

JEWISH-MOSLEM RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE

Esther Benbassa

In December 1987, the “war of the stones” began. Neither the state nor the army was prepared for a battle of this size. On the 15th of November 1988, Yasser Arafat proclaimed the foundation of an independent state in Palestine and implicitly recognized the existence of the State of Israel in December of that same year.

The first Intifada meant the conflict between Israel and the Arabs became an internal affair again, as it had been before the creation of the State of Israel and the “territories” transformed the conflict into one big battlefield. The establishment of “Greater Israel” after the Six-Day War inevitably defined the conflict and intensified it; and all of this because of the colonization of the Palestinian territories by Jewish activists, a colonization that never ceased even under the left-wing administration that returned to power in 1999 with the election of Ehud Barak. What began as a military strategy now turned into urban guerrilla warfare. Ehud Barak did try to advance the peace talks at Camp David but he remained intractable on the question of the return of the refugees (1948) and on the matter of Jerusalem, proposing a Palestinian State divided up according to the presence of Jewish colonies and with borders under Israeli control.

The second Intifada, which began in the autumn of 2000, threw the Middle East into a state of tension and its repercussions were felt in Europe, particularly in the Arab and Jewish communities who often live in the same districts, as for example in the suburbs of the large French cities. It destabilized these two communities and even resulted in serious conflicts and anti-Semitic acts of violence of varying seriousness.

Projection of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Europe and France

In France, the Maghrebians and the Maghrebian Jews of the working classes often live in the same suburbs and sometimes even in the same neighborhoods. The relative success of the Maghrebian Jews, which is partially due to their adaptation skills inherited from the long history of the Jewish Diaspora in general, aggravates the resentment of the Maghrebians and other groups descended of immigrants, especially in times of Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. But Maghrebian Jews, who live close to Arabs, are also getting themselves caught up in this spiral of resentment not only because of the trauma of their departure from North Africa, but also because they project their own past experience, that they interpret today as "expulsion," on what is happening in the Middle East between the Israelis and the Palestinians, imagining that their co-religionists in Israel are threatened by a similar fate. Most of the radical right websites and groups were founded during the last recent years by young Maghrebian Jews. These groups are anti-Arab and some of them are clearly racist, and their members may even resort to violent action in the demonstrations. We observe the same type of projection in Israel where the Oriental Jews have transformed the trauma of their exile into hostility against the Palestinians.

The Jewish and Arab-Moslem "*communautarisms*", which became active in France especially after the second Intifada, and which spread in the form of diasporic nationalisms, should also be taken into consideration. Jews and Arabs, in France and everywhere where they constitute important Diasporas, are all more or less touched by this nationalism. A nationalism with no territorial claims, reconciling loyalty to the country of residence with strong support to external causes, is likely to cement a diasporic identity. These causes are transnational. The Arab-Moslems of the Diaspora, beyond their own particular national affiliations or those of their parents, rebuild a certain unit in defense of the Palestinian cause, and overcome at the same time their possible dissensions. This identification, more visible among young people, enables them to reinscribe themselves in a genealogy, even after severing the link with both their country of origin and their parents, whom they reproach for having passively undergone the humiliations and the rejections imposed by immigration.

In these badly controlled time bombs that the suburbs have become, it is, more than religion, their identification with the Palestinians, or with all those who defy the West, that helps them retrieve their lost honor. The dramatic deeds of the heroes of the Palestinian cause become acts of bravery and a means of appropriation, while Israel, associated with the West which relegated them to its margins, becomes the enemy incarnate *par excellence*, persecutor of the Palestinians, their brothers of destiny. In this representation, generally no distinction is made between Israelis and Jews.

For a long time, the Jews themselves have been developing their own diasporic nationalism surrounding Israel, which was reinforced by the evolution of the conflict in the Middle East. This could be seen as a nationalism without borders, uniting Jews all over the world. The victory of Israel in 1967 gave them back their pride, and definitively brought an end to the time when they were perceived as passive and humiliated beings. From now on, Jews in France and elsewhere present themselves openly as Jews and convey at the same time and in the same way their relation to Israel. 1967 was for many North-African Jews also a kind of revenge for the pains of emigration, a revenge against the Arabs, and a way of recovering their dignity after their forced exile. And today, while for a number of Arab-Moslems the support for the Palestinian cause alleviates the crumbling of their traditional identity, many Jews find in their attachment to Israel a means of counterbalancing a comparable fragility.

What is the reality of Arab-Moslem anti-Semitism in France, which is one of the expressions of this diasporic nationalism in action, defined by community affiliation? Of course, no one can deny the increasing number of anti-Jewish acts, of varying gravity, or the fierce anti-Jewish hostility encountered in certain Arab-Moslem milieus, a hostility which is not limited only to these milieus. Anti-Semitism is becoming more and more the metaphor for the evils of French society. An explanation for this anti-Semitism currently spreading among Arab-Moslem milieus could be found in the absence of a real integration policy and a social and professional mobility still in its embryonic stages.

Between the 1st of January and the 30th of June 2004, 135 anti-Semitic acts were listed as opposed to 127 in 2003. Dominique de Villepin, then Minister of Internal Affairs, confirmed 160 aggressions or degradations for the first seven months of the year 2004 as opposed to 75 over the same period in 2003. The anti-Semitic acts dropped of 48% in the first part of 2005 in comparison with the same period one year before: 290 in 2005 against 561 in 2004, which is probably partly an effect of the government's policy against anti-Semitism.¹ It is important to note that nobody is able to register the number of acts of violence against Arabs and Black populations in the country.

Is the fear that seizes the Jews of France today and the way in which it is expressed, in proportion to the aggressions actually committed? Or shouldn't one see this too as an expression of the new diasporic nationalism which is based on the defense of Israel, inclined to consider any critique of Israel as anti-Semitic and triggered by the trauma of the memory of the Holocaust reactivated in a climate of tension? Anyway, the fear is real. But anti-Arab racism follows the same rising curve, derived from the same underlying basis of a dispute inherited from colonization and de-colonization, which has reemerged since September 11, confusing Islam and terrorism.

Europe, because of its own history, of which anti-Jewish sentiments and the extermination to which it led are an integral part, is much more sensitive to

anti-Semitism than to anti-Arab racism, which is more tolerated in its various versions—islamophobia, “shock of civilizations” ideology, anti-Islamism, etc. The guilt born from the recent realization of the responsibility of Vichy for the deportation of the Jews of France, certainly also plays a role. All this explains the kind of expiatory fever, reactivated by the last resurgence of anti-Semitism in renewed forms. All this, instead of alleviating the tension, contributes to a kind of panic among the Jews, which was fed by the attitude and discourse of community leaders and the Jewish press, the interventionism of Israel in favor of emigration, and the alarmism of some intellectuals.

The confusion between the fight against anti-Semitism and the defense of Israel at any price and sometimes the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism by certain Jewish leaders to encourage emigration to Israel (France constitute the biggest Jewish community of Europe) fed the confusion between the Jews of the Diaspora and the Israelis in the eyes of the French population and of its Arab-Moslem component. This happens at a time when the memory of the Holocaust is no longer a protection against anti-Semitism since the taboo it created was broken with the aggravation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²

The Arab-Moslem population should make a distinction between supporting the Palestinians and anti-Semitic discourse and behavior. It is imperative not to see an anti-Semite in every Arab. It remains a fact that since the creation of the State of Israel, anti-Semitism of the European type took hold in the Arab world. This anti-Semitism, which worsened with the two Intifadas, focused on the enemy but in fact served to obscure prevailing social and economic problems. It took a virulent form, conveyed by anti-Semitic films and television shows, and based on an image of the Jew close to the Western anti-Semitic stereotypes that were dominant in the inter-war period and during the Second World War. Certain Arabic TV channels diffused by satellite reintroduced this type of discourse in the Arab-Moslem homes of Europe, strengthening the sermons of certain fundamentalist Imams who, with anti-Semitism, believe they have the means of unifying a shattered Islam, at least in France. In addition, the discourse of the anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic type spread by textbooks and propaganda in the Arab countries and in Palestine are not likely to prepare the ground for a rapprochement between future generations.

Recent developments

In a context of economic crisis in France and huge social problems without serious solutions toward a better integration of French youth whose parents and grand-parents were immigrants, the rising memories of colonization and slavery among these populations, the apathy of governmental circles unable to find ways to integrate these memories in the French collective memory are the symptoms of very profound social conflicts in the country.

Many Blacks and Maghrebians consider that the memory of the Holocaust and the fight against anti-Semitism are currently occupying too large a place in the political space, thus barring the way to their own claims. Recently, the Blacks organized themselves in a political way, imitating the Jewish model of the CRIF, the Representative Council of the Jewish Institutions of France, which is a political organization, and even giving to their own federation a very similar name: the CRAN, the Representative Council of Black Associations.

For Moslems, this type of political self-organization seems for the moment out of reach, because of the specific characteristics of their history and of their experience of immigration, and because of the will of the French government to federate them on a strictly religious basis, according to the model of religious organization imposed by Napoleon on the Jews when he founded the consistories. Nicolas Sarkozy, Minister of the Interior, acted in a very Napoleonic way when he created, a few years ago, the Conseil français du culte musulman (CFCM), the French Council of the Moslem Faith, which is a typically religious Islamic organization.

All these are very serious problems that can only reinforce the competition of memories in a context of severe discrimination against Arab-Moslems and Blacks in France. And in such an atmosphere, the hostility between Jews and Arabs, and between Jews and Blacks, can take the new form of a competition of victims.

At the same time, on the ground of the unending Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the old French anti-Semitism too is coming back, even if the Jewish leadership in the country focused its fight against the "new" anti-Semitism emerging among populations of Arabic origin—which seems a genuine political error. The intensive bombing of Gaza by Israel in its war against Hamas as well as its attack of Lebanon to disarm the Hezbollah, which caused massive destruction and the death of more than one thousand Lebanese civilians—all this after the capture of three Israeli soldiers—will certainly not contribute to an improvement of Jewish/Arab relations in Europe. Very few Jewish voices in France criticized the Israeli military actions in Lebanon. Jewish institutions and many Jewish individuals, in a kind of united front, gathered in a public unanimous defense and justification of Israel. This attitude was negatively received by French public opinion, and, of course, by the Arab-Moslems of the country.

If this war could be seen as legitimate in the beginning, it quickly appeared to be useless. It demonstrated the weakness of one of the best armies in the world in front of the guerillas of the Hezbollah, which turned into the heroic symbol of Islamic resistance. The relative failure of the Israeli forces might lead to more balanced negotiation with the Palestinians, but at the same time the Israelis lost their position of strength. All these new elements should give a new orientation to the relations between Jews and Arabs in Europe—not necessarily, I am afraid, the most positive orientation.

Notes

- 1 See: http://lesrapports.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/cgi-bin/brp/telestats.cgi?brp_ref=064000264&brp_file=0000.pdf
- 2 On these subjects read the numerous papers I have published in various French periodicals (on www.estherbenbassa.net) and *La République face à ses minorités. Les Juifs hier, les Musulmans aujourd'hui* (Mille et une nuits/Fayard, 2004) and *Juifs et musulmans. Une histoire partagée, un dialogue à construire*, edited by Esther Benbassa and J.C. Attias (La Découverte, 2006).

Esther Benbassa is a professor of Modern Jewish history at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Sorbonne, Paris) and an intellectual active in the French public debate. Among her publications in English are: *Haim Nahum. A Sephardic Rabbi in Politics, 1892-1923, A Sephardi Life in Southeastern Europe. The Autobiography and Journal of Gabriel Arié, 1863-1939* with Aron Rodrigue, *The Jews of France. A History from Antiquity to the Present, History of Sephardic Jewry, XIVth-XXth Centuries* with A. Rodrigue, *Israel, the Impossible Land* with Jean-Christophe Attias, *The Jews and their Future. A Conversation on Jewish Identities* with J.C. Attias, and *The Jew and the Other* with J.C. Attias. In 2007 she received the Seligmann Prize against racism, intolerance, and injustice.
