

The French Intifada: The Long War between France and Its Arabs

by Andrew Hussey

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The murderous May 2014 attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels perpetrated by Mehdi Nemmouche drew renewed attention to the painful, festering issue of the integration of Muslims in France. According to information conveyed in the media, Nemmouche, a French Muslim of Algerian origin, underwent a process of radicalization while in prison for larceny. After his release, he joined the ranks of an al-Qa'ida-affiliated organization in the struggle against the Assad regime in Syria. He then returned to Europe and carried out his attack, killing four people. Nemmouche was captured in Marseille a week after the crime, during a random French customs search for drugs on passengers arriving from Amsterdam.

The tragic event in Brussels is an extremely sensitive issue for the French authorities, as it highlights the failure of tens of thousands of young Muslims from the suburbs to integrate into the surrounding society. Unemployment, poor housing conditions, inferior education, and discrimination have wrought bitterness, alienation, and frustration, which have triggered acts of violence such as the riots in the Parisian suburbs in 2005 and in the *Gare du Nord* in 2007. Youngsters have also been increasingly involved in crimes as well as in acts of violence against French Jews. This situation has been exploited by extremist imams who incite hatred and call for jihad, resulting in a worrisome process of radicalization among French Muslims. This process is especially troubling for the French authorities, as hundreds of young Muslims in France and elsewhere have joined the ranks of Islamist rebels in Syria, raising real security concerns. While in Syria they receive military training and experience, and once they return home to France these young Muslims constitute a serious threat. Additionally, the religious radicalization among French Muslims triggers a reverse reaction: the rise of extreme right-wing parties, the discourse of which is often characterized by hatred of immigrants, Islamophobia, and antisemitism. These phenomena are perceived in France as a threat to the concept of *laïcité* [Laicism]—the separation of Church and state—upon which the French Republic is based.

Andrew Hussey's *The French Intifada* analyzes the complex and troublesome relationship between the French Republic and its Arab and Muslim citizens—mostly second- and third-generation progeny of North African immigrants—from the vantage point of France's colonial history. In this respect, the book contributes to the discourse by highlighting the importance of France's colonial

past in understanding the motives behind the violence in the suburbs and the radicalization process of Muslim citizens. The author pays special attention to Algeria. Colonial legislation had made that country an integral part of France, without granting French citizenship to its primarily Muslim population. Hussey portrays in great detail the significant chapters of French colonial history in Algeria: its conquest in 1830; its colonization by French citizens; the oppression of the Muslim population; the bloody events of the Algerian War of Independence; the cruel Algerian Civil War; and the spillover of the war of independence and the civil war into French soil.

Hussey's book provides readers with important historical and cultural context, contributing to a better understanding of current events in North Africa and France. However, because of the sensitivity of the issues involved, one must approach the subject with due prudence and avoid sweeping generalizations or any hint of imprecision. It seems that on this count, the author has failed.

The author repeatedly makes simplistic and inaccurate equations, conflating issues such as Algeria's War of Independence, its civil war, and the riots in the French suburbs (*banlieues*) with the Holocaust, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and the apartheid regime in South Africa. The following citation from the book's introduction exemplifies the author's penchant for generalizations and unfounded amalgams:

Despite its enormous expense and the hundreds of French troops who manned its checkpoints, the Morice Line [a fence from the Tunisian border with Algeria to the Moroccan border—TH] simply did not work... The barrier only succeeding in making Algerians feel as if they were living in a massive concentration camp... The same emotions are alive today in Ramallah and Gaza, and it is these feelings of imprisonment and exclusion that flare up in the French "*banlieues*" (p. 14).

The author further develops this line of thinking when he compares the incomparable: the French repression of the Algerians to the Holocaust. For instance, the author compares the appalling killing of dozens of French Algerians in Paris on the orders of Maurice Papon in October 1961 to the *rafle* [mass roundup] of Vel d'Hiv in July 1942, which constituted a watershed moment in the Final Solution as carried out against the Jews of France. The common denominator of Papon's implication in the repression of the Algerians as well as in the Holocaust of French Jewry does not justify this absurd comparison. In a way, the author adopts the discourse of those who want to promote extremist agendas by making unjustified and unfounded comparisons with the Shoah.

Another problematic aspect of the book relates to the author's lenient attitude toward violent acts committed by Algerians. Indeed, Hussey portrays in detail the cruel actions of the Algerian underground movements before independence, and the repression and corruption of its ruling class afterward. Nevertheless, the author provides simplistic psychological explanations for the motivations behind the violent acts, which might appear to justify intolerable and inexcusable actions. Thus, Hussey attributes responsibility for the atrocities committed many years after independence in 1962 by the Algerian government as well as by the Islamist opposition to traumas caused by French colonialism. He avoids criticizing Algeria's National Liberation Front (FLN) leaders when he remarks: "Having prepared for a conflict for so long, they had really no idea how to manage peace or more crucially how to make a nation out of the wreckage of war" (p. 26).

Hussey also presents the motivations of the rioters from the suburbs in a manner that suggests a measure of justification or excuse for unacceptable behavior. He cites "their feelings of imprisonment and despair" as the reason for their violence: "The kids of Bagneux accordingly gloried in their own *intifada*—they openly identified with the Palestinians, whom they saw as prisoners in their own land, like the dispossessed of the *banlieues*" (pp. 26–27). In fact, the author, who paints the rioters in the glorious colors of national and social purpose, does not mention that they damaged institutions such as schools and dispensaries that served the deprived people of their own neighborhoods.

Hussey goes on to depict the feelings of imprisonment: "In the *banlieues* we are separated from France by a wall, an enormous wall" (p. 240). He ignores the fact that it might be a wall that they themselves have inadvertently created by rejecting Western values, ideas, and culture. The author does not mention the fact that millions of other immigrants were integrated into French socioeconomic and political life, despite the difficulties they encountered upon their arrival. These immigrants include thousands of North African Jews, who were forced to flee the countries in which they had lived for centuries and begin their lives anew as immigrants in France. They did not shy away from the hard work of integration and adored the country that gave them asylum. Their successful acculturation triggered feelings of envy and hatred in the young rioters from the suburbs.

The author refrains from criticizing the rioters' violent hatred of the Jews: "They feel that the Jews rule the world and from one point of view it can look that way. They see Iraq and Gaza and Rwanda and Kenya and the Jews of Paris or New York who have profited from their pain. To them it all makes sense" (p. 34). This statement might be understood as acceptance of their appalling allegations. One would expect that such ideas would elicit a certain degree of critical perspective from the author, especially as they reflect an extreme agenda of violence.

Another of the author's remarks regarding Jews heightens the impression that there his position reflects both a certain amount of ignorance and bias: "Although I know plenty of Jews in Paris, I don't know a single Jew who lives in the *banlieues*..... (p. 22). Of course, there are Jews and other non-Muslims who live in the *banlieues*, even if Hussey has not met any of them.

Moreover, the author does not accurately define the term *banlieue*, which does not refer solely to the destitute suburbs of Paris but also to more affluent ones. The scope of the book, as reflected in its subtitle, "The Long War between France and Its Arabs," is not sufficiently defined. This may confuse the reader, as obviously not all Arabs are Muslims and not all Muslims are Arabs. Another shortcoming is that apart from the point of view of the rioters in the suburbs, the author does not present other factors that contribute to our comprehension of the complex relationship between France and its Muslim or Arab communities. He ignores significant topics such as the Muslim community's civil organizations in France; the debate over the Islamic veil ban; interreligious dialogue between Muslims, Jews, and Christians in France; and France's educational, economic and legislative measures intended to better integrate the Muslim population.

Finally, the author adopts fatalist attitudes when referring to eventual solutions to the problems of the violence in the suburbs and the radicalization process of French Muslims. This is reflected in the concluding paragraph of the book: "In the early twenty-first century, the ghosts of colonial and anti-colonial assassins continue to be visible in the daylight of the *banlieues*. It may be that what France needs is not hard-headed political solutions or even psychiatry, but an exorcist" (p. 405). With these words, Hussey creates the impression that he is ignorant or dismissive of all the efforts of the French authorities to cope with these issues and bring about solutions. In so doing, he seems to suggest that he identifies with the rioters' attitudes. Does he affirm the idea that there is no solution to their plight and therefore the only choice is to turn to violence?

In conclusion, the importance of Hussey's book lies in the fact that it highlights the acute problems that daunt current-day France, and which will probably continue to present a significant challenge to French society for many years to come. However, it should be emphasized that such sensitive issues merit a more nuanced and profound analysis than the one presented in this book. At the end of the day, the rioters from the suburbs, the French authorities, and organizations representing civil society must acknowledge that cooperation is indispensable. Despite Hussey's final and rather fatalistic message, there is no alternative but to devise constructive policies.