

What Are the French Doing to Protect Jews? A Lot.
By Pamela Druckerman

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A poster reading “I am a Jew” during a demonstration in Paris last month after the killing of an 85-year-old Jewish woman.

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PARIS — Here’s some news you might find surprising: By and large, the French like Jews. Yes, there have been despicable anti-Semitic crimes here, and there are enduring stereotypes. But 85 percent of the French have a favorable view of Jews, the same as the British do, according to the Pew Research Center. Since 1990, France’s national human rights commission has annually ranked Jews as the one of the country’s most accepted minorities. In polls, most French people say the state should vigorously combat anti-Semitism.

That’s little solace to the family of Mireille Knoll, the 85-year-old Holocaust survivor who was stabbed to death last month in her Paris apartment in an apparent hate crime. A year earlier, a 66-year-old woman in the same arrondissement was beaten and thrown off her third-floor balcony.

There were other anti-Semitic murders in the years before that.

But this isn’t Vichy. Tolerance toward Jews, measured by the human rights commission, has been increasing. And unlike in the 1940s, the French government is trying to protect its citizens.

When Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and some in the foreign press ponder whether French Jews should simply flee the country, they’re asking the wrong question. Far more relevant is this one: What is the French government doing to combat dangerous anti-Semitism in a small part of the population?

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And the answer is that it’s doing quite a lot.

France has given new powers to Dilcrah, an organization run by the prime minister, Édouard Philippe, that coordinates efforts to combat racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia. Judges can send people convicted of hate crimes to a two-day “citizenship course” at the national Holocaust memorial. Police are training to respond better to victims. A planned law would require internet platforms to take down racist or anti-Semitic material.

“Contrary to the image that you might get abroad, there hasn’t been an explosion in anti-Semitic acts the last few years in France,” said Johanna Barasz, a Dilcrah spokeswoman. “But it remains very serious and very worrying.”

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Anti-Semitism is a touchy subject here, in large part because the prejudice appears to run highest among some French people with Muslim origins, who are subject to discrimination themselves. A young man with this background — and another man he met in prison — are accused of killing Ms. Knoll.

That has put French schools on the front lines. There are occasionally stories of classrooms in immigrant neighborhoods where teachers try to give required lessons about the Holocaust but students shout them down with attacks on Israel or Jews.

Policymakers say teachers need more training in how to turn these tense encounters into “teachable moments” in which students can express their beliefs and teachers can help the class

to discuss and deconstruct them. But French teachers don't always encourage open discussion. Instead, they tend to lecture students on tolerance and values, which experts say has little effect. [Read an Opinion piece by Bari Weiss on anti-Semitism and the murder of Mireille Knoll.] And until now, combating anti-Semitism in France has centered on the Holocaust. Students regularly tour Auschwitz and visit memorials. Sarah Gensburger, a sociologist who curated a 2012 exhibition at Paris's city hall on the thousands of Jewish children who were deported from this city and murdered between 1942 and 1944, said most visiting class groups came from two heavily immigrant districts in northern Paris. She said the students emerged profoundly shaken. But that's not enough, Dr. Gensburger said. "We've been developing more and more programs, places, meant to transmit the memory of the Holocaust as a way to build citizenship and tolerance," she said, yet the government still counts hundreds of anti-Semitic incidents each year, and many more probably go unreported.

"You can bring people to Auschwitz or wherever you want, but it will not change the everyday social networks and dynamics they live in," she said.

These dynamics can be murderous. In 2012, a 23-year-old Frenchman born to working-class Algerian immigrants walked up to a Jewish school in Toulouse and killed three children, ages 3, 6 and 8, and the father of two of them. Last year, one of the killer's brothers published a book describing the anti-Semitic climate he grew up with:

"In my family, we blamed the Jew, we blamed them for everything," he wrote. Relatives would regularly say, "The Jews stole Algeria, the Jews control the world."

Obviously, all French Muslims don't share these views. But in the recent attacks, ambient stereotypes seemed to transform neighborhood thugs and delinquents into anti-Semitic killers.

To fight prejudice, some teachers say they've had to supplement France's national curriculum. Samia Essabaa, who teaches high school English in a heavily immigrant area northeast of Paris, says it's essential to valorize the places where students' own families are from. On school trips to places including Morocco, she emphasizes the shared history of Jews and Muslims, like the fact that both religions ban pork, that both Hebrew and Arabic are written from right to left, and that North African Jews eat couscous too.

She said that once her students know that Jews "participated and contributed to the development of their country of origin, then we can tackle a lot of things, because it's no longer a history of the other. No, it's also my history."

The French government is developing manuals and other resources for teachers, along with a mobile team that can jump in to help schools respond to severe anti-Semitic or racist incidents. Next month, Unesco will publish a guide for combating anti-Semitism in schools around the world.

Despite recent events, French Jews aren't cowering at home. What you don't see in the headlines, or from abroad, are the countless friendly interactions between Muslims and Jews in stores, sports fields and offices. But some observant Jews no longer wear skullcaps in public. And there's talk of "internal aliyah" — families moving from neighborhoods where they are routinely subject to anti-Semitic taunts and threats to other parts of France where they feel more welcome. The prime minister, Mr. Philippe, recently announced Dilcrah's new three-year plan, vowing "to put all our resources into it. Because if there's a subject that, in the name of our values and our history, we must all agree on in Europe, it's this one."

This isn't World War II all over again. The good guys are in charge. But they're not yet doing enough.

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