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Review of Muslims and Jews in France. History of a conflict by Maud S. Mandel

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Maud S. Mandel, *Muslims and Jews in France. History of a Conflict*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014) pp. 253.

by Bryan S. Turner

Before World War II Muslims were generally well integrated into European societies. In Weimar Germany they were a well off and socially accepted community, but this middle-class cohort of Muslims largely disappeared in the aftermath of the War.¹ It was not until 1977 that the concept of ‘Islamophobia’ was first defined in Britain by the Runnymede Trust to describe the nature and scope of prejudice against Muslims and to recommend that the 1976 Race Relation Act be amended to make discrimination on religious grounds unlawful. This amendment was rejected by the government that argued that the Human Rights Act of 1998 would provide sufficient protection of minorities.² Perhaps unsurprisingly after 9/11 there has been a growing literature on Islamophobia indicating widespread hostility to and fear of Muslim communities in western societies. There is even a view that the anti-Muslim discourse is rampant, in fact constituting an ‘industry’ and that Islamophobia is simply an illustration of old Orientalist myths.³ While Europe appears to be struggling with diversity as such, Islam is thought to be a special challenge. In *Can Islam be French?* John Bowen claims that Islam touches raw nerves in French culture.⁴ The entry of Islam into public culture has changed the topography of France and raised old anxieties about colonial repression, modern anti-Semitism, and the struggles between Catholics and Republicans.⁵ It is claimed that European hostility to Jews has been replaced by the growing fear of Muslims.⁶

The mood of European scholarship with respect to the recognition and integration of Islam is typically pessimistic. The rise of anti-immigrant and anti-Islam political parties – Golden Dawn in Greece, the Northern League in Italy,

¹ E. Ozyurek, *Being German Becoming. Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

² J. S. Fetzer, J. C. Soper, *Muslims and the State in Britain, France and Germany*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 32.

³ D. Kumer, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2012).

⁴ J. R. Bowen, *Can Islam be French? Pluralism and Pragmatism in a Secularist State*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

⁶ P. Weller, Paul, P. Kingsley, N. Ghanea-Hercock, S. Cheruvallil-Contractor, *Religion or Belief, Discrimination and Equality*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 197.

Marine Le Penn and the National Front in France, and the English defense league in Britain – have exposed a hitherto hidden or ignored under-current of resentment against foreigners. In the context of these developments, Maud Mandel's study of Muslims and Jews in France is a welcome corrective to the dominant focus on anti-Islam in the academic literature and in the popular media. The historical picture is far more complex and contradictory, because, despite religious conflicts around the world, Jews and Muslims often have shared interests as a consequence of having a common experience as outsiders and minorities. Her study is also somewhat unusual in that the dominant comparison in the academic literature is between Christians as the majority and Muslims as a minority.

There have been dramatic but mainly isolated attacks on Jews in France in the 1980s and in the 1990s, but anti-Jewish violence increased dramatically after 2000, primarily fuelled by the resentment of Muslim youth from the most disadvantaged sectors of French society. Tragic attacks on Jewish citizens in 2006 and 2012 caused further alarm for the authorities. Explanations of increasing anti-Semitism or Judeophobia are diverse and often contradictory, but they have in common the belief that Muslim and Jewish communities are on a collision course that is inevitable and unavoidable. The purpose behind Mandel's historical study is to challenge such assumptions. She opens her discussion by recording that she was originally drawn to the topic by observing the deep cultural and historical connections that link these two communities rather than dividing them. As a matter of fact, France has the largest Jewish and Muslim communities – around four to six million Muslims and over half a million Jews – outside Israel. The pressures on these two communities, which share certain linguistic and cultural traditions and a common experience of displacement, to assimilate combined with feelings of rejection, are the same. Mandel consequently wants to reject the dominant narrative that describes the mutual hostility between Jew and Muslim, while also asking how far these narratives engender the very violence they claim to describe. While there is no deep and intractable enmity between actual Jews and Muslims, 'Jew' and 'Muslim' have become political symbols of conflict.

Thus her main thesis is that 'binary constructions of Muslim-Jewish interaction have worked to erase the more complex social terrain in which Muslims and Jews have interacted in late twentieth century France' (p.155). Writing about 'Jews' and 'Muslims' from an historical or sociological perspective raises considerable difficulties, because these labels hide significant cultural, social and religious

differences within the two categories. A further difficulty in defining and contrasting religious identities is that, especially among youth, believing, belonging and behaving are no longer systematically connected.⁷ Perhaps one criticism of the book is that, while she recognizes significant differences within these communities, she does not describe these in any detail. So for example she offers no analysis of the Shia –Sunni divide that intensified after the Iranian Revolution into a global struggle for dominance. In the last decade the Shia-Sunni conflict has largely defined not just the Islamic world but global politics in general.⁸ Nevertheless, Mandel shows considerable sophistication in recognizing that, while the labels obscure historical differences, what Jews and Muslims have in common is their lived experience of both exclusion and successful efforts to integrate. One further parallel between Jews and Muslims perhaps requires more attention from Mandel, namely that Islam and Judaism, in contrast to Roman Catholicism, have no transnational institutions of authority that are recognized globally. In both communities, authority is very much devolved and at least in the case of Islam local *fatwas* give expression to religious ‘de-territorialization’ and promote greater heterodoxy of belief.⁹

The historical unfolding of this narrative of a ‘clash of civilizations’ – a phrase which she does not use – is closely connected with domestic political events such as the 1968 student revolts, the 1980s experiments with multiculturalism and the general economic decline of France by the end of the last century. However, these domestic or national issues cannot be separated from the international and global context, and above all by the complicated history of French Algeria. This attention to the postcolonial is clearly not incidental or trivial and ‘From the standpoint of demography alone, decolonization was monumental in the historical trajectories of France’s Muslim and Jewish populations’ (p. 3). At least one million French citizens were ‘repatriated’ as a consequence of the violence, the number of Algerian Muslims grew from 130,000 in 1930 to over 600,000 by 1963. Between 1944 and 1979 there were 240,000 new Jewish arrivals. While the increase in numbers was important, immigration also brought greater community diversity between the new arrivals and those Jews that had roots in

⁷ G. Davie, Grace, *Religion in Britain since 1945. Believing without Belonging*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

⁸ V. Nasr, *The Shia Revival. How conflicts within Islam will shape the future*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

⁹ O. Roy, Olivier, *Holy Ignorance. When Religion and Culture Part Ways*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

France stretching back before the French Revolution and those Jews who had migrated from war-ravaged Eastern Europe.

These developments also began to differentiate Jews from Muslims on the grounds that Jews were regarded as better educated, intelligent and more 'assimilable' than Muslims. The social differentiation was also juridical and the sense that the 1870 Cremieux Decree had granted French citizenship to all Algerian Jews thereby cutting them off decisively from most Algerian Muslims. The Decree had been reinforced by various informal administrative practices and schools of the *Alliance Israelite universelle* by which Jews came to enjoy better life-chances than the Muslim population. Although after World War II citizenship was granted to Muslims in the belief that it would dilute support for the independence struggle, Muslims in France continued to experience discrimination especially after 1954 when the struggle with the *Front de liberation nationale* transformed Muslims into 'the enemy within.' Jews fleeing from the Algerian conflict enjoyed the benefit of subsidies and aid that were made available to repatriating citizens. These historical conditions of structural discrimination had long term consequences in distinguishing between Muslims who were socially and economically marginalized and immigrant Jews who joined a French Jewish community with historical ties. Although Jews had been profoundly traumatized by Vichy legislation during Nazi occupation of France, by the 1950s, as a consequence of a determined rebuilding process, Jews had access to a highly developed infrastructure. In addition to this institutional support, there was a communal leadership committed to their integration and to the defense of Jewish interests. As a result, the Jewish community had many more opportunities to shape public opinion and to access the locus of political power. Jews are unsurprisingly better educated, more economically successful, and socially mobile than French Muslims. However, in one important respect they have been unsuccessful in shaping French foreign policy with respect to Israel and in discrediting public opinion about the plight of Palestinians.

These general observations about the modern history of Jewish-Muslims relations set the scene for the six main chapters each of which considers a moment in which Muslim-Jewish conflicts became a matter of official concern for the French police, the media and the wide array of communal spokespersons. Beginning in 1948 with minor unrest in Marseille, chapter 1 examines the ways in which disagreements over Israel provided a channel for debates about inequalities in French minority policies at home and in North Africa. Jews, who were traditionally reluctant to express a visible ethnic politics in France, kept

quiet about any Zionist sympathies they may have embraced. Chapter 2 explores the link between French colonial policies and Muslim-Jewish relations in the metropole and how decolonization changed the ways in which different actors understood the character of Jewish belonging throughout the region. In particular she considers how the invention of ‘the North African Jew’ united Tunisian, Moroccan and Algerian Jews into a collective that was in conflict with ‘North Africans,’ ‘Arabs’ and ‘Muslims.’ In chapter 3 she examines how these new ways of conceptualizing Muslim-Jewish interactions conditioned integration into the metropole in the late 1950s and 1960s, and how these possibilities for integration were compromised by the structural inequalities between Muslim and Jew. In the context of considerable civil disturbance and international instability around the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, chapter 4 shows that, while conflict between Muslims and Jews was rare, the narrative of two communities in conflict gained momentum and credibility. In chapter 5 the notion of two polarized communities was underlined by a growing student movement that connected radical left politics at home with the plight of the Palestinians abroad. However, it was not until the 1980s that the idea of polarization developed as the central motif for understanding relations between Jews and Muslims. In chapter 6 (‘Particularism *versus* Pluriculturalism’) she describes how the head-scarf controversy in October 1989, the desecration of the Jewish cemetery in Carpentras in May 1990 and the outbreak of the first Gulf War in January 1991 put an end to joint activism and intensified identity politics. France has as a result been deeply divided by the head-scarf controversy and the presence of religious symbols in public schools. With the growth of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s anti-immigration and nationalist agenda and increasing fear of terrorist attacks, the policy of ‘the right to be different’ was replaced by a firmer emphasis on ‘integration’. Public concern was directed towards the ‘second generation’ of Muslim migrants who were identified with general delinquency and occasionally with civil disturbance such as the burning of 250 cars and the wounding of seven police men in Lyon in July and August 1981. These fears were intensified by the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the fear of a global *jihad* movement. It is worth noting in passing that *Muslims and Jews in France* was published before the Charlie Hebdo affair in 2015 and the growing threat of ISIS as an inspiration for domestic terrorism.

Perhaps the principal intellectual lesson of this research is that understanding domestic or national conflicts cannot be undertaken without a detailed and close understanding of international politics. The national relationships between Jews and Muslims since 1945 have been deeply influenced, but not wholly determined,

by France's relationship to Israel during the various wars that have erupted in the region especially in 1948 and 1967. The depressing lesson of this excellent history of social and religious pluralism in modern France is that these external conflicts in the Middle East have contributed to the erosion of the official commitment to 'pluriculturalism' and, while French politics is deeply divided between left and right, both agree that 'immigration' is a 'problem' that needs an urgent solution. The growing crisis of African refugees in the Mediterranean and millions of displaced people from Syria has only served to strengthen opposition to immigration across European societies. Given the economic and political crisis in Greece, some Greek islands, most notably Lesbos, could be quickly overwhelmed. The prospect of an international deal over Iran's nuclear program in 2015 further complicates the international environment and may in fact provoke further conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and divide opinion in the West with respect to the security of Israel in the next decade. While Jews and Muslims may not be on a collision course, it will require considerable statecraft on the part of French leaders to create an environment in which both communities feel safe and secure at home and abroad.

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