Chapter 10

A Jewish-Muslim Battle on the World Stage: Constantine, Algeria 1956

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1 Speculations: Israélites or Israelis?

In November 1956, a Le Monde article asked whether the Algerian-Muslim “masses” were smart enough to discern Jews—or “Israélites”—from Israelis.¹ Referring to the war over the Suez Canal that month, Eugene Mannoni wondered, “Will the conflict between Israel and Egypt reawaken violence between French Jews and Algerian Muslims? It’s not impossible.”² He alluded to “confused Muslims” who could mistake Jews for Israelis. The piece appeared at a moment of new hostilities in the Middle East: in a move that was blatantly anti-colonial, Egyptian President Gamal Nasser had nationalized the Canal, which had long served as a route between Europe and the colonies in Africa and Asia. But Mannoni’s concern lay in the possibility that this conflict might shore up older tensions between Jews and Muslims within Algeria. Since the 1930s, Judeo-Muslim conflicts had erupted in Constantine, most recently in May of that year. This battle was a moment of transition in Algeria: the inter-communal violence in Constantine 1956 had already become integrated into a global conflict. Mannoni’s assessment was too late. Jews and Muslims in Algeria had already fought an international battle: It happened over the course of three days in May 1956.

Many scholars have pointed to 1956 as the year when the Franco-Algerian War was thrust into global consciousness. It was the year that the Algerian Question entered the United Nations; the year that the FLN wrote out a political platform; the year that Algerian nationalists joined up with Egyptian Arab nationalists; the year when Israel was extremely popular

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¹ The use of the term ‘Israélite’ is a common and respectful way to refer to Jews in France that separates Jews (as an ethnicity) from any presumption of a belief system. The classic text that defined these terms sociologically is Dominique Schnapper, Juifs et Israélites (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).

among Jews around the globe. With Nasser’s unilateral decision to support the Algerian cause, and the French-British-Israeli attack on the Suez Canal later that year, it is clear that by that autumn, the Algerian struggle was inextricable from other wars in the Middle East. What’s more difficult to assess is how this affected the locals in Algeria. Jews, especially, held onto an idea of peaceful coexistence alongside Muslims in their community. I argue that this vision unraveled over the course of a few days in May 1956.

Jews of Algeria—about 140,000 at the outset of the Franco-Algerian War in November 1954—comprised around 14% of the French population, and just over 1% of the total population of colonial Algeria. With the exception of a small minority living in the Southern M’zab, these Jews were French citizens, living in French Algeria, which many considered to be more than a colony—it was metropolitan France. Throughout its existence, most inhabitants accepted the idea that French Algeria was home to three different populations: Europeans (a.k.a. *colons* or Christians), Jews (a.k.a. Israelites), and natives (a.k.a. Muslims). Although Jews were French, they were socially distinct, sharing history, traditions, and cultures with Muslims.

For the first two years of the war, many Jews vowed to stay silent about their politics, claiming that neutrality was best. Perceptions of who the Jews were, and where they fit within the mounting tensions between Europeans and Muslims, perplexed journalists, community advocates, politicians, and activists on both sides of the Mediterranean. Were Jews European, because they were French citizens, or were they closer to Muslims, having resided in Algeria for centuries? Did the existence of a state of Israel mean that they were Israeli nationals instead of either French or Algerian?

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4 These broad categories flattened Algeria’s multiethnic, diverse groups into three giant swaths; this was the deep-rooted damage inflicted by the French occupation of Algeria in 1830. These groupings emerged from administrative strategies meant to create a political hierarchy based on ethnicity and religion—the widely practiced divide-and-rule method. (See Kamel Kateb, *Européens, Indigènes et Juifs en Algérie* (Paris: INED/PUF 2001)).

5 Anxious about the separate attention that Algerian Jews were receiving, in 1956, the Federation of Jewish communities of Algeria demanded that all Jewish organizations outside of Algeria “should avoid any declaration… concerning the future of North African Jewry.” “Deux Déclarations du Comité Juif Algérien d’Etudes Sociales et de la Fédération des Communautés Israelites d’Algérie,” *Information juive*, June 14, 1956, 3.