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## Why Israel Needs Anti-Semitism ... And French Jews

by DIANA JOHNSTONE

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*Paris.*

Last July 12, Jewish Defense League (JDL) militants provoked some participants in a Paris protest demonstration against the Israeli attack on Gaza into violent clashes in front of a synagogue in the rue de la Roquette. The JDL militants were protected by police, whereas several pro-Palestinian demonstrators were arrested. The incident was loudly denounced by influential pro-Israel Jewish leaders as an act of French anti-Semitism.

It was no accident that this incident was falsely attributed to anti-Semitism.

It was no accident that Jeffrey Goldberg characterized the violence as “Jews Trapped by Rioters in Paris Synagogue” and questioned whether or not the incident was a cause for migration.

It was no accident that Avi Mayer of the Jewish Agency of Israel described the incident as an “anti-Semitic riot, which masqueraded as an anti-Israel rally.”

It was no accident that Yair Rosenberg, a writer for Tablet Magazine and employee of the Israeli State Archives, posted a video describing the incident as “European anti-Semitic attacks spiking during Israel’s operation”.

It was no accident because this incident was deliberately organized in order to brand a protest against attacks on Gaza as evidence of rampant “anti-Semitism” in France.

Above all, it was no accident because it fits perfectly into an official campaign of the Israeli government to lure French Jews to leave France for Israel.

### **Recruiting for Aliyah**

Last December, the Israeli press announced a new three-year program designed to entice 42,000 French Jews to settle in Israel by 2017. In 2013, 3,120 Jews left France for Israel, compared to 1,916 in 2012. The campaign by the Israeli Ministry of Aliyah and Integration and the Jewish Agency aims to double the number of immigrants each year: targets are six thousand new Franco-Israelis in 2014, 12 thousand in 2015 and 24 thousand in 2016. France’s Jewish population of about half a million is the largest in Europe and the third largest in the world, after Israel itself and the United States. It is a tempting target for Israeli recruitment.

The carrot for this immigration will be government measures to recognize a range of French professional diplomas as well as funding to provide appropriate housing, education and employment.

And the stick? Israel can count on fear of anti-Semitism, real or imagined. Precisely by its support to Israel coupled with constant denunciations of anti-Semitism, the French government gives the impression of strong favoritism toward Jews which Arab and African immigrants interpret as discrimination against themselves. In some mixed neighborhoods, a fringe of marginalized youth increasingly assert themselves by displays of hostility toward Jews (or women, or “native” French). Such incidents create fear that is stoked regularly by alarmist web sites and deliberate exaggerations. Lists of “anti-Semitic incidents” are padded with random personal insults which would pass unnoticed if addressed to someone for being female, badly dressed or too fat. These scratches from prickly reality are by no means a re-emergence of “French anti-Semitism”. They are much more the result of a tendency to experience ethnic inequalities as a reflection of Israel’s domination of the people of Palestine.

Israel needs new immigrants from countries with a Jewish population, and France is high on the list. And what is needed most to recruit new immigrants? Anti-Semitism. The conclusion is clear: Israel has a vital need for anti-Semitism. The more there is, or seems to be, the better for Israel as the only “safe haven” for threatened Jews.

This fear is kept alive by Israel’s many volunteer propagandists in France, the *sayanim*, a category described in a novel by Jacob Cohen, *Le Printemps des Sayanim*. Cohen’s novel features an extremely prominent and influential *sayan* who is obviously meant to represent Bernard-Henri Levy, thinly veiled with a pseudonym. For decades, BHL has promoted the theme that France is singularly and essentially “fascist” in nature, the very heartland of fascism – which is historical nonsense considering that in the heyday of fascism, the 1930s, France alone in Europe had a Jewish prime minister, Leon Blum, while Mussolini ruled Italy, Hitler ruled Germany and fascists flourished in much of the rest of the Continent.

Since World War II, the French alliance with Israel went so far as to include secret cooperation on building nuclear weapons in the 1950s. But the ever-present theme of “French anti-Semitism” serves to keep French leaders endlessly apologetic and submissive to Israeli demands

**“French Jews have every reason to be wary...”**

An article by Sam Knight in Mondoweiss correctly reported that the July 12 clashes in front of the rue de la Roquette synagogue were deliberately provoked by the Jewish Defense League, citing as eye witness Michèle Sibony, of the Union Juive Francaise pour la Paix (the French Jewish Union for Peace). However, even as he set the record straight regarding the fake “anti-Semitic attack on a synagogue”, the author paid lip-service to the prevailing myth of “anti-Semitic France”.

“From multiple expulsions in the Medieval era to *L’Affaire Dreyfuss* (sic) and Vichy collaborationism, French Jews have every reason to be wary of anti-Semitism”, the Mondoweiss article conceded.

Unfortunately, this sort of reference to “French anti-Semitism” has become so standard, especially in the United States, that it may be considered required background even to an article casting doubt on the phenomenon.

Let’s look at the three assumptions supposedly confirming the danger of French anti-Semitism mentioned above.

1. As for the Medieval era, there were all sorts of reasons for various people to be “wary” in those days; serfs had reason to be wary of the Lord of the Manor, for example. The Medieval era is over, and was abolished by the French revolution which was first to give equal rights to Jews. A few now complain at having lost their Medieval privileges, but you can’t keep your cake and eat it.

2. The main historical significance of the Dreyfus affair is that defense of a Jew in the end prevailed over the honor of the Army, which wanted to cover up its judicial mistake in condemning the wrong man. The incident served to align the progressive intelligentsia with defense of the Jews, even at the expense of the Army, which marked a basic ideological change. The long-term losers of the affair were the aristocracy (linked to the Army officer corps) and the Catholic Church, as secularism triumphed in France in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the status of Jews was strengthened. In other countries, many comparable miscarriages of justice – especially military justice – have surely gone unnoticed.

3. As for Vichy collaboration, how well is this really understood? Jews were persecuted and deported all over Nazi-occupied Europe, but most of France’s Jewish population was spared. Last year, Alain Michel, born in France but now a rabbi in Israel and member of Yad Vashem, published a book, *Vichy et les Juifs*, which argues that the Vichy regime of Marshal Pétain and Pierre Laval set out to protect French Jews from Nazi persecution and was largely successful. When Nazi Germany defeated France in 1940, there were 195,000 Jews in France with French citizenship as well as 135,000 Jewish refugees, many having fled anti-Semitism in

Poland and Germany. Vichy's concern was to protect the French Jews, and succeeded in saving 95% from persecution and deportation. As for stateless Jewish refugees in France, Vichy's attempts to persuade governments in the Americas to take them in failed, and over a third were deported to Nazi camps, while the rest escaped deportation thanks in part to evasion and stalling by the Vichy regime, as well as protection by ordinary French citizens. Alain Michel's evaluation echoes the conclusions of earlier French historians, such as Leon Poliakov, who concluded that Vichy's collaboration saved many Jewish lives which would have been lost had "Jewish policy" been left to the Nazi Occupation authority alone.

Interpretation of history has its oscillations between the glass half empty and the glass half full. In 1972, the influential film "le Chagrin et la Pitié", and a year later, the publication of the French translation of American scholar Robert Paxton's *Vichy France* contributed to a radical shift away from idealization of the French Resistance which had flourished under the post-war influence of De Gaulle and the French Communist Party. The loss of influence by both de Gaulle and the Communists among the post-war generation that emerged in May '68 favored identification of France as a whole with the regime of Marshal Pétain in Vichy. Under the influence of so-called "new philosopher" ideologues such as Bernard-Henri Lévy, who stressed this identification as essential, it was easy to forget that Pétain came to power only as a result of France's humiliating military defeat. His regime never was and never could have been chosen by the French people in free elections. This shift of focus from pride in the Resistance to shame for collaboration has contributed to a prevailing mood of anti-nationalism, even of penitence, centered on commemoration of the Holocaust (or Shoah), which may seem designed to reassure French Jews, but can make them uneasy as well. It may be too much to hope that the pendulum will stop swinging from one extreme to another and seek balance and accuracy in evaluating the complexities of the past.

### **"Importing the Israeli-Palestine conflict into France"**

France today rivals the U.S. Congress as Israel's most important overseas occupied territory. Considering the incredible rise of BHL to the role of a sort "spiritual guide" to French presidents, advising them to go to war in Libya and Syria and claiming that he does so "as a Jew", it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the most active Jewish community leaders and their organizations, far from "having reason to be wary", know full well that they have *no reason to be wary* of anti-Semitism in France. French politicians, media and even school teachers are overwhelmingly devoted to commemorating the Shoah and defending both Jews and Israel (with varying degrees of subtlety). The Jewish Defense League has close relations with French police, even training in their headquarters, on the pretext of "protecting their community". No other ethnic group enjoys such favors.

That is why certain Jewish organizations and individuals dare engage in the most outrageous provocations, acting as both master and victim, sure that they get away with it. If they really had reason to be "wary", they might *act* wary. They might worry (and with reason!) that by constantly claiming to be persecuted in a country where they enjoy every privilege, they could easily be arousing the very hostility to Jews they claim to fear. Instead, the leading Jewish organizations flaunt their unrivaled influence, in blatant contrast to a large Muslim community

which is on the constant defensive. They are sure that in a contest between French Jews and Muslims, the Muslims will lose.

Exploiting this favorable position amounts to more than just plain chutzpah. It is primarily an “Israel first” policy.

On the French national holiday, July 14, President François Hollande denounced the rue de la Roquette incident as an attempt to “import the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” into France as a pretext for “anti-Semitism”. Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared that “the Israeli-Palestine conflict cannot be imported into France.”

The French Jewish Consistory denounced “systematic exploitation of the Middle East conflict by organized groups and supporters of Jihadist terrorist movements”.

Roger Cukierman, president of the extremely influential Representative Council of Jewish Institutions of France (CRIF), took his complaints in person to President Hollande. “We are in an unheard-of anti-Semitic climate”, he declared, demanding that such demonstrations be banned.

Obediently, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve called on local authorities to increase their “vigilance” and to ban demonstrations that risk to “trouble public order”.

Claiming that France is unable to “guarantee security”, Cazeneuve went on to ban a pro-Gaza demonstration scheduled for Saturday, July 19. The French government threatened demonstrators and even individuals calling for demonstration with long jail sentences and hefty fines.

Thus France became the first European country to outlaw a pro-Palestinian demonstration. Meanwhile, it goes without saying that all manner of demonstrations of solidarity with Israel are totally kosher.

The main effect of the ban was to place the French government clearly on the Israeli side of the Middle East conflict. On July 19, several thousand people defied the ban to gather in the Barbès section of Paris, focusing their protest on President Hollande’s support for the latest Israeli assault on Gaza. As was bound to happen once the demonstration was declared illegal, it attracted a number of apolitical youth who never miss a chance to fight with police, causing violent incidents in the neighborhood, notably setting fire to vegetable stands in a mainly Afro-Arab market.

Pascal Boniface, director of IRIS (the Institute of International and Strategic Relations), and author of *La France malade du conflit israélo-palestinien (France is sick from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict)* is not the only one to point out that the Middle East conflict has long since been “imported” into France, primarily by Jewish organizations which insist on identifying Jewish interests with Israel and stigmatizing criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism. In response to the latest demands “not to import” the conflict, Boniface asked ironically whether that meant banning the annual CRIF banquets – events to which French politicians flock to proclaim their devotion to the Jewish State.

Clearly, the most active Jewish organizations feel that they can only gain by doing what politicians keep saying “mustn’t happen”. Importing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Europe is exactly what they have been doing for years. In Europe, portraying the conflict as a war between “survivors of the Holocaust” and Islamic terrorists seems a sure way to mobilize public opinion in favor of Israel. Identifying the Palestinians with “Islamic terrorism” has been an obvious Israeli policy goal since September 11, 2001.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrations are called by an array of small organizations of diverse ethnic composition, including the Trotskyist New Anti-Capitalist Party, which like other such groups includes people of Jewish origin. In Belgium more than in France, a certain “return to religion” among young people of immigrant origin makes it easier to identify the Palestinian cause with Islam, even though this identification is false. Nevertheless, using the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to denounce Muslims is indeed tending to foster a religious civil conflict in France which Jews seem bound to win thanks to their vastly superior social status. The pro-Israel lobby can hope that such conflict will oblige European governments to strengthen their support for Israel, treating defenders of the Palestinian cause as “terrorists”. And indeed, in recent years, European governmental attitudes toward Israel have grown more favorable despite the fact that public sympathy for the plight of Palestinians has probably also increased, but lacks effective political expression.

The flagrantly unequal treatment is virtually certain to foster the growth of anti-Jewish sentiment among people of Arab and Muslim origin. But this “disadvantage” can be seen as an advantage if it serves to frighten impressionable Jews into moving to Israel. Importing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can seem to be a win-win strategy for Israel, by strengthening French political support while increasing the Israeli population with a desirable addition of French Jews.

It would be ironic indeed if fear of Muslim neighbors in Paris suburbs should lead French Jews to move to a country totally surrounded by millions of hostile Muslim neighbors.

Such cynical calculations may backfire in various ways. Meanwhile, the majority of French politicians are themselves responsible for importing the Middle East conflict in total contradiction to their own declarations and to the genuine interests of France as a secular country of equality among individuals regardless of religious or ethnic origins.