

Arson attack on Jewish social centre in Paris

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An arson attack on the night of August 21-22 destroyed the premises of a Jewish social centre in Paris. Formerly a synagogue serving the Sephardic Jewish community, the building was converted in 1960 into a centre open to all, serving meals to some 30 old-age pensioners.

The destroyed social centre situated in rue Popincourt in the 11th arrondissement bore all the signs of a fascist attack: swastikas daubed with red marker, several scrawls (full of spelling mistakes) with messages such as “The world will be purer when there are no more Jews” and “Death to Jews.”

An unknown and unauthenticated group has issued a communiqué on an Islamic web site stating that “A group of young mujahedin...set fire to a Jewish church at 4 am...in retaliation against Jewish racists attacks in France against Islam and Muslims.” The statement was signed “Group of Partisans of the Islamic Holy War.”

However, according to *Le Monde* (August 24): “If the far right is thought to be the most likely suspect, the investigators, on Monday morning, were not ruling out the possibility of an act by a disturbed individual.”

By August 30, *Le Figaro* was reporting: “The favoured line of investigation no longer assumes an anti-Semitic attack, but is leaning towards another hypothesis: the work of a disturbed Jewish person now being actively sought.”

On August 9, in a Jewish cemetery in Lyons, 60 tombstones were daubed with Nazi symbols and slogans by an attention-seeking loner, Michaël Tronchon, unemployed, bitter at being a social failure and attracted by neo-Nazi propaganda. Fervently anti-Arab, he had made two previous assaults on Arab men with no media impact. He then gained notoriety as Phinéas, the name he adopted to sign his handiwork, by attacking the Jewish cemetery and soon after turned himself in to the police.

The cowardly attack in rue Popincourt has devastated the local community and sent shock waves throughout France. The prompt intervention of the fire brigade prevented the fire from spreading to inhabited parts of the building and causing loss of life.

André Cohen said: “I came here every day after the market. I was born opposite and had my bar mitzvah here.... In the afternoons we would play cards here, have a drink and pass the time with our life-long friends. Now we’re out on the stones and I don’t know where we’ll go.”

Claire Romi, secretary of the Judeo-Spanish association *Aki estamos* said, “I don’t think France is anti-Semitic, I think there are disturbed people who don’t know what they are doing because they are not acquainted with the history.” Armand Kac, 72, the son of deportees, said, “Fortunately, on the whole, French society is

opposed to this kind of criminal act, which was not the case in 1940.”

Another resident pointed out that in July 1942, “the district had been especially affected.” He explained that “in Paris, the first roundup took place in the 11th arrondissement, where 7,000 Jews were arrested.” He was referring to the mass arrests of Jews, for deportation and extermination, by the police at the behest of the Nazi occupiers and the collaborationist French authorities—known as *la rafle du Vel’ d’hiv* (the vélodrome d’Hiver round-up), after the cycling race track to which those arrested were taken.

This incident is the latest in a series of anti-Semitic attacks in France. All such attacks must be categorically condemned. Anti-Semitism, which has a long and tragic pedigree, is a form of racism and ethnic persecution with the most disastrous political implications.

The growth of poverty within the French population of North African descent, Israeli depredations against the Palestinians and the US invasion of Iraq and the broader oppression of Arabs and Muslims in the name of the “war on terror” have produced mass anger. Any attempt, however, to direct that outrage against Jewish people, in France or elsewhere, is, from the standpoint of the Arab population, entirely reactionary and counterproductive.

The French government, which postures piously in the face of racism and anti-Semitism, has done its part, through the anti-head scarf laws and its repression of youth, to stoke up communal tensions.

Implacable opposition to acts like the recent arson attack in Paris in no way implies support for the policies of the Israeli government, which inevitably attempts to equate anti-Semitism with any and all opposition to its brutalities.

The Israeli regime has intervened for its own cynical reasons in the Paris attack. Sylvan Shalom, the Israeli foreign minister, made an unscheduled visit to the French capital. Speaking on August 24, after a discussion with the French minister of the interior, Dominique de Villepin, he called on the French authorities to take action against the growth of anti-Semitism and not limit themselves to speeches.

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Villepin accepted that there had been “a sharp increase in anti-Semitic acts since the beginning of the year” and that “over the seven months of the year, 160 anti-Semitic acts had been recorded, attacks on people or damage to property, as opposed to 75 in the

first seven months of 2003.” Officially, there were 127 anti-Semitic acts reported in France in 2003 and 195 in 2002. Villepin also declared that the situation was contrary “to the very spirit and basis of our Republic” and pledged “the total mobilisation of the French state.” He reported that 147 people had been questioned over the last seven months.

The Israeli government has a double interest in painting the worst possible picture of the situation for Jews in France. First, it uses the charge of anti-Semitism to put pressure on French foreign policy, which tends to be somewhat more favourable to the Palestinians in the Middle East conflict than that of other Western governments.

Furthermore, the Zionist regime wants to panic French Jews into emigrating to Israel. Six weeks ago, Ariel Sharon, the Israeli prime minister, created a public scandal when he exhorted French Jews to emigrate to Israel “as soon as possible” in an address to representatives of American Jewish organisations. He said that “today in France, around 10 percent of the population is Muslim, which gives rise to a new form of anti-Semitism based on anti-Israeli sentiments.... If I were to address our brothers in France, here is what I would say to them: immigrate to Israel as quickly as possible.”

The French government strongly protested. Michel Barnier, minister of foreign affairs, criticised by Israel for his June 29 visit to Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian leader, demanded an explanation for Sharon’s outburst. President Jacques Chirac let it be known that he had told Sharon on the phone “that he was formally opposing the anti-French campaign in Israel, aiming at presenting France as an anti-Semitic country” and that “this campaign is unacceptable.”

Indeed, many in the French Jewish community were critical of Sharon’s Islamophobic statement. Patric Gaubert, chairman of LICRA (International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism), said that Ariel Sharon “should have kept quiet” since “his words will not bring the calm, peace and serenity that we need.” Patrick Klugman, former chairman of the French Jewish students’ union and at present vice chairman of *SOS Racisme*, declared that Sharon was “very ill informed about what is happening in France” and “the true situation of Jews in France.” Mouloud Aounit of the MRAP (Movement against Racism and for Friendship Between the Peoples) suggested that Sharon was attempting to “use anti-Semitism, so as to organise another programme to populate Israel.”

On July 20, *Le Monde* also pointed out: “Mr Sharon’s words are doubtless to be seen, once again, as part of the drive of the Jewish Agency for the Promotion of the ‘aliya’ [immigration]. For this agency, the 600,000 Jews of France...constitute, after American Jewry, the second largest reservoir of candidates for immigration, at a time when the waves of migrants from the former Soviet republics or Argentina have dried up.”

Robert Badinter, a Socialist Party senator and former chair of the Constitutional Council, stated in an interview in *Le Monde* (July 23): “These words implicate millions of French Muslims, and impute anti-Semitic hatred. They are equally injurious to French Jews, called upon to leave their country, France.” He pointed out that “historically, it was the French Revolution that had made Jews

French citizens.”

While opposing Sharon’s appeal to French Jews, the French government and media have their own interest in fomenting communalism in order to counter any united political opposition to its increasing recourse to repression and the dismantling of the welfare state. The law forbidding girls from wearing the Muslim veil in school and the setting up last year of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (the French Council of the Muslim Religion) by former Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy, as well as the recommendations of the Stasi Commission to the Chirac-Raffarin government on enhancing the involvement of the different religions in France’s institutions, are all signs of this.

There was also the strange case of Marie L., a young mother, who falsely claimed on July 9 that she had been robbed on the metro, and, being taken for a Jew, had been cut and had her stomach daubed with swastikas by a gang of four Arabs and two blacks who had run off deliberately overturning the push chair with her child in it. The attack, she asserted, had lasted 13 minutes, during which time the train had stopped at three stations and no passengers had done anything to help. It turned out that she was an habitual liar, attention-seeker and inventor of racist fantasies. But for some four days, the political and media establishment gave full credence to her highly dubious story and worked to create an atmosphere of anti-immigrant hysteria and outrage at the passivity of the passengers.

There exist undoubtedly growing social and ethnic tensions in France. But the principal source of these tensions is the ongoing programme of destruction of the welfare state by “left” and right governments: savage reductions in unemployment benefits, job security, working conditions, health and pension provisions. This is alongside increased powers and resources for the police and a weakening of the control of magistrates over their actions. Unemployment, for years chronically high in France, is reaching the 10 percent mark and affects most harshly youth, immigrants and the Muslim population.



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