

Antisemitism in 2019 France

According to police statistics, antisemitic acts in France rose by 74% in 2018. Appalled, president Emmanuel Macron claimed this was “the worse resurgence of anti-Semitism since World War two”. His Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe referenced Kristallnacht (the Night of the Broken Glass) and the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany 80 years ago. So what is causing the rise and what can be done about it? “Resurgence” is not quite the proper term to use. Since the end of the war, anti-Semitic violence has never completely disappeared. It comes and goes in cycles, The peaks of violence have followed Israeli Defence Force interventions in the occupied territories. Widely publicised by the media, resulting civilian deaths function as an emotional trigger among those who for reasons of origin or ideology identify with the Palestinians and project their resentment against French Jews who are simply assumed to be supporters of Israel and Zionism. There were spikes in anti-semitic acts in 2002 (Operation Rampart), 2004 (Rainbow operation and targeted killing of Sheikh Yassine), 2009 (Cast Lead), 2014 (Protective edge) and 2018, mostly in March-July during the Marches of Return in Gaza and the “Kite Intifada “(when young Palestinians threw burning kites over the border).

The Middle East conflict is not the only trigger for antisemitic acts, so too are national politics . In 2014, after the controversial French comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala's shows were cancelled because of their antisemitic content, incidents of harassment against Jewish people increased. A protest in Paris known as “Jour de colère” (Day of Wrath) called for the resignation of the then president François Hollande, who had endorsed attempts to ban Dieudonné's performances. The crowd that day included an eclectic mix of Breton “red caps”, protesting against an eco-tax on road freight, marching alongside opponents of same sex marriage, supporters of Dieudonné, and extreme right wing activists wearing military fatigues. Antisemitic and Holocaust denial??? slogans were shouted, and Nazi salutes alternated with the allegedly antisemitic “quenelle” gesture invented by Dieudonné (which some describe as “reverse Nazi salute”) .

Last year, there was another peak in anti Jewish sentiment following the yellow vests protests. The gilets jaunes movement is diverse, and not antisemitic by nature. But because it is unstructured, has no recognised leader, and feeds on social media, it can be easily infiltrated and manipulated by extremists . And its populist, anti-elite rhetoric can easily lead to the recycling of the age-old trope that equates Jews with money and power. Macron has been regularly targeted by antisemitic cartoons, that wouldn't seem out of place in the 1930s, representing him with a hooked nose, top hat, and cigar, all because he worked for the Rothschild bank..

This year, antisemitic hate crime seems to be at the same level. In the last weeks, swastikas have been painted on photographs of Holocaust survivor and former health minister, Simone Veil, the word “Juden” was written on the window of a Bagel shop WHERE?, several Jewish cemeteries have been desecrated, and trees chopped down that were planted in memory of Ilan Halimi - a young Frenchman of Moroccan Jewish ancestry who was kidnapped, tortured and murdered in 2006. Antisemitic graffiti is appearing on walls and public buildings, at the rate of two a day in Paris according to City Hall. The publicity these acts receive leads to copycat acts .

The financial crash of 2008 fuelled insecurity, fear and political resentment among many ordinary people. It has also proved fertile ground for conspiracy theories and for scapegoating the so-called elites. This has led to frequent small-scale acts of antisemitism such as spitting, shouting insults, and graffiti. These are driven by social resentment against a minority thought to be privileged and influential. As result studies show that French Jews feel more insecure and fearful than other Jewish communities across Europe.

Yet despite all of this, one cannot compare today's France with the 1930s. Then antisemitic policies were conceived and implemented by the state –from the 1935 Nuremberg laws in Nazi Germany, to the 1940-1941 anti-Jewish legislation of Vichy France - and public opinion supported, or was indifferent, to the persecutions of Jews. Since then, all French governments have made stamping out antisemitism a priority, from the 1990 Gayssot Act, which made Holocaust denial an offence, to the 2016 anti-discrimination law. And Macron has just announced new measures : banning three extreme right groups, proposals for a law repressing hate speech on the internet, and the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, which includes anti Zionism. And he is backed by public opinion.

Since 1990, an annual survey on racism, antisemitism and xenophobia, conducted for the National Consultative Commission for Human Rights, shows that the image of Jews, far from deteriorating, improved after 2000, implying that antisemitic incidents stirred compassion and support. And Jews have a far better rating in the longitudinal study than both Muslims and Roma. Jews score 78 - on a scale of tolerance from 0 (maximum intolerance) to 100 (maximum tolerance) - way ahead of Muslims and Roma (61 and 34). Today 90% of French people consider that insults such as "dirty Jew" should be a criminal offence, and three quarters of respondents to the NCCHR study consider that "a strong fight" against antisemitism" is essential. But the first step in that fight has to be to identify what antisemitism really is; and it is neither a "resurgence" of the past, nor a remake of Kristallnacht.