

Jews in France Feel Sting as Anti-Semitism Surges Among Children of Immigrants

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SARCELLES, [France](#) — In working-class Parisian suburbs like this one, heavily populated by North African immigrants, the word "Jew" is now a standard epithet. It appears in graffiti on middle school walls and neighborhood playgrounds and on the tongues of the young.

"It's blacks and Arabs on one side and Jews on the other," said Sebastian Daranal, a young black man standing in the parking lot of a government-subsidized housing project with two friends.

Eight men beat the son of a rabbi here in March. Another Jew was attacked the next day.

In the wake of the torture and killing in February of Ilan Halimi, a 23-year-old Jew, attention has focused on an undeniable problem: anti-Semitism among France's second-generation immigrant youth, whose high jobless rate the government is trying to address with a law drawing widespread protests across the country.

The law, intended to increase employment, especially among the young, has drawn opposition because of a provision that allows companies to hire people 25 or younger for a two-year trial period, during which they can be fired without cause.

Schools are the battleground over anti-Semitism, and teachers complain that the government has done little, despite many proposals.

"The minister of education has done nothing," said Jean-Pierre Obin, an inspector general of education in France, who wrote a report in 2004 that called anti-Semitism "ubiquitous" in the 61 schools surveyed. "He prefers not to talk about it."

Mr. Obin wrote in the report of "a stupefying and cruel reality: in France, Jewish children — and they are alone in this case — can no longer be educated in just any school."

Ianis Roder, 34, a history teacher in a middle school northeast of Paris, said he was stunned by what he witnessed after Sept. 11, 2001. The next day, someone spray-painted in a stairwell of the school the image of an airplane crashing into the World Trade Center beside the words "Death to the U.S., Death to Jews."

When he told his class months later that [Hitler](#) had killed millions of million Jews, one boy blurted out, "He would have made a good Muslim!" Mr. Roder told of a Muslim teacher who dismissed her class after a shouting match over Nazi propaganda. The students said the offensive images accurately depicted Jews.

Even today, he said, there is widespread belief that the Sept. 11 attacks were a Jewish plot and that Jews were notified beforehand.

Barbara Lefèbvre, a history teacher who has taught in several of the working-class suburbs, said many people minimize the anti-Semitism among France's youth.

"They say, 'That's the way the kids talk — they don't mean it in the same way that you or I would,' " she said. Ms. Lefèbvre, who is Jewish, said she had to argue with the principal of her school several years ago to get an investigation when a student wrote "dirty Jew" on a notebook used by her class. The student, a French-Arab boy, was ultimately given just two hours of detention.

Some teachers simply gloss over subjects likely to elicit anti-Semitic responses. Ms. Lefèbvre said she knows teachers who even show fictional films, like Roberto Benigni's "Life Is Beautiful," instead of treating the Holocaust directly.

France was the first European country to offer Jews full citizenship and has done as much as any to exorcise the ghosts of Nazi collaboration.

But the postwar climate for Jews has steadily soured as attention has focused on the Palestinian cause and Muslims have moved here in large numbers.

With the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada against Israel in 2000, anti-Semitic attacks in France skyrocketed. While the number of reported incidents has fallen since peaking in 2004, anti-Semitism is now entrenched in many of the country's working-class housing projects.

The Arab communities of North Africa had no postwar sense of Holocaust guilt. If anything, distress over the creation of Israel in 1948 reinforced anger at Jews to the point that successive waves of anti-Jewish riots drove most of North Africa's Jews to Israel and Europe — primarily France — in the 1950's and 1960's.

Some people say that many of the North African Arabs who subsequently moved to France carried anti-Jewish prejudices with them and passed them to a second-generation, where they have been reinforced by support for the Palestinian cause. And French guilt over colonialism has made such prejudices harder to counter.

"As long as anti-Semitism came from the extreme right there was a reaction," said Ms. Lefèbvre, who has written about anti-Semitism and sexism in the schools. "But when it came from that part of the population that itself was a victim of racism, no one wanted to see it."

Sitting in a room hung with posters deploring racism at a youth center in La Courneuve, a suburb on the outskirts of Paris, Yannis, the 16-year-old son of a French father and Algerian mother, said racist talk was common. "We've become used to it, hearing it day after day, so we've all started to speak like that," he said, adding that even 7-year-olds say, "Don't eat like a Jew," if someone is being stingy with food.

Fahima, 14, with long black hair and limpid eyes, doing her homework beside him, spoke of a confrontation she had with a Jewish teacher two years ago.

"He said, 'You blacks and Arabs will never get apartments in Paris,' " she said, explaining that he meant the students would never manage to move out of the poor suburbs. Fahima, who is French-Algerian, said she retorted, "You Jews only have apartments there because you were picked on during the war."

"I was mean," she said, playing with a shiny cellphone. "But I'm not anti-Semitic."

The girls with her complained about the teacher, saying he talked often about his family's suffering in the Holocaust. "He cries whenever he mentions his grandmother," one girl said with exasperation.

Some schools have tried to defuse the problem without addressing it directly. After a Jewish girl was harassed in Saint-Ouen two years ago, the administration of her school decided to show "Night and Fog," a haunting 1955 documentary film that includes graphic footage of Nazi death camps.

Initially, teachers feared that showing the movie risked inciting confusing comparisons between the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but then relented.

At the film's end, one boy — not a Muslim — asked how Jews who had known such suffering could treat Palestinians "the same way."

No one responded, though Carole Diamant, a philosophy teacher, said she spoke to him privately later about why he was wrong. "I felt like we were on a wire," she said, describing the tension. Since then, the school has included the Holocaust in a broader program on genocide.

Anti-Semitism is felt most acutely in communities like Sarcelles, where many North Africans settled in the 1950's and 1960's. Sarcelles is home to one of the most concentrated Jewish communities in France, surrounded by an unsightly sprawl of apartment blocks that house the North African and sub-Saharan immigrants who arrived later.

France has a well-established Jewish community with European roots, many of whose members occupy the upper echelons of French society. Hundreds of thousands of poorer North African Jews have more recently swelled the Jewish community to about 600,000, making it the largest in Europe. Those North African Jews and their children bear the brunt of the anti-Semitism in the working-class neighborhoods.

Each time anti-Semitic attacks make news, the Interior Ministry promises more security around Jewish institutions. But "more police aren't the answer because it remains in the spirit of the people," said Dr. Marc Djebali, a spokesman for the Jewish community in Sarcelles.

Laurent Berros, the synagogue's rabbi, said local imams had evaded his suggestion that Jewish and Muslim leaders go together into troubled neighborhoods. "They say that bringing a rabbi into these neighborhoods isn't easy," he said. "There is a fear that they'll be seen as collaborators."

The deteriorating climate has led thousands of French Jews to move to Israel in the past five years, including about 3,300 last year, a 35-year high.

Murielle Bami, 42, whose parents immigrated to France to escape anti-Jewish riots in Tunisia, has the sinking feeling that history is repeating itself. "All the Jews in France want one thing, to leave for Israel or the United States," she said. That is hyperbole, but it is a sign of the anxiety percolating through France's Jewish community. "When our parents came, it was paradise here," said Ms. Bami, who remembers staying out late without worrying about her safety.

Now she avoids certain neighborhoods even in the day and no longer allows her son to wear a yarmulke in the street after some youths put a knife to his throat last year.

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