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Hotbed of Hatred

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It's getting more and more difficult to be a Jew in France. Painful memories still reverberate as the country recently commemorated the seventh year since the brutal killing of Ilan Halimi, a 23-year-old young man who was tortured for three weeks before being killed by a group called "the Gang of Barbarians." As with the brutal slaying of Daniel Pearl, Halimi was killed because he was Jewish.

Despite Halimi's tragic death and worldwide condemnation, France remains a hotbed of anti-Semitic hatred.

2012 had been a difficult year for the Jewish community of France. A people who experienced profound losses under the Nazis and the Vichy regime 70 years ago are now witness to a resurgence in hateful anti-Semitic activity. A disturbing report released this week by the Service de Protection de la Communauté Juive found a 58% increase in anti-Semitic incidents in France in 2012.

The report uncovered horrendous crimes being committed against the Jewish community of France. In all, 614 antisemitic acts were reported in 2012 against 389 in 2011. Physical and verbal attacks rose by 82%, of which 25% involved the use of a weapon. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 55% of all racist attacks in France in 2012 were against Jews.

Most significantly, the Jewish community suffered two major attacks that made international headlines in less than six months: In Toulouse, Mohamed Merah savagely

killed a father and his two children, aged four and five, along with a seven-year-old girl in front of a Jewish school. Merah also tragically killed three French soldiers in Montauban. In Sarcelles, a hand grenade was thrown inside a kosher supermarket, wounding a customer. The resulting anti-terror operation yielded a list of Jewish organizations to be targeted in France by Islamist groups.

Sadly, the report points to two counter-intuitive facts: Following the attacks in Toulouse and Sarcelles, there was an increase in anti-Semitic incidents throughout France, rather than the expected decline based on sensitivity and education. In fact, the report notes, "numerous anti-Semitic acts were committed and included support or identification with Merah and his act."

Numbers and statistics are just that -- cold hard facts. When considering the actual incidents and the victimization of Jewish children and adults alike, the story is far more disturbing. Consider some of the most recent incident reports:

Sunday, October 7, 2012 -- PARIS

A Jewish man wearing traditional garb is shot at with a bb gun while standing at his window. He is not wounded.

Tuesday, October 9, 2012 -- PARIS

A young Jewish man is shot at with lead bullets in front of the synagogue. He is lightly wounded.

Monday, November 19, 2012 -- MONTREUIL

A group of young schoolchildren are playing ball in front of their school. A group approaches them, circles one child and accuses him of having insulted them earlier. He receives two head kicks. Another student intervenes asking the attacker to calm down. He is then punched so hard that he falls against a parking meter. While on the ground, he is kicked. Firefighters bring him to the hospital with a broken nose and tooth.

These are just a handful of the incidents cited in the report; they cannot adequately convey the fear experienced by French Jews, nor their profound sorrow. They cannot convey the humiliation and dread of boys and girls who are physically assaulted and called "dirty Jew," nor the terrible reality that Jewish men in France are, once again, afraid to wear yarmulkes in public.

Rock throwing. Beatings. Bullets. Shouts of "F----ing kike." Ambushes. Theft. Threats. Tear gas attacks.

This is not history. This is today.

Of course, it wasn't until last year that the French National Railway apologized for its role in deporting 76,000 Jews to their slaughter in the Nazi death camps during World War II; France has yet to truly come to terms with its wartime past.

Having been down this dangerous road before, the Jewish community expects and deserves a far greater degree of respect, as well as a strategic and considered response by French authorities to the blatant anti-Semitism French Jews are experiencing today. But the hate is increasing, and, as in a darker era, the pendulum does not seem to be on the side of the victims.

It is time for France to develop a more attentive approach. Canada, Israel and the world are watching.