure that the violence does not continue or escalate. But neither should it overreact. Boycotting France and French products would be an overreaction.**

**Although it may be tempting, calling the current violence the seeds of another Holocaust is reckless. It panders to fear and ignorance and fosters a simplistic view of the world and the Jewish community in particular.**

**No matter how many French officials make negative remarks about Israel, there is a difference between crimes being committed by a handful of alienated outsiders and crimes committed as an expression of official government policy.**

\*

**Toni L. Kamins is the author of "The Complete Jewish Guide to France" (St. Martin's Press, 2001).**

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