

Written submissions – Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to the General Assembly

May 13th 2019

Focus - Situation in France

Statistics & Trends

Earlier this year, the French government released statistics revealing a huge increase in anti-Semitic acts in 2018: 74%, with 541 acts against 311 in 2017. This is lower than in 2014 and 2015 which saw huge increases, with over 800 acts each year, but does show a resurgence of hatred acts.

This trend is reflected in many contexts around the world, with increased of +66% in Italy, +10% in Germany, +50% in the United States (for the same period).

Furthermore, looking at other types of discrimination in France, such as homophobia, these are also on the rise (+15% in the first 9 months of 2018 in France), revealing a general rejection of “the other” and declines in tolerance.

The image and fear of the identity-based lobby groups exerting an informal but vast economic and political influence still prevails in French society. The idea of a “gay” or “LGBT” lobby group emerged in the early 20th century in France, with the idea that gay/LGBT individuals exert excessive influence in powerful arenas such as culture and politics, with a secret agenda of spreading their lifestyles to the general population. This same trend occurred with the idea of a “Jewish” lobby group which re-emerged in the 1970s, wishing for political, economic and financial domination in France and the world. In both cases, these ideas are anchored in fear and suspicion of the other, the “other” being non-heterosexual and non-Christian (Catholic).

Such stereotypes and fear prevail in parallel to discrimination against other minorities including Muslim and Roma people (although official figures seem to indicate that acts against such groups remain small in numbers).

The anti-Semitic acts described above have taken various forms:

- Murder of Jews
- Nazi signs and anti-Semitic graffiti in Jewish cemeteries, as well as the destruction of grave markers.
- Trees destroyed, which had been planted in memory of deceased Jews (gay)
- Physical aggression toward Jews
- Verbal aggression toward Jews and non-Jews (but perceived as Jews based on stereotypes such as social and economic origins) as reflected in the recent attacks during Gilets Jaunes protests.

The origins of these acts are based in the following trends:

- The continued rise of populism and right-wing political groups (the Rassemblement National in France) promoting stereotypes and hatred towards Jewish communities, and others perceived as not fitting into the right-wing normative framework, including LGBT individuals
- *Far-left political groups, including members of the Gilets Jaunes movement.*
- The rise of religious fundamentalism, notably Islamic Fundamentalism (although there has also been, historically, strong anti-Semitism promoted by other religious groups, including the Christian tradition).

Anti-Semitism in France is not new, “It’s old wine in new bottles,” says Professor Deborah Lipstadt and anti-Semitism, as in all parts of the world, is a historically and contemporary deep issue within French (and international) society.

What are some recommendations to counter such trends?

- Enhance legislative framework;
- Promote education: for example, what the Holocaust was, and genocides throughout history¹; and deconstructing conspiracy theories including regarding Jews²
- Develop interfaith dialogue between religious leaders, and including civil society and government officials;
- Work with faith-based organizations and civil society groups in deconstructing populist anti-Semitic (hate speech) discourse and promoting inclusive messages.

For further Information, please see news articles

- https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/frederic-potier-il-y-a-deux-formes-d-antisemitisme-tres-virulent-22-02-2019-2295473_23.php
- <https://fr.timesofisrael.com/dilcrah-la-hausse-de-lantisemitisme-est-tres-structuree-massive/>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/22/france-antisemitism-gilets-jaunes>
- <https://newrepublic.com/article/153273/france-losing-war-anti-semitism>

¹ 10% of French people do not know what the Shoah is, and this number rises to 21% for young people between 18 and 24 years old.

² A study released by the Ifop polling firm last week showed that people identifying as “Yellow Vests” are considerably more likely to espouse conspiracy theories than the general French population (41 percent vs. 21 percent). Ifop tested for beliefs in a wide spectrum of conspiracy theories, including “some airplane contrails are composed of chemicals deliberately spread for secret reasons” (29 percent vs. 15 percent); “international drug trafficking is actually controlled by the CIA” (35 percent vs. 19 percent); and “the car accident in which Lady Diana died was in fact a covered-up assassination” (57 percent vs. 34 percent). Asked whether “a worldwide Zionist plot” exists, 44 percent of Yellow Vest members surveyed agreed compared to 22 percent of French people generally, according to the study.