

## French Muslim leaders in Israel to promote undersanding

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Brenda Gazzar , THE JERUSALEM POST

Combating anti-Semitic acts is a top priority among police officers in France, where anti-Semitic incidents in Paris have declined in the last couple of years, a senior Muslim police official in the French capital told *The Jerusalem Post* Wednesday.

"I don't think French people are anti-Semitic, but when there are tensions in Israel and in Palestine and in all the Middle East, we see [a rise in] anti-Semitism, especially with young people [who] are French but of Arab origin," said Muhammad Douhane, a police commander in the Paris District and a French Muslim of Algerian descent.

Douhane was one of 15 French Muslim leaders visiting Israel this week on a five-day tour organized by the Washington-based Project Interchange, an institute of the American Jewish Committee. The tour is designed to provide participants with a better understanding of Israel's political, historical and religious context.

Anti-Semitic sentiment increased in France - home to some 5 million Muslims, many of whom are North African immigrants - during the last intifada, but has since calmed down considerably, Douhane said.

"The situation was very difficult during the intifada," said Douhane, who is also a member of the national police syndicate, Synergie Officiers. "Now it's relatively quiet. I am not saying there is no longer anti-Semitism; I'm saying it has stabilized."

According to Douhane, anti-Semitism is more prevalent in the suburbs of Paris - where social problems such as crime, unemployment and Islamic radicalism are more severe - than in the city.

It was often youths between the ages of 12 and 18 who engaged in anti-Semitic acts, he said, because they identified with Palestinian youth during the intifada. These youths, he said, were motivated by images such as rock-throwing, which they saw on satellite television without seeing the complexity of the Israeli-Arab conflict. They sometimes expressed their anger with violence, he said.

Tensions are particularly evident in schools, where Jewish students are sometimes verbally or physically attacked. For example, it is sometimes difficult for teachers to discuss the Holocaust in class because it angers some Muslim students who argue that the tragedy, in which six million Jews died, is discussed at length while issues closer to their hearts, such as African slavery, are ignored.

"They say, 'We are of French African origin and French Arab origin, so why don't we speak about colonialism? Why is it always the Shoah?'" Douhane said.

However, he noted that teachers were making a great effort to explain that all the students were French, and regardless of religion, all were equal under French law.

Students are also encouraged by the authorities to report any acts of discrimination, racism or anti-Semitism to the police, who are trained to handle such issues.

After completing their training, all police officers in the district are required to visit the Shoah Museum in Paris "to see and understand what is anti-Semitism," he said. The visits have been a requirement for about five years.

As a police commander, "my job is to explain to police officers that anti-Semitism is a felony, it's an infraction and it must be treated as an infraction because for our children who suffer from racism, it's a great trauma," he said.

Douhane added that bringing French Muslims to Israel to see how Israelis live was an important initiative, "so that we can explain... in France what we see and the complex reality in the country" - something many people did not understand, he said.

"We see that security is a real preoccupation for Israel," he said.

Regarding the security barrier, "we can say a lot of things about it, but if it reduces terrorist acts, it's a good thing."

On the other hand, he said he could understand the Palestinians, who argue that the wall should be built on the pre-1967 borders.

He added, however, that it was important to understand "that this is a political problem, and we can defend our rights with political negotiations - not with terrorism or war."

Discrimination is also a challenge for France's Muslim and Arab populations, who often have difficulty finding jobs or housing, he said.

Some youth who live in city projects in Paris associate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with their own difficult conditions because they connect more with their Muslim identity than with their French one, said a non-elected government official who participated on the tour.

"They do not feel recognized by the republic," she said through a translator. "They have not found their place in the republic."

In recent years, the government has launched campaigns and programs to promote diversity and help these youth identify as French citizens, so they understand that when they assault a Jew, they are assaulting a fellow French citizen.

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