

In Praise of a Relational History of Muslims and Jews in France.

An Interview with Maud Mandel

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Maud S. Mandel is Dean of the College and Professor of History and Judaic Studies at Brown University. Her research focuses on modern Jewish history, and particularly on the impact of policies and practices of inclusion and exclusion on ethnic and religious minorities in twentieth-century France, most notably Jews, Armenians, and Muslim North Africans. Her first monograph, *In the Aftermath of Genocide: Armenians and Jews in Twentieth Century France*, was published by Duke University Press in 2003. Her new book, *Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict*, was published with Princeton University Press in January 2014 and has been awarded fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies and the American Philosophical Society.

A Relational Comparativism

Books and Ideas: Your first book entitled *In the Aftermath of Genocide: Armenians and Jews in Twentieth-Century France* was a comparison of the country's Armenian and Jewish survivor communities. Your new book *Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict* published this year by Princeton University Press is based upon comparativism but also and more importantly on relationality between Muslims and Jews.

Maud Mandel: In my first book, I was interested in diachronic comparisons, thinking about how two different minorities responded to having been violently targeted for their ethnic or racial status as they rebuilt their respective communities along ethnic lines. The question at the heart of that book was a comparative one: what impact did the processes of genocidal exclusion have on the rebuilding of communal life for groups that had been targeted for who they were?

The second book was relational. I was interested in showing how two groups had had an impact on each other. Very often, the history of minorities is told from the perspective of the individual group. What I was trying to do in this relational study was to underline that groups do not exist separately from each other; they had an impact on each other that actually shaped the history of each. In the case of Muslims and Jews this mutual co-constitution is quite clear. In many ways, the choices, political debates, and historical paths of one group had a direct impact on the choices, political debates, and historical paths of the other.

Books and Ideas: Was your book also an attempt to shed light on French contemporary history by revisiting its two most important moments namely the Vichy régime and Algerian War?

Maud Mandel: One of the key arguments that I am trying to make is that the relationship between Muslims and Jews is not just a displacement of the Middle East conflict into France. It is very much a part of French history and is affected by the relationship of the French state to its minority populations - broadly speaking, the assimilationist culture of French policies, on the one hand, and these important moments in French history, particularly World War II and decolonization and their impact on XXth century religious minorities in France, on the other hand. My story thus has three components: to understand Muslims and Jews in France, one must also understand French historical evolution over the twentieth century.

Books and Ideas: You pay specific attention all along your book to the way the terms “Jew” and “Muslim” became “calcifying political categories” according to your expression.

Maud Mandel: I started this project in 2000 when there were initial outbreaks of violence against individual Jews and sometimes Jewish institutions in France by Muslims, often very young French Muslim citizens from the *banlieues*. And there was a lot of media attention at the time focusing on the rise in anti-Semitism and on the displacement of the Middle-East conflict to France. At the time, I was struck by the language around these issues that seemed to suggest that two unified and highly organized minorities were in a state of constant conflict. In fact, these are heterogeneous populations with varying countries of origin, different historical trajectories in France, and diffuse political and social commitments.

My book, then, became focused on studying the history of how the categories of “Jew” and “Muslim” hardened over time. The diversity of each population gets lost when you describe them as homogeneous and calcified blocks. Thus, I used historical methodologies, which are always, in part, a means for uncovering the complexities of human development as a way to question and analyze how we got to such simplifications.

Books and Ideas: How do you relate with the current scientific debate around the comparability and comparison between Judeophobia and Islamophobia?

Maud Mandel: The debate is very heated as to whether these two phenomena can be compared. I am less interested in arguments about competitive suffering than about what happens when you only focus on one kind of exclusion over another. For example, talking about the rise in anti-Semitism in France that is real and palpable among certain populations misses the fact that islamophobia is also very strong among other populations. And both are very real aspects of how these two minorities have integrated into French society. When you make relational comparisons, you begin to see the differences in levels and types of exclusion over time, which tells you a great deal about French society as a whole.

Colonization, Decolonization & Migrations

Books and Ideas: At the core of your project lies the question of the legacies of the imperial project on contemporary France and on its ethno-religious minorities.

Maud Mandel: One of the fundamental arguments of this book is that it is not just colonization but also decolonization - namely the process of uncoupling from the colonial empire – that shaped the ways in which Muslims and Jews in France have thought about themselves and about each other. Recent historiographical studies have challenged assertions that Jews and Muslims have been in conflict since the birth of Islam by arguing that it was the colonization process that disrupted a relatively socially balanced (if juridically unequal) inter-religious milieu. I take this argument a step further by pointing to decolonization as another key turning point when the relationship shifts.

My early chapters focus on North African Jews, and particularly on Algerian Jews. The argument is essentially that in the early 1960s, when the French government decided to allow Jews to keep the citizenship granted to them by the 1870 Crémieux decree and to come to France as citizens while at the same moment stripping Algerian Muslims who actually had French citizenship of that status thereby turning them into immigrants, something fundamental happened: Jews were included or re-included in the group of Europeans while Muslims were transformed into immigrants after a century and a half of the government claiming that they were a part of French society. This citizenship for French Jews eased their inclusion into French society, while Muslim immigrants had much less social and governmental support.

As a result, Jews had greater access to jobs, to education, and to housing putting them on an entirely different trajectory than Muslims who arrived in the same period. Of course, Moroccan and Tunisian Jews who came to France in the 1950s and 1960s (and subsequently) did so as immigrants, because no Crémieux Decree had been instituted in these territories. Nevertheless, their process of integration into France was easier than for North African Muslims due to the Jews' higher levels of education and better French language skills, stemming from French colonial policies that had encouraged Jewish acculturation to French norms.

Books and Ideas: The first chapter of your book is devoted to Marseille in 1948 by exposing how this city had a specific position as France's largest port and its gateway to the Mediterranean. You explain how the 1948 war over the declaration of Israeli independence coincided with the growth of north-African anti-colonial movements.

Maud Mandel: Ironically, although I argue throughout the book that we should not focus so much on the Middle-East for understanding relationships between Jews and Muslims in France, I open the text with the impact of the 1948 war in Israel/Palestine in France. Here I make clear that in Paris, where most Jews and Muslims lived, there were very few conflicts for various reasons: Jews were busy rebuilding their lives after World War II, and Muslims who were mostly Algerian at the time were essentially swept into building their independence movements. At that time, while many Jews became sympathetic to the Zionist movement and while some highly-politicized Muslims supported the Palestinian claim to the land, neither was particularly interested in the other because of these wider projects in which they were

engaged: rebuilding from the Nazi and Vichy persecutions on the one hand, and fighting for Algerian independence on the other hand.

In Marseille, we do, however, find some notable moments of conflict. This is partly because the Marseille port housed both a large number of Algerian dockworkers and several thousand Jewish migrants on their way to Palestine to fight in the war. The few conflicts that broke out between these two populations were certainly about differences over the Middle East, but they were also about French policies towards its colonial subjects and citizens. Thus dockworkers that protested Jewish migration to Palestine often complained that the French government was favoring Jewish immigrants over French Muslim citizens.

The discussions around Israel/Palestine thus became a means for demonstrators to assert a place within the French polity. Conflict about Israel's founding was also very much about France and its relations to its subjects and citizens.

Books and Ideas: You show how the decolonization process contributed to the construction of the “North African Jew”, that framed the diverse Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian Jewish populations into a collective understood to be in conflict with “North Africans,” Muslims”, or “Arabs”. You deal extensively with the FLN's progressive shift towards Jews.

Maud Mandel: One of the things that strikes me about the period of decolonization is the emergence of this category the “North African Jew”. There was nobody in this era that self-described as a North-African Jew. It was not a category of identity. Nevertheless, during the period of decolonization various actors began using this category to talk about Jews in the region as an apparently unified group that stretched across political borders: firstly, French colonial administrators in North Africa; secondly, international Jewish organizations; and thirdly Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian nationalists... For French colonial officials who were worried about instability and unrest while trying to quell the rise in nationalist movements, Jewish/Muslim conflict was to be feared, and when an incident broke out in one place, French authorities immediately began worrying that the disruption would spread throughout the colonial empire. International Jewish organizations, in contrast, were focused—after the Holocaust—on any Jews they thought might be in peril. They saw North Africa as a source of potential danger for Jews and encouraged them to leave the region. And a third source for the more homogenized image of the “North African Jew” came from indigenous nationalist movements. Here, the crystallization of this category was never straightforward and, indeed, often contrary to the stated aims of the mainstream Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan nationalist parties whose leaders downplayed quarrels with local Jews in their efforts to build united national fronts. Thus, the FLN, Neo-Destour, and Istiqlal, the major Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan independence movements respectively, all declared Jews to be equal partners in the struggle against the French and integral members of their respective nations. All three movements, however, had spokesmen that blurred the lines between Jews and Zionists. Warning Jews that emigration, particularly to Israel, was a sign of disloyalty to their birth nations, nationalist rhetoric in all three countries helped establish new binaries around which those monitoring Jewish life took note. All these actors created this new group: the North African Jew.

Books and Ideas: You show how during the decolonization process, colonial legacies left their mark on Jewish and Muslim immigrants who came to France.

Maud Mandel: When one focuses on the relationship between Muslims and Jews in France, one typically thinks about 1948, 1967, 1973, etc and skips over the 1950s and the early 1960s. Yet these years were crucial in shaping later interethnic relationships. Thousands of Muslims and Jews came to France during the decolonization process. Unsurprisingly, they imported many similar cultural, linguistic, and even religious practices from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Moreover, Muslim and Jewish migrants shared a common sense of displacement and origins that facilitated bonds between them in their new home. Due to the housing shortage after World War II, they often lived in the same neighborhoods of Marseilles, Paris – such as Belleville and the Marais – and the outskirts of Paris, such as Aulnay, Bondy or Sarcelles. Such shared city spaces allow them to interact regularly. If common origins and similar settlement patterns helped them establish new forms of sociability and friendship in the 1950s and early 1960s, however, they could not fully mask divisions that influenced the integration of both into French society.

A focus on Marseille underscores the way in which shared cultural connections and a postwar housing crisis initially pushed Muslim and Jewish migrants together, while colonial legacies and differing juridical relationships to the French state pulled them apart. And, as result, a certain number of Jews started to move out of these neighborhoods over time and due to greater access to better jobs and education were able to integrate more easily into French society. In addition, the already long-established and highly organized French Jewish community worked hard to integrate their incoming co-religionists despite certain conflicts over institutional control and religious practices. North African Muslims had no similar aid network or infrastructure to help ease their transition.

An Increasing Polarization

Books and Ideas: *A key turning is according to your research May 1968 and its aftermath where Muslim and Jews started to consider themselves as competitors.*

Maud Mandel: Traditional chronologies have emphasized the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 as a touchstone moment in this increasing ethnic polarization, but in fact the impact of that war was relatively muted on Muslim-Jewish relations in France, if among highly politicized militants, there was an increased interest in what is happening in the Middle-East. It was only in 1968 that ethno-political allegiances began to harden, largely a response to the radicalization of students that year. This turning point brought the story of Jewish-Muslim polarization to the French public sphere for the first time, as student radicals begin to link the occupation of the Palestinian Territories with leftist politics in France.

But what is particularly interesting to me in that history is that very often the far-left radicals who were the most active in pro-Palestinian activities were Jewish themselves. While not affiliated with any communal or religious institutions, their leftist politics and anti-racist humanism typically emerged out of their anger and frustration over what they or their families had endured during the Shoah. These Jewish far-leftists, and particularly the Maoists, forged alliances with Muslim radical students, committed both to reforming the governments in their countries of origin and to fighting racism in France. And both started to see the Palestinian case as a kind of symbol for talking about racism in France. So, for example, French Maoists would go into the bidonvilles and ask Muslim immigrants to work with them to fight racism in France, to fight the racism in Israel, and to free the workers in France from the capitalist system. The issues were very deeply intertwined.

Yet while some Jewish students turned to pro-Palestinian leftist activism, others on campuses started to separate themselves from the French left because of its discourse on Israel. And these highly polarized anti and pro-Israel student groups came into direct and occasionally violent conflict with each other. These developments were picked up by the newspapers, which began to talk about the arrival of the Middle East conflict in France. And, very famously, there was a riot in Belleville in June 1968 between Jewish and Muslim neighbors that was widely reported in the media as an indication of the way Middle East struggles were coming to France. But if you really look closely at that riot, you discover that at the center of the riot was a card game between Jewish and Muslim residents of the neighborhood who then fought over the outcome. Thus ethnic tensions were certainly present but so too were convivial neighborly exchanges. Because of the way in which radical politics had been imported into the Belleville neighborhood at that moment, however, the riot became ethnicized and talked about as a split between the two communities. 1968 thus was a moment when ethnic politics began to harden, particularly in public perceptions, even at a moment when Jews and Muslims were sometimes working together in these movements and often living in harmonious proximity.

Books and Ideas: You conclude your book with the birth and death of the anti-racist coalition in the 1980s and the short-lived “pluricultural” experience of the Mitterrand government.

Maud Mandel: This is a moment that has been completely overlooked when we talk about Jewish and Muslim relations in France. During that decade, a surge of anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic violence gave rise to large and widely celebrated anti-racist campaigns that brought Muslim and Jewish youth together in a common struggle, most notably in the Socialist led organization, SOS Racisme. Born in the period following François Mitterrand’s 1981 election to the presidency on a pro-immigrant rights and decentralization platform, the anti-racist coalition took advantage of the political establishment’s unprecedented willingness to recognize the nation’s cultural and linguistic diversity. Within a few years, however, growing electoral support for Jean-Marie Le Pen’s anti-immigrant and nationalist political agenda and a mounting fear of international terrorism meant that officials from across the political spectrum began adopting a more conservative discourse toward religious and cultural difference. “Integration” rather than the “right to be different” once again became the watchwords of the day.

By the mid-1980s, then, with the first electoral successes of Jean-Marie Le Pen, both the center-right and the socialist party started to move back to a politics of assimilation and a rejection of differences in the public sphere. As a result, Jewish and Muslim cooperation began to fall apart as each group began moving back to communitarian politics and self-defense efforts targeted at racism against their own group. It was in this context that the first headscarf controversy broke out, in response to which the whole political establishment embraced the politics of assimilation. In response, notable Jewish spokesmen began arguing that Jews and Muslims had fundamentally different historical trajectories in France, thereby challenging SOS Racism’s claim that these populations shared a common struggle. Some even went so far as to stress Jewish “Frenchness” and Muslim “foreignness,” a problematic claim given that the “Beurs” were French citizens too, and just as French as children of Jewish immigrants. The distancing between Jewish and Muslim groups in the late 1980s was never fully repaired.

France and Europe at Drift

Books and Ideas: Your book ends where it began in autumn 2000 with a “dramatic spike in anti-Jewish violence” and an “increasing Jewish intolerance towards “Arabs””, suggesting that “relations between France’s two largest ethno-religious minorities have been forever damaged”. Realized before the “Protective Edge” Operation, a report published in April 2014 by the Commission nationale consultative des droits de l’homme (CNCDH) underlined the fact that France is facing a growing intolerance against minorities. Most especially, it shows a continuous rise in islamophobia and, for the first time, a rise in anti-Semitism.

Maud Mandel: I am an historian and the research for this book ended in the early 1990s. But of course I follow contemporary events very closely and I hope my conclusions force us to ask certain questions about events transpiring today. First, when the American, French, and Jewish media report that anti-Semitism is rising in France - which is undeniable - what is often missing is that the rise in anti-Semitism is accompanied by a rise in Islamophobia. They are both growing in intensity and have an impact on each other. They are deeply intertwined. Secondly, I think that the French state’s commitment to a politics of assimilation continues to create the opposite of its intentions, helping to create the kind of political communitarianism it seeks to undermine, a process that has an effect on the political realignment to the far-right. People are drawn into these movements either because they feel affinity with these movements or because they are worried by the political instability. And the far-right benefits from these developments. Thirdly, when we speak about rising anti-Semitism, we must remember that even in the worst moments of aggression, that only very small numbers of people are participating. While most Jews may sympathize with Israel and most Muslims may sympathize with the Palestinians, that does not mean by definition they are islamophobic or anti-Semitic. The real violence and instability is actually coming from a very small number of people. There is a tremendous diversity of responses and attitudes among Jews and Muslims by gender, class etc... complexity is lost when one talks about this issues.

Books and Ideas: International surveys carried out by the Pew Research Center and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), among others, show that a rise in islamophobia and judeophobia has occurred not only in France, but more broadly across all Europe with an alarming development of electoral successes of far-right or ultra-right political groups.

Maud Mandel: There is no question that there is a correlation between the rise in anti-Semitism and in islamophobia. To focus on just one misses their interconnection. And clearly there has been a significant rise in both over the last few years in Europe. When we consider the data from surveys on these issues, however, it is important to look not only at rising racist attitudes, or even violence but also at structural inequalities. Can people live where they want to live? Is discrimination affecting the jobs they get? Their educational opportunities? Their representation in the government? In many European societies Muslims cannot achieve those things. That is not the case right now for Jews, although historically they faced those types of challenges. Right now, however, it is easier for Jews than for Muslims to prosper. If Jews once again begin facing the kinds of structural inequality that Muslims face today, it will be even more terrifying due to the violent antisemitism of Europe’s past.

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