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French antisemitism: an historian's view

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World Jewry is rightly disturbed by the eruption of violent anti-Semitism in France. Perhaps naively, we had seen in the horror and shame engendered by the Holocaust the bankruptcy of European anti-Semitism. Popular revulsion, we had hoped, would prevent further attacks upon Jews. Unfortunately, it has become clear that the Holocaust did not purge European societies of anti-Semitism. The legacy of anti-Semitism has been passed to a new generation of radical Rightists, who once again portray Jews as the symbol of all that is wrong with modern democracy and select them as their targets.

Notwithstanding our legitimate sense of anger, we should recognize that analogies between the current situation of French Jews and the years of the Holocaust, or even of the 1930's, are both misleading and unduly alarmist. France of the 1930's was rife with anti-Semitism. Right-wing thugs sporadically attacked Jews in Paris's immigrant Jewish quarter and even staged a pogrom in France's Algerian colony. Powerful right-wing leagues, some of which urged the restriction of Jewish rights, could call upon considerable popular support. Cultural and political expressions of anti-Semitism were accepted within respectable circles and promoted by prominent personalities. When Leon Blum was elected as France's first Jewish premier, a member of the Chamber of Deputies publicly deplored the day when "for the first time this old Gallo-Roman country would be governed...by a Jew." By the end of the decade conservative newspapers were not reluctant to accuse the Jews of warmongering. It became clear

that large segments of the French population opposed the republic and its commitment to the rule of law. The very concept of state upon which Jewish claims to equal protection are based was threatened, and ultimately succumbed when France was invaded by German armies.

Recent incidents should not be exploited

Today the political expression of anti-Semitism is limited to a fringe element within French society. Parties representing the entire spectrum of French political life have publicly declared their repudiation of anti-Semitism and their commitment to defend all French citizens. True, the government's initial response was ambiguous. Raymond Barre's statement which condemned "this odious attempted assassination of Jews in their synagogue which struck down innocent Frenchmen crossing the rue Copernic" revealed the ingrained French habit of differentiating between Jews and Frenchmen. However, the government has recognized the folly of appearing even to tolerate anti-Semitic terrorist attacks. France's democratic institutions remain stable and are the ultimate guarantee of the security of French Jews. The impact of events and of public outrage appears to have convinced the government to take manifestations of anti-semitism seriously and to deploy its intelligence and police resources more effectively in the surveillance of the radical Right. Moreover, a strong and assertive Jewish community, the largest in western Europe, will maintain pressure upon all French political parties. The Jewish establishment today is far more responsive to the political strategies of North African Jewish immigrants than its prewar predecessor was to the similarly assertive policies of East European Jewish immigrants.

What can world Jewry do to prevent the proliferation of anti-Semitic attacks? We can, and should, indicate to French representatives that we will hold the government responsible for protecting its citizens. We can, and should, urge the French to condemn all terrorism, for societies that close their eyes to some terrorist incidents invite others. But we can make our case against anti-Semitism most effectively if we do not assume a link between anti-Semitic attacks and France's pro-Arab policy. By using the recent incidents to attack France's Middle East policies — as repugnant and misguided as we may find them — we appear to be exploiting the situation of French Jews to score public relations points in the game of diplomacy. In doing so, we dilute our moral and political claim for the right of Jews everywhere to security. For Jews must be assured protection of the law whatever the foreign policy of their own countries.