

# Intersecting Hatreds: Antisemitism and Islamophobia in 21<sup>st</sup> Century France

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**Thesis:** With the current influx of Middle Eastern and African refugees overwhelming the asylum systems of EU member states, the issue of Islamophobia on the part of these new host countries, and the accompanying surge in antisemitic incidents, has been brought to the forefront of worldwide media. This crisis, however, has not served as a spark for newfound xenophobia in Western Europe. Rather, it has simply brought to light an undercurrent of prejudice systemic to the French system of government that, combined with the politicization of both antisemitism and Islamophobia, has allowed these phenomenon to increasingly permeate the nation of France.

Pro-Palestinian protesters in Paris, 2014



## Antisemitism

France's Jewish population has experienced a 21<sup>st</sup> century resurgence of larger antisemitic sentiment, particularly among the French Muslim population.

- Jewish graves have been desecrated in France every year since 1980, but in 2015, 300 Jewish graves were desecrated in Alsace alone.
- **From 2013 to 2014, the European Jewish Press reported that antisemitic attacks in France had doubled.**
- Watchdog group Service de Protection de la Communauté Juive reported that the first quarter of 2015 was marked by 508 antisemitic incidents, as compared with 276 in 2014.

## Islamophobia

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has borne witness to an increase in inter-religious conflict and Islamophobia on the part of the French public.

- According to the 2008 Pew Research Center's Pew Global Attitudes Project, **France reported that 38% of people hold negative opinions of Muslims.**
- A 2014 report by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs' Muddassar Ahmed, reports that the number of Islamophobic incidents in France had increased by 47% percent since 2013.



French Muslim women demonstrate their national pride in Paris

## Politicization

The French political right in particular is exemplified in voice and ideology by far-right party The National Front

- The National Front has fused Islamophobia into their anti-immigration agenda in order to sway voters. On the other side, antisemitism has seen its own political resurgence.
- The politicization of antisemitism through its melding with anti-Zionism is not unique to France, nor predominant among the traditionally antisemitic French political right.
- Anti-Zionism and anti-Americanism have allowed for a growth of antisemitism in the French political sphere among the left.



Marine Le Pen speaks to French voters, 2014

## Intersecting Hatreds

Economically, Islamophobia drives unemployment among French Muslim population and consequently, higher poverty rates. This creates a disaffected and economically disadvantaged population living in concentrated sectors: a potential breeding ground for Islamic extremism.

- Islamophobia thus aids in the rise of antisemitic sentiment and violence in France alongside anti-Zionism, anti-Americanism, and the intolerance inherent to Islamic extremism, but all of these roots have strong ties to Arab-Muslim attitudes towards the modern state of Israel.
- With the French Muslim population estimated in 2014 to have reached 5 million, France's 500,000 Jews' growing fear of antisemitic sentiment among the Muslim population, and particularly of retribution for Israeli foreign policy by pro-Palestinian activists, has created a breeding ground for Islamophobia among French Jews.
- The success of anti-Muslim sentiment among French Jews is only amplified by a number of prominent attacks on the French Jewish community by Islamic extremists, including the murder of four Jewish shoppers at a kosher market by an armed Islamic fundamentalist in January of 2015.
- **Thus a cycle of hatred is created, in which Islamophobia creates antisemitism among French Muslims, which further drives Islamophobic sentiment among French Jews.**

## The French National Model: In Theory

The French national model is that of secular Republicanism, meaning that it is bound by the separation of church and state. In this model, the state acts as a neutral and supreme democratic institution charged with ensuring both the freedoms of its citizens and defining a cohesive national identity.

- In theory, all French citizens develop a shared system of values and ideology through this participation, first and foremost through the public education system and national curriculum.
- These systems are ruled by the French concept of *Laïcité*, which involves the balance of religious freedom and public order, and therefore bans all forms of political or religious activism and proselytizing.
- In theory, this system is designed to protect freedom of and from religion, by framing religion as a private matter to occur within private spaces.



French Muslims cite France's core values in a protest against the 2004 law which essentially banned headscarves, 2004

## Reality: Discriminatory or Flawed?

In recent years, attempts at maintaining the secularity of these systems have begun to target religious minorities within them.

- A 2004 law passed by the French Senate established a ban on the wearing of 'conspicuous religious symbols' in public schools, in what essentially amounted to a ban on headscarves among both Muslim students and teachers.
- **Is the French national model inherently at odds with religions which include public declarations of faith, either through modes of dress or action?** Can a model which suppresses religious displays survive in a modern world where free expression is one of the core values of human rights?
- France becomes a question of tradition, one intended to protect a nation's people and culture, versus adaptation to a new and changing population with evolving needs and desires.