GEORGES BENSOUSSAN, RADICAL JEW

Posted on January 8, 2022
Cancelled for denouncing Arab anti-Semitism, Bensoussan’s publicized trial has crystallized a larger malady that ails France’s intellectual life.

Category: Essay
Tags: antisemitism, France, Georges Bensoussan, Holocaust, Orthodox

For a nation that collaborated in the Holocaust without being its ultimate perpetrator, France does a lot on remembrance policy—and rightly so. Schoolchildren are first taught the gruesome facts about the extermination of Europe’s Jews as early as age 11, and twice more in increasingly greater detail at ages 15 and 18—oftentimes by survivors themselves in the occasional all-school lecture, or in school trips to the camps in Poland. To every France-based living orphan of Jewish wartime deportees from France, the country has been paying a generous pension since 1946, to the annual tune of €36.5 million in 2020. To say nothing of the additional €60 million paid in reparations to US-based deportee relatives who couldn’t benefit from the same policy until the two countries reached a bilateral agreement in 2015. Another €16 million is expended annually in reparations for the goods confiscated from Jews by the Vichy regime. Paris’ Shoah Memorial—an austere-looking complex on the right bank’s Marais district that officiates as the country’s official Holocaust Museum—runs on an annual budget of another €16 million.

One effect of such a robust remembrance policy, admittedly, should be that of reducing antisemitism in the present, but on this score France keeps failing—and miserably. Jews make up less than 1% of the country’s population yet account as victims for over a third of all hateful violence, per Interior Ministry figures. After a period of relative quiet in the 1990s, the Second Intifada of 2000 brought the country’s annual number of antisemitic acts to an average of around 500 over the following decade. It has risen further since, to almost 700 annually in 2019. Some particularly ghastly killings are worth recalling.

In 2006, a gang of 20 youths, some minors, kidnapped Ilan Halimi, a Jewish 24-year-old
whom they fantasized could be ransomed for a fortune, then tortured and killed him. In 2012, Franco-Algerian terrorist Mohammed Merah carried out a killing spree outside a Jewish school in Toulouse, slaying three infants. In 2015, Amedy Coulibaly, another terrorist, took hostage 17 shoppers at a kosher supermarket in eastern Paris, killing four of them before police shot him dead.

More recently, the threat to French Jews has found a way into the privacy of their very homes. In 2017, a Malian immigrant broke into the apartment of Sarah Halimi, an Orthodox Jewish grandmother, and knifed her to death, only to be found criminally irresponsible by a jury four years later for being under the mind-numbing effect of cannabis. In the same Parisian neighborhood, another elderly lady and Holocaust survivor, Mireille Knoll, was similarly murdered in 2018. The state of sheer insecurity experienced by the targets of this constant onslaught has all but decimated France’s Jewish community, leading an estimated 60,000 of them to leave the country over the past decade—over 10% of their total number in the early 2000s. French Jews are one of Israel’s fastest-growing immigrant communities, although many also leave for other cities in Europe, particularly the less well-off families fleeing the banlieues—the low-income, poorly-housed, immigrant-dense suburbs of Paris and other major French towns.

These figures are almost certainly an understatement, mind you. France’s Interior Ministry is forbidden by law from bucketing the data it collects by the victim’s faith or ethnic background, so the documenting of anti-Semitic acts has been outsourced to Jewish community safety organizations such as the Bureau National de Vigilance Contre l’Anti-Sémitisme (BNVCA), formed in the last decade to meet the community’s sense of insecurity. And yet these same bodies have alerted the Interior Ministry, to whom they feed the data, that Jews systematically under-report the violence or insults hurled at them due to doubts that reporting such acts will make any difference to their continuance. Incidentally, the data also anonymizes by law the perpetrator’s faith or ethnic origin. Even a faint understanding of present-day antisemitism, however, suffices to know who the perpetrators mostly are—young and middle-aged Arab men. Such men have been radicalized into baiting Jews on account of their Islamic fundamentalism or flare-ups in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
In fact, France’s Jewish and Arab communities are both Europe’s largest, making the country a microcosm of relations between the two peoples. This unique demographical situation is due to a combination of immigration from Muslim-majority former colonies and the special place that French Jews held in those colonies. In its famous Crémieux decree of 1870, the Third Republic had made French citizens out of the 35,000 Jews living in Algeria at the time, whose progeny—including the parents of right-wing commentator Éric Zemmour—would largely desert for France upon the country’s independence in 1962. To this day, the community’s fastest-growing subgroup—the slowest to decrease, rather—are Sephardic Jews from Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, or Jewish “pieds-noirs” in common parlance.

France’s leading scholar on the condition of Jews in Arab lands is historian Georges Bensoussan, a Moroccan Jew himself who in 2012 published the authoritative monograph *Jews in Arab Lands: The Great Deracination 1850-1975* (2012). Already then, Bensoussan’s work stood athwart political correctness. For France’s cultural and academic establishment, ever so mindful to eschew charges of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism can only be European in nature, a noxious invention of heterosexual, patriarchal, colonizing white males. To the extent it has affected Arab societies too, the taboo holds, it must have been by contagion from Europe. A formerly colonized society, in this binary worldview, is by definition ‘unstained’ by bigotry.

Bensoussan’s scholarship is unwavering in dispelling the myth of Judeo-Arabic coexistence. Long before the creation of the state of Israel further soured Arab-Jewish relations, the historian documents Jews’ inferior status as a despised minority in Muslim-majority societies, a condition with echoes to the medieval rank of *dhimmi* that has its roots in the Quran itself. Bensoussan brings a slate of concrete examples to bear in his case. In 1840, the Jews of Damascus were wrongfully accused of ritually murdering a French priest, triggering a show-trial and a series of forced conversions before their innocence was obtained through the sheer effort of Western Jewish organizations—including the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, formed on that occasion, to whose history Bensoussan has also dedicated a book. In 1934, tensions between the Arab and Jewish communities of Constantine, Algeria, were brought to boiling point with a mass slaughter that resulted in 26 Jews dead. In 1929, a similar pogrom had killed 135 Jews in
Jerusalem. As Europe careened towards the Holocaust, much of the continent’s Nazi anti-Semitism rubbed off on Arab leaders such as the city’s Grand Mufti, who pressed Hitler to extend the final solution to Africa and the Mid-East.

Bensoussan kept running afoul of political correctness the following decade. In 2015, he revealed himself to have been the editor of a collection of essays compiled and published in 2002 under the pen name Emmanuel Brennes, *Les Territoires Perdus de la République* (the Republic’s lost territories). Undaunted by the risk of being labeled Islamophobes, a cadre of his high school teacher colleagues reported in the book the rise of antisemitism, misogyny, and homophobia in the *banlieues* where they taught. Later appointed editorial director at the Shoah Memorial and editor of its prestigious academic quarterly, Bensoussan’s contribution to the tome highlighted the difficulty of teaching the Holocaust to young Frenchmen of Arab and Maghrebi descent, whose instinctive anti-Semitism informed a disbelief bordering on denialism. Resigned to being a contentious public figure, Bensoussan has increased his media presence in both general interest and Jewish outlets in the following years, editing in 2017 a similar compendium of essays, *Une France Soumise* (*Submissive France*) that diagnosed the ills of France at large.

Though already an intellectual maverick of sorts, Bensoussan didn’t cross the red line of political correctness until October 10, 2015. In an episode of the highbrow radio show *Répliques*, hosted by fellow Jewish intellectual Alain Finkielkraut, Bensoussan was debating left-leaning historian Patrick Weil, also Jewish, on “the crisis of republican values.” When it came to diagnosing why Arab youth from the *banlieues* had such difficulty integrating into French society, Bensoussan off-handedly let a comment slip that would ensnare him in a years-long trial and forever haunt his reputation. “In Arab families,” he proximately said, quoting from a freshly released documentary by French-Agerian director Smain Laarcher, “antisemitism is suckled at the mother’s teat.” Far from implying a transmission of anti-Semitism among Arab families by blood, Bensoussan was indicting Arab culture for passing down anti-Jewish prejudice from one generation to the next through acculturation, not genetics.

Suffice it to say, his enemies had interpreted otherwise. Bensoussan became the instant
target of a plethora of left-leaning NGOs, led by the infamously borderline-islamist \textit{Collectif Contre l’Islamophobie en France} (CCIF), which disbanded after the beheading of high-school teacher Samuel Paty in October last year. The CCIF and its allies—an alphabet soup of groups including the MRAP, LICRA and SOS Racisme—first lobbied for Bensoussan’s cancellation to the \textit{Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel} (CSA), France’s TV and radio regulating authority, to no avail. A few months later, they filed a lawsuit against him for “stoking racial hatred” against Muslims, launching a trial that would last four years before Bensoussan was finally expunged of all charges. Additionally, the plaintiff organizations pressured Bensoussan’s employer, the Shoah Memorial, into firing him, also unsuccessfully. Bensoussan, it turns out, was merely quoting Smain Larcher, and the metaphor he used—“suckled at the mother’s teat”—was meant in reference to the cultural transmission of antisemitism in Arab families, and in no way implied a genetic, immutable trait.

Bensoussan’s judicial travails—about which he published a memoir late this year titled \textit{Un exil français: Un historien face à la Justice} (A French Exile: A Historian Faces Justice)—may seem anecdotal, at best a blip in the radar. They’re not. By explicitly denouncing Arab anti-Semitism—both its deadliest and most common form in a country that has seen over twenty Jews die to radicalized Islamists in the past decade and countless more suffer harassment and violence on a daily basis—Bensoussan called out the elephant in the room. All are able to see the troubling reality that he has highlighted, but few speak up for fear of being labelled an Islamophobe. Bensoussan did it, endured four years of an insufferable trial, and emerged on the other side acquitted. Still, the whole sequence proved revealing of the woke approach to anti-Semitism: it is only real if Europeans can be blamed for it.