Since the French Revolution, Jews have been amongst those French citizens most committed to republican values. When faced with antisemitism in the past, they have latched onto republican values of equality and universalism as their surest protection. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as the far-right National Front gained support, Jews often allied with anti-racists in the Muslim community to affirm French universalism. Yet by the 2010s, Kimberly Arkin has found, teenage Sephardic Jews in Parisian banlieues were rejecting republican universalism for racialist differentiation. Out of fear that their North African origins might taint them in a France teeming with anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment, these young Jews proudly proclaimed their hate for Arabs, seeking to distinguish “Arab Jews from Arab Muslims.” Not only did many young Sephardim reject universalism as a strategy for affirming Jews’ place in the French nation, but they also contested the very idea that Jews belonged in France.

Even among those who do not think of French Jews and Muslims in racial terms, it has been tempting to imagine these groups as inexorably separate and
hostile. Amidst Islamicist violence in the 2010s (including Mohammed Merah’s 2012 killings and the 2015 Charlie Hebdo/Hyper Cacher attacks), pundits often described Jews and Muslims as antagonists; they described the growth of Muslim populations in France as a threat to established Jewish communities. Antisemitic incidents had indeed been on the rise since 2000; many of the documented aggressions were by young people whose parents had come to France from North Africa or the Middle East.4

However, beneath the narrative of Muslims as Jews’ enemies—hating them to the point of killing them—there were some inconvenient truths. Ahmed Merabet, the policeman who gave his life defending the cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo (among them several Jews), was himself a Muslim. The gunman who killed four people at the Hyper Cacher supermarket was Muslim, but so was Lassana Bathily, the employee who saved many Jewish customers. Muslims numbered among those who gathered to mourn the victims, who tweeted #jesuisjuif in solidarity, or who carried similar placards in demonstrations. As one French Muslim told a CNN reporter, “Jews and Muslims shouldn’t be enemies, and they refuse to be enemies.”5

Though critics may have been tempted to dismiss these responses as atypical, they hinted at realities long predating the 2010s. Maud Mandel has challenged depictions of a “timeless Muslim Judeophobia”; she has vigorously disputed the idea that “Muslims and Jews in France are on an explosive collision course.” Without ignoring the history of conflicts between members of these communities, she has maintained that Muslim-Jewish relations in France have been much more varied. Mandel has noted also that current tensions are rooted not in Islamic doctrine or even the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but rather in the uneven state assistance given to Jewish and Muslim arrivals from North Africa after decolonization in the 1960s. Ethan Katz has similarly sought to nuance the history of Jewish-Muslim relations in France and to highlight moments of cooperation.6

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