

Maud S. Mandel, *Muslims and Jews in France. History of a conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 272

by Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun

This is a book whose publication was preceded by unanimous praise, both in the United States and in France. Although in France the book has not yet been translated, the author has been invited by prestigious institutions (for example the CNRS and the Collège de France), where each time there was a large and attentive audience, already swayed by the author's work. The book is about a very topical issue: in the past decade, relations between Jews and Muslims in France and not only, have become increasingly tense. This was further showed by recent acts of terrorism by Islamic extremists, also committed specifically against Jews. Both observers of current events and researchers point to the development of a new and mainly Muslim anti-Semitism in France and the rest of Europe.

Can Mandel, in a book of only 156 pages, sufficiently explain the situation through a historical analysis of the relations between these two groups in France? As the author rightly argues, the essence of the conflict between Jews and Muslims cannot be attributed solely to the effects of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the *Héxagone*, as French journalists hastily do. The thesis that the author develops is based on the idea that as early as the colonial period in Algeria, but even more so since decolonisation, France has highlighted and exacerbated the *inequalities* between Muslims and Jews. In Algeria, the Crémieux decree allowed the mass naturalisation of Jews, who as early as 1870 became French citizens with all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; from 1962 onwards the granting of citizenship took place on French soil. Oddly, the author notes that “the French government [decided] to allow Jews to keep the French citizenship” but did not grant it to Muslims. According to Mandel, the series of inequalities that followed the settlement of the Jews of Algeria in France and after that the arrival of Muslim immigrants, were manifested in education, employment, in diversified highly-skilled jobs. In short, what took place was the successful integration, if not assimilation, of the Jews and the transformation of Muslims into “immigrants” who benefited from a “much weaker social and government support.” Here, Mandel seems to forget that the Jews who arrived in France during this period were first and foremost French citizens – since at least four

generations. So, as French citizens and *not as Jews*, they benefited from the rights of citizenship, including access to schools, social care and jobs.

Has the author examined the legal procedures through which the then government could “decide [or not] to allow Jews to keep French nationality?” In addition to historical errors behind these assertions (for example, the debates within the Gaullist governments concerning the future of the Jews of Algeria never emerged in the public sphere and could not have done so without appearing as a repetition of the repeal of the Pétain decree), is it possible that Mandel deplores the fact that De Gaulle in 1960-1962 did not have another go on what Pétain had done in 1940, when he abolished the Crémieux decree and granted the Jews of Algeria once again the status of indigenous people, so that there would be “fewer inequalities” and injustices between Jews and Muslims?<sup>1</sup> Does the author really think, as she said during an interview with Jean-Philippe Dedieu,<sup>2</sup> that the benefit of citizenship to individuals who were French citizens for nearly 100 years, and which was subsequently not extended to the Muslims, is the source of the current problems? Does Mandel think that the contract of citizenship between an individual and a nation is something that can be taken and thrown away at some point or another? In 1962, the Jews of Algeria who arrived in France were not an organised group but individual French nationals, who, like the other French citizens of the colony, came to the “motherland.”

We were surprised to see that under the pen of a distinguished American historian (the author is Professor of History and Jewish Studies, and Head of the Department of Jewish Studies at Brown University), the conflict between these two populations seems to have begun during the period of colonisation and been initiated in some way by the colonial power that divided them (through the Crémieux decree) in order to better exercise its authority. Even though this motivation cannot not be completely ruled out, to reduce the conflict between Jews and Muslims to the ulterior motives of the colonial power reveals a total lack of understanding of the broad historical context. Without sinking to the

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<sup>1</sup> This is a persistent argument that has been used by all anti-Jewish groups in Algeria since 1871. See the articles published in *Les Juifs d'Algérie. Une histoire de ruptures*, eds. Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun and Genèvieve Dermenjian, (Paris: PUP, 2015). This view was supported by General Giraud, who did not repeal the withdrawal of the decree under the pretext that we should not perpetuate inequalities between Jews and Muslims, and that we should “let the Jew in his shop and the Muslim in his field.”

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Philippe Dedieu, “Juifs et musulmans de France, histoire d’une relation. Entretien avec Maud Mandel,” *La Vie des idées*, September 18, 2014, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Juifs-et-musulmans-de-France.html>.

level of the current historical discourses that focus only on the violent episodes that have marked the life of Jews in Muslim countries, let us not forget that both the observers and travellers who, between the 16th and the 18th centuries, were not accepting of the Jews in the country and those that were quietly anti-Jewish, were outraged by the deplorable condition of the Jews in this Ottoman province (at the time not yet known as Algeria) who were subject to the *dhimma*, as were all Jews in Muslim lands. For example, the American consul William Shaler in 1816 wrote: “The Jews of Algiers are perhaps the remnants of Israel’s most destitute.” Let us not forget, to mention only the 19th century, the *pogrom* in Algiers in 1805, which claimed the lives of many Jews, the decapitation of the Chief Rabbi of Algiers Isaac Aboulker during a riot in 1815, and finally the case of the Jews of Mascara – including men, women, the elderly, and children – who were massacred indiscriminately by Arabs in 1835 while they were fleeing the city as they were about to be taken by the French.<sup>3</sup>

As Philippe Portier writes in his foreword to a recent book: “In 1956, the National Liberation Front (FLN), in the Declaration of the Soummam, brings to mind the atmosphere of a ‘millennium entente’ between these two religious components of Algerian society [Jews and Muslims]. But is this the reality? We note that Jews and Muslims are, on more than one level, part of the same civilizational fabric: they speak (almost) the same language, they share similar culinary traditions, they move together to the rhythm of Arab-Andalusian music, and under the cover of a denominational differentiation of activities, they exchange goods and services in the economic sphere. It would be wrong, however, to dwell on these similarities. There are abundant testimonies clearly showing that Jews have been collectively viewed with general contempt which can sometimes feed acts of extreme violence.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, when the author raves about the cordial relations between the Jewish traders of Marseille and their Muslim clients in the period 1960-1980<sup>5</sup>, we can only be surprised that from this she draws the conclusion that all is well in all eternity between the two groups, that their proximity from being neighbours and that their good relations on a daily basis are proof that French policy has spoiled the relations between the two.

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<sup>3</sup> Valérie Assan “L’exode des Juifs de Mascara, un épisode de la guerre entre Abd el-Kader et la France,” *Archives Juives*, 2/38 (2005): 7-27.

<sup>4</sup> Philippe Portier, “Avant-propos,” in *Les Juifs d’Algérie*, eds. Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun and Genèvieve Dermenjian, 6.

<sup>5</sup> See, Mandel, *Muslims and Jews*, 155 – according to which ninety percent of Jewish trading merchants were located in areas with a Muslim majority: a sign of cultural proximity that, however, says nothing about the previous history of Jews in Muslim lands.

But what actually happened? The status of *dhimma*, backed by Koranic rules but also by customary practices, can explain the situation of exclusion that the Jewish minority – less than 15,000 people in 1830 – experienced before the French arrived in Algeria. “Ottoman Algeria worked well for the Jews with a dual modality of subjugation which made them subject to both rabbinical law in their internal affairs and Islamic law in their external relations. This was the general pattern that the French presence came to break. The French administration had barely settled when the government repudiated Muslim legislation. None of the great and small humiliations of the past were to be continued: the Muslims and the Jews were each ‘indigenous’ but they were granted a new form of equal status before the occupying power.”<sup>6</sup> Between July 1830, when the French landed near Algiers, and July 1962, when more than 90% of the French Jews of Algeria permanently left Algeria for France, the Jews of Algeria progressively let go of their *Arab-Berber identity*, a humiliated identity made even more inferior, in order to adopt a *French identity* (which for them symbolised the free and liberated man) that coexisted, until their departure for France, with their *religious identity* which became increasingly confined to the private sphere. The memory of the Jews of Algeria, or that of their descendants that is expressed today in France, brings back to life these plural identities: as *French citizens*, they cultivate their *Jewishness*, which is *Sephardic* and steeped in the *Arab-Berber* culture; they also share with other repatriates of Algeria their feelings for the Algeria of the past which is today largely idealised.

The increasingly desired and claimed transformation of indigenous Jews into French citizens was the culmination of a process originated in the beginning of the French colonial rule. It was the result of the intersection of multiple political, legal, ideological and cultural issues raised by both the successive French governments and the Jewish elites of France and Algeria. This is something that the author seems to forget or strongly minimise. The internalisation of French identity among the Jews of Algeria took place thanks to two institutions that they were all subject to and that became the foundations of the Republic: the school, which assimilated young people in a cultural sense, and the army, which fulfilled the school’s mission for the men. But these institutions did not fully achieve their objectives because they were effectively replaced by three entities: Jewish notables and rabbis (a few exceptional individuals from the local rabbinate and others who had come to France as early as the first decade of the

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<sup>6</sup> Portier, “Avant-propos,” 8.

Conquest); the Consistories that were created based on the French model after the rulings of November 1845 and put in place as early as 1847; and, finally, the women, mothers and sisters from popular milieus, who were most often in daily contact with the French settlers' families and who adopted in their family environment the language, the cuisine and the ways of dressing of the colonial power.

The Jews of Algeria, most of whom were spectators of their own future, had been repeatedly studied by successive French governments (first the monarchy, then the Empire and the Republic) and identified and officially registered until 1870, essentially as regards birth and death certificates. They also became gradually more secular and they have been in (more or less difficult) close contact (depending on the period) with French society – of which they will quickly become key partakers, mindful of their own cultural integration.

It is to be noted that in 1870 the Jews amounted to a small population of less than 40,000 people who thanks to its elites were attached very early on to the French values of Emancipation, the Revolution and the Rights of Man. We must also remember that the project of Jewish mass naturalisation was in the pipeline as early as 1836 thanks not only to the support of the Jews of Algeria and of the Jewish community in France, but also to the then Leftist parties. Emile Ollivier, head of the last government during the Empire, was preparing to have this draft law voted in Parliament just before the defeat of the Empire in Sedan. The Government of National Defence, whose Minister of Justice was Adolphe Crémieux, picked up and acted on the draft law that had been under discussion for 40 years. As for the Muslims, they were two million and almost unanimously *hostile* to the French conquerors whom they viewed as Christians and occupiers, thus rejecting any idea of Francisation. Whereas Jews were predominantly urban dwellers, Muslims were for more than 80% rural dwellers. The granting of citizenship to Jews, more than as an anti-Muslim measure (in fact, Muslims did not want it at that time) should be viewed as something that meant to counteract the influence of foreigners (Italians, Spaniards, and Maltese) – who lived in the cities in equally great numbers as French nationals – and thus broaden the French electoral body during elections, but also to increase the number of military personnel in place, since France had been defeated in Sedan and was too drained to be able to afford to repatriate them.

Mandel seems surprised by the emergence of the category of “North African Jews,” which comprised the Jews of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, during the period of decolonisation: she wonders why no one “during this period [i.e. the

colonial period] identified as a Jew from North Africa.” However, one could argue that people begin to examine their identity when they feel it is under threat. So, the Jews of North Africa discovered themselves as such, but also as *pieds-noirs* and as *Sephardim*, only when they settled in France. Not before. Finally, we must note that in France, French citizens with a Jewish identity are not all of Sephardic origin. For this reason, the author’s pattern of analysis cannot be easily applied to French citizens with a Jewish identity from Alsace-Lorraine, Poland, Russia or Romania.

It is regrettable that the book does not include a final bibliography on a subject matter that covers 200 years of history of states, ideologies, religions and individuals. Secondly, the fact that notes – 81 pages, that is almost a third of the volume – are located at the very end of the book, makes the reading rather difficult.

Overall, the book is full of historical approximations and simple, not to say simplistic, ideas: that the situation between Jews and Muslims in France today is so bad because of the period of colonisation, followed by decolonisation; that France has been consistently unfair to Muslims and has favoured Jews.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the book, readers will continue to wonder how Mandel cannot be aware of the strong bursts of Muslim anti-Judaism that characterised the Maghreb already before the period of colonisation and the outbreaks of the same anti-Judaism during the colonial period.<sup>8</sup> Does the author view the violent anti-Semitic acts committed all over Europe by Muslims – not only from the Maghreb but also from Pakistan, Turkey and elsewhere – as merely a result of the Crémieux decree?<sup>9</sup> Are the “Jews of Algeria” a compact and homogeneous block that can be tossed around one way or another, and that after granting them French citizenship and stripping them of it at some point or another and then giving it back to them, the people who make up this block would not react, letting themselves be carried away by the events in complete passiveness?

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<sup>7</sup> This idea, dominant and commonplace among young North American historians, also is at the core of another much-praised American new book, Ethan Katz, *The Burdens of Brotherhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Consider the Constantine pogrom of 5 August 1934. See, Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun, “Antijudaïsme dans l’Algérie coloniale: le pogrom du 5 août 1934 à Constantine comme révélateur de ‘deux hostilités,’” in *L’Antisémitisme en France XIX<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, eds. Dominique Schnapper, Perrine Simon-Nahum and Paul Salmona, forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> *Perceptions of the Holocaust in Europe and in Muslim Communities. Sources, Comparisons and Educational Challenges* eds. Günther Jikeli and Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun, (Dordrecht/Heidelberg/New York/London: Springer Science, 2013).

In short, the book is more ideological than scientific, pointing *in petto* and *in fine* the responsibility of the current violence to France and to the Jews, who since 1830 have not rebuffed what they believed was a blessing for them, for their future and that of their offsprings.

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