Introduction

In autumn 2000, Muslim-Jewish relations in France captured national attention following a dramatic spike in anti-Jewish violence. Largely the work of Muslim youth from the country's most disadvantaged sectors, the violence raised alarms over rising antisemitism and emerging ethno-religious conflict in France. Periodic moments of dramatic bloodshed such as the 2006 torture and murder of twenty-three-year-old Ilan Halimi, and Mohammed Merah's March 2012 shooting of a rabbi and three children at Ozar Hatorah, a Jewish school in Toulouse, have kept such fears alive, while studies of increasing French Jewish intolerance toward "Arabs" suggest that relations between France's two largest ethno-religious minorities have been forever damaged.

Explanations for the discord have ranged widely. According to some, anti-Jewish attacks have been encouraged by the media's "methodical stigmatization" of Israel and an intensifying anti-Jewish bias in France. Most others, however, have focused on a timeless Muslim Judophobia rooted in the conflict between Islam and Judaism, a ubiquitous European antisemitism that has penetrated Arab culture, or the combustible fusion of radical Islam and anti-Zionism. For still others, the conflict is entirely contemporary: either a by-product of the Arab-Israeli conflict or an expression of the frustrations of disenfranchised French Muslim youth and an increasingly ethnically enclosed Jewish minority. While often diametrically and even angrily opposed to one another, the overall tone of all these analyses is that Muslims and Jews in France are on an explosive collision course.

I envisioned this book as a challenge to that assumption. Polarization, I believed, was a gross simplification of the much richer and more varied range of Muslim-Jewish relations in France. I therefore began my research most drawn to the cultural and historical connections linking these two populations, of which there are many. Indeed, France houses the largest Jewish and Muslim populations living side by side outside of Israel (current estimates number 4,000,000–6,000,000 Muslims and 500,000–600,000 Jews), thanks to the many in both communities who left North Africa following decolonization. Sharing certain linguistic and cultural traditions and a common experience of displacement, these newcomers also experienced similar pressures to assimilate while also often feeling rejected by the nation seeking to integrate them. These multifaceted cultural, linguistic, residential, and historical connections meant that...
Muslim-Jewish relations in France were never defined solely as a bitter war over Palestine and Israel, Islam and Judaism, or any other set of binary divisions.

Conflict, nevertheless, dominates the archival record of Muslim-Jewish relations in postwar France. Indeed even if such relations have been multiple and variegated, it was the episodic interethnic political disagreements—whether over French policies in the Middle East and North Africa or over domestic issues related to minority integration in France—that most often caught the attention of a diverse range of social actors, including international Jewish representatives, anti-Zionist Algerian nationalists, French police, Jewish student activists, and second generation Muslim anti-racist organizers. In following these sources, this book thus evolved from a straightforward challenge to narratives of Jewish-Muslim conflict into an examination of how such narratives emerged and in time helped produce the very conflicts they purported to recount.

The result is a study of the evolution and political meaning of conflict. It traces the process through which “Jew” and “Muslim” became political symbols, even as actual Jews and Muslims rarely clashed. Indeed, the very terms “Jew” and “Muslim” hide as much as they reveal, because they cluster various national and ethnic origins under broad religious categories that imply homogeneity and communal identifications in place of the profound heterogeneity that characterizes each population. As I argue throughout these pages, however, heterogeneity is largely irrelevant to the hardening of the political binary Muslim-Jewish. Beginning with the birth of Israel and North African anti-colonial warfare and continuing through the failed efforts of the 1980s anti-racist campaigns to bridge ethno-political divisions between activists in France, episodic moments of Muslim-Jewish conflict cemented a narrative of polarization. This book asks why this narrative has proven so powerful and enduring.

Central to this account is France. While global developments, particularly in the Middle East, created fault lines around which activists began to mobilize, the nature of this mobilization (i.e., who was involved), the political rhetoric employed, and the success or lack thereof of their appeal emerged from French political transformations—especially the decolonization of North Africa, the 1968 student uprisings, and the 1980s experiments in multiculturalism. Moreover, the impact of Middle Eastern war was never straightforward. As one relocated Algerian Jew told a researcher in the early 1990s, “When we say ‘the Arabs,’ I feel hatred, but those are Middle Eastern Arabs. I am not talking about the Arabs who live [in France], because they don’t do us any harm. They work, they earn their living, they have children and families like us, à la française. That’s fine. If we could live together and get on well as we used to back there, it would be perfect. But the problem in Israel is still not solved. So since I’ve known the Israeli problem, I am anti-Arab, but not against the Arabs of France.” As such a remark suggests, focusing solely on the Middle East in
an effort to understand Muslim-Jewish politics in France misses key aspects of the story. The goal here, then, is not to remove the Middle East from the equation; indeed, the repercussions of conflict between Israel and its neighbors will be a central analytic thread throughout. Rather I will underscore the way global dynamics, both in the Middle East and in French North Africa, came together with national and even local factors to shape Muslim-Jewish relations in postcolonial France.

This focus on the postcolonial is far from incidental. From the standpoint of demography alone, decolonization was monumental in the historical trajectories of France’s Muslim and Jewish populations. Not only were one million French citizens "repatriated" as a direct outcome of the violence (including many Muslims and Jews), but the dramatic growth of the metropolitan economy meant tens of thousands of former colonial subjects also came to France as immigrants. While Algerian Muslims had begun arriving in the early nineteenth century, their numbers grew from 130,000 in 1930 to over 600,000 by 1965 in a "veritable hemorrhaging of Algeria to France." By 1982 the number had grown to more than 800,000, while Moroccan and Tunisian Muslim populations had grown to 440,000 and 190,000, respectively. Jewish immigration brought 240,000 new arrivals to France between 1944 and 1979, more than half from Algeria and the rest from Morocco and Tunisia. These newcomers more than doubled France’s Jewish population, forever transforming its socioeconomic, cultural, political and religious contours and creating new and visible subgroups within a population primarily made up of those with roots in France since before the French Revolution and those who had migrated from war-torn Eastern Europe.

While similar origins and settlement patterns at times forged bonds between different kinds of migrants from North Africa, the juridical and social inequities embedded in French colonization policies and the vastly different levels of Muslim and Jewish communal development in the metropole created sharply divergent integration processes. Beginning with the invasion of Algeria in 1830, colonial administrators, scholars, and legislators constructed categories for understanding North African society that emphasized regional, ethnic, religious, social, and economic divisions over indigenous unity. Jews, in these constructions, were often held to be more intelligent and "assimilable" than the Muslims among who they lived. In Algeria, where such thinking took legal form, the 1870 Crémieux Decree granted French citizenship to all Algerian Jews, juridically cutting them off from most Algerian Muslim subjects. In Tunisia and Morocco, which remained nominally under Muslim control throughout the colonial period, no mass naturalizations occurred. Nevertheless, the "Frenchification" of local Jewish populations took place through more informal administrative practices and the schools of the Alliance israélite universelle, meaning Jews had greater opportunities to acculturate to European social and cultural norms than the Muslim populations amidst which they lived,
and this contributed to the formation of new social hierarchies. Although the post–World War II French government granted citizenship to Algerian Muslims in an effort to diminish support for the growing independence struggle, those in France continued to face systematic discrimination, particularly after 1954 when the outbreak of FLN (Front de libération nationale) armed protest transformed Algerian Muslims into “the central and even unique symbol of ‘the enemy within.’” France’s decision to recognize the French citizenship of Jewish Algerians in the war’s final negotiations at the very moment when Muslim Algerian French citizens were permanently excluded enfolded Jews into the wider “European” family. Jews fleeing newly independent Algeria thus benefited from all the subsidies and aid available to repatriating citizens, while Muslims from Morocco, Tunisia, and particularly Algeria faced administrative structures that distinguished them from other incoming migrants. For example, while most arriving Tunisian and Moroccan Jews did not share the benefits of citizenship like their Algerian co-religionists, they reported that authorities “bent over backward” to help them obtain French nationality while doing nothing to aid Muslim newcomers.

These inequities had profound economic, cultural, and political consequences in 1960s France, among which were sharply divergent processes of Muslim-Jewish integration. Arriving Jews thus joined a long-rooted French Jewish community, which although deeply undermined by Vichy legislation during World War II, had been engaged by the mid-1950s in a decade-long rebuilding process that had given rise to a highly developed communal infrastructure. While encounters between incoming Jews and those already settled in France were never smooth, the new arrivals benefited from institutional structures geared to facilitating their integration and a communal leadership determined to defend Jewish interests, particularly when Jewish lives were understood to be endangered. Arriving Muslims not only had no equivalent infrastructure in place, but also the organizations that sought to speak for them were profoundly distrusted by French authorities as sources of political instability.

The combined impact of this asymmetrical integration and communal development process was that compared to their Muslim counterparts, French Jewish spokesmen had a far more developed apparatus with which to articulate a group politics and greater access to national and local officials for promoting the causes important to them. Thus while this book seeks to trace Muslim-Jewish political exchange, it does not proceed as an equal tale of two halves. The divergent histories of Muslims and Jews in France’s colonial project and the more integrated position of Jews in the metropole necessarily gave the organized French Jewish community more opportunities to shape public discourse and greater access to the hallways of power. In addition, they cast a longer shadow, leaving a larger body of French language sources behind. Indeed, if
many of the Jews and Muslims under study spoke Arabic, the public sphere in which they interacted was conducted primarily in French—another arena in which Jews were better schooled.28

We should be careful, however, not to assume that the relative ease of Jewish integration into post–World War II France meant they could dictate the terms of that integration. Although by the early twenty-first century, Jews proved more economically mobile, better educated, and professionally better placed than the general population and certainly than French Muslims, the organized community was often criticized for failing to defend Jewish interests successfully (however they were defined in a given moment), particularly with regard to foreign policy around Israel.29 Dramatic moments of anti-Jewish hostility, such as the October 1980 explosion at the rue Copernic synagogue or the May 1990 desecration of the Jewish cemetery in Carpentras were also raw reminders of Jewish leaders’ ongoing inability to use their social capital to end violence and bigotry against them. Moreover, whatever the asymmetry between the stature of Jewish and Muslim spokesmen, respectively, the latter were neither passive nor without political agency, also seeking to influence political culture in France on matters of concern to themselves and their Jewish interlocutors.

The following pages, then, explain when and why certain voices predominated over others and how the combined result created a political landscape so often understood as inevitably polarized. Each of the six main chapters addresses a moment in which Muslim-Jewish conflict became a matter of concern whether to French police charged with maintaining social order, to media sources, or to a wide array of self-appointed communal spokesmen. Beginning in 1948 when war in the Middle East caused minor unrest in the city of Marseille, chapter 1 traces the way in which disagreements over Israel became a way to debate inequities in French minority policies at home and in North Africa. Chapter 2 builds on the link between French colonial policies and Muslim-Jewish relations in the metropole by tracing how decolonization throughout North Africa changed the way a diverse set of social actors, including French colonial administrators, international Jewish spokesmen, and a wide range of indigenous nationalist groups conceptualized Jewish belonging throughout the region. The process, I argue, led to the emergence of the “North African Jew,” a category to which no individual ascribed but that worked rhetorically to unite the diverse Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian Jewish populations into a collective often understood to be in conflict with “North Africans,” “Muslims,” or “Arabs.” Chapter 3 then examines how these new ways of conceptualizing Muslim-Jewish interactions, and the longer term inequities built into French colonial and minority polices, shaped integration into the metropole in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In these chapters, and in those that follow on the impact of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the 1968 student uprisings in France, and the effort to establish a multiethnic anti-racist campaign in 1980s France, I look closely at the way
Muslim-Jewish conflict unfolded—who participated and why—and I examine how rather isolated episodes of conflict created new binary frameworks often despite the intentions of those involved. Chapter 4 thus considers the impact in France of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War showing that while conflict between France's large Muslim and Jewish populations was, in fact, quite rare, the story of two polarized ethno-religious political units hardened as new political actors, particularly university students, began to use the French campus as a space in which to engage matters of foreign policy. Student uprisings in France in 1968, the subject of chapter 5, then brought the story of Muslim-Jewish polarization to France's national conversation as student radicals began to link the occupation of Palestinian territories evermore fully to leftist politics at home. While many Jewish and Muslim leftists worked together in these endeavors, highly visible moments of discord, such as a riot in the Parisian immigrant neighborhood of Belleville in June 1968 and ongoing conflictual encounters between Muslim and Jewish university students, continued to fuel perceptions of polarization. Indeed, paradoxically, even those who emphasized the cultural connections and shared histories binding Muslims and Jews contributed to this process, since in seeking to counter more polarizing rhetoric, they unwittingly legitimized the boundaries of political discourse as it was taking shape: to deny Muslim-Jewish polarization was to acknowledge the problem, thereby reinforcing the very categories they were seeking to dismantle.

It was not until the 1980s, however, when a new generation of Muslim and Jewish French nationals came of age, that polarization emerged as the central motif for understanding Muslim-Jewish relations. During that decade, a surge of anti-minority violence gave rise to large and widely celebrated anti-racist campaigns that brought Muslim and Jewish youth together in a common struggle. Born in the period following François Mitterrand's 1981 election to the presidency on a pro-immigrant rights and decentralization platform, the anti-racist coalition took advantage of the political establishment's unprecedented willingness to recognize the nation's cultural and linguistic diversity. Within a few years, however, growing electoral support for Jean Marie Le Pen's anti-immigrant and nationalist political agenda and a mounting fear of international terrorism meant that officials from across the political spectrum began adopting a more conservative discourse toward religious and cultural difference. "Integration" rather than the "right to be different" once again became the watchword of the day. This mounting conservatism, while mostly directed at France's Muslim population, could conflate the nation's religious minorities, and some Jewish figures began backing away from public connections to Muslims. Meanwhile, some Muslim activists, who had seen value in underscoring a common anti-racist agenda, began reasserting the particular nature of their own community's struggle.

For general queries, contact webmaster@press.princeton.edu
By decade’s end, the much-celebrated efforts at cross-ethnic cooperation had given way to distrust and bitterness; interethnic conflict was henceforth presumed. During the 1991 Gulf War, for example, journalists, government officials, and religious leaders predicted widespread Muslim-Jewish conflict in response to unfolding events in the Middle East. The fact that such fears never materialized is one of the paradoxes at the heart of this book. Indeed, whatever their links to the Middle East (and such ties were never homogeneous or frozen in time), Muslims and Jews related to each other also as former residents of French North Africa, immigrants competing for limited resources, employers and employees, victims of racist aggression, religious minorities in a secularizing state, and citizens. These multiple and complex interactions were often lost, however, as a narrative of polarization took root, thereby helping to erase them.

The Dilemmas of Terminology

Writing of “Muslims” and “Jews” creates two distinct but overlapping problems for the historian. First, these terms risk collapsing significant diversity under essentializing labels, and second, they seemingly privilege ethno-religious over ethno-political categories of analysis. I will address each of these problems in turn.

As the wide-ranging scholarship on Jews and Muslims in France has made clear, neither population formed an organized or homogeneous body in ethnic, national, religious, social, economic, or political terms. The post–World War II Jewish population included citizens with roots in France prior to the French Revolution as well as large numbers of immigrants or newly minted citizens from Central and Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Levant. Although a handful of important organizations claimed to speak for all French Jews, the population held a wide range of views on national minority policies, war in the Middle East, racism in France, religious practice, and everything else. Nor was France’s Muslim population any more unified, made up as it was of migrants from Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, West Africa, Syria, and Lebanon. In the 1990s, sub-Saharan African, Bosnian, and Central Asian Muslims also came to France. Not surprisingly in a migration this large and spanning numerous decades, national, religious, ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic diversity was the rule.

If recent work has stressed this heterogeneity, however, it has also underscored a certain “community of experience.” In the words of Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaïsse: “Despite their ethnic and national diversity, what Muslims in France increasingly do have in common is their ‘lived experience,’ which includes the bitterness of exclusion as well as successful efforts to integrate.” Scholarship on French Jews has also begun emphasizing bridges
linking the diverse Jewish collective. Dominique Schnapper, Chantal Bordes-Benayoun, and Freddy Raphaël, for example, have stressed a social homogenization process from the 1970s to the 1990s. While refusing to use the language of “community,” given ongoing French discomfort with recognizing ethno-religious political groupings, they stress how shared experiences of democratic life and economic homogenization have diminished prior differences among Jews.39

The existence of communities of experience reminds us that overarching terms like “Jew” or “Muslim” reflect a certain—if partial—lived reality. Moreover, despite the constructed nature of collectives based around these terms and the fact that some who might be considered Jews or Muslims would object to being classified primarily as such, we should not deny their power to shape historical outcomes. As Joyce Dalsheim argues, [T]he ways in which we order, divide, and categorize our socio-political world are not innocent. . . . These divisions have very real outcomes, including the constitution of categories of identity, religion, and politics, the delimitation of the contours of action and debate in the present, and the construction of boundaries within which we might imagine possible futures. The narratives that emerge through these divisions become familiar to us, taking the form of common knowledge upon which we base our judgments and take action in the world.40

To cite but one example of this process: According to Naomi Davidson, beginning in the early twentieth century, French politicians, colonial administrators, intellectuals, and urban planners elaborated a notion of “Islam français” that functioned as an essential and eternal marker of difference in French society. While Islam français posited certain compatibilities between French secular republicanism and Islam, it also articulated a “reductionist, totalizing religious-cultural category ‘Muslim’” that served to racialize religious difference. Nor was this articulation of an Islam français simply a discursive move, as it became the primary administrative medium through which the French state interacted with Muslim residents in the metropole.41 This process gathered steam with the decolonization of Algeria. As Todd Shepard has shown, French juridical and bureaucratic practices at the end of the Algerian War of Independence divided “Muslims” from “Europeans,” as eight million of the former were stripped of their French citizenship and several hundred thousand non-Muslims—many of whom had never lived in Europe—were claimed as “French.”42 The media then reified these divisions.

As such scholarship has made clear, socially constructed categories had legal, administrative, and cultural implications for those categorized as “Muslims” whether they embraced the label or not. Likewise, if post–World War II
French authorities rejected Vichy legal distinctions, “Jews” never disappeared into a neutral public sphere. Indeed, governmental archives abound with references to “Jews” and the “Jewish community,” and self-appointed spokesmen and media outlets repeatedly confirmed the boundaries of such a collective regardless of individual ascription. The categories “Muslim” and “Jew” thus had social meaning for those inside and outside of the “communities” collapsed therein. Muslim-Jewish political conflict evolved in and helped define this discursive space. Assertions of polarization—whatever the reality on the ground—helped legitimate social understandings of group belonging. To understand the evolution of polarization, therefore, is also to understand the way categories calcify, obscuring and flattening the social complexity therein.

Recognition of calcifying political categories raises the second dilemma that the terms “Jew” and “Muslim” create for the historian. As scholarship on both has made clear, the meaning of these terms has changed over time as understandings of the groups they represent have shifted. French Jews were thus known as “israélites” from the time of the French Revolution until the middle of the twentieth century, a construction that emphasized Jewish religious affiliations over ethnic or racial identifications so as not to challenge categories of belonging within the French nation. Nazi and Vichy racializing practices coupled with the nationalizing claims of the Zionist movement challenged such constructions of Jewishness. By the mid-twentieth century, the term “juif” had replaced “israélite” in spoken French and even for most French Jews, who, while rejecting Nazi racial categories, nevertheless emerged from World War II with a reinvigorated sense of ethnic identification.43

The term “musulman” has had a similarly complex history in France. Indeed, despite the emerging historiographical consensus that the category “Muslim” has been more powerful in colonial and post-colonial French history than previously recognized, it is also true that until the 1970s, French authorities often used the terms “Musulmans,” “Algériens,” “Nord-Africains,” “Arabes,” “Musulmanes nord-africains,” and “indigènes” interchangeably, a lexical confusion that reflected colonial conflations of geographic, religious, ethnic, and legal categories.44 In the sources upon which this book is drawn, and particularly those from the 1940s through the 1970s, Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian Muslim migrants in France were most typically—although never exclusively—referred to as “Arabes,” a category that at least some adopted for themselves as part of wider political struggles that sought to link Muslim North Africans with Arab national liberation struggles.45 It was only in the late 1970s, after the Iranian Revolution spurred fears of spreading Muslim fundamentalism and as French society became increasingly aware of a generation of French-born children of North African immigrants living on the edges of national, social, and cultural life, that media outlets and the wider public began to speak more consistently of musulmans.46
Despite this relatively recent development, I have opted to use the term “Muslim” even when analyzing citations that refer directly to Arabes, Nord Africaines, or Algériens. This choice should not be understood to imply that for the migrants themselves religion was more important than ethnic, racial, or national identification, nor does it suggest that theology lay at the heart of evolving Muslim-Jewish relations. Rather, the term works to distinguish Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan Muslim migrants from Jews and Christians coming from the same regions (since all were, in fact, Algerians, Tunisians, or Moroccans) and is preferable to the term “Arab,” which not only glosses over the varying national and ethnic origins of the migrants collapsed therein but also reflects assumptions about their political allegiances and foreign status that this book seeks to challenge. Put differently, whatever the limitations of the term “Muslim,” it shifts the focus away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and re-centers our gaze on France, the context in which this term has come to stand in for at least two generations of French-born citizens pushed to the national margins.

Geography and Politics: Harmony and Conflict in One French City

To tell a French story is often to tell a Parisian story, and this book is no exception. Not only does the highly centralized nature of state bureaucracy and cultural production in France focus attention on the nation’s capital, but Paris houses the country’s largest Muslim and Jewish populations and their most visible institutional structures. Insofar as there have been signs of Muslim-Jewish conflict, they have often been in Parisian immigrant neighborhoods, whether in Belleville in 1968 and 1973 or Sarcelles in 2000. Anti-racist demonstrations have famously ended their marches at the Place de la République and the Place de la Bastille.

If Paris stands at the heart of this study, however, it is in a second French city where de-colonization and Middle Eastern war had their most profound impact. As France’s largest port and its gateway to the Mediterranean, Marseille had a front-row seat to the various crises in North Africa and the Middle East. French soldiers departed from this city for Algeria, tanks and guns were shipped to Israel from her ports, “repatriates” fleeing newly emerging independent North African states sought refuge in her neighborhoods, and colonial soldiers and laborers all poured into Marseille in search of exit or work, respectively. While most departed again, the city’s identity as a center of transit profoundly marked its political, social, and cultural development and shaped the way Muslims and Jews interacted therein.

Decolonization was particularly unsettling for Marseille. Not only did the city serve as the main arrival point for most of the 1.5 million “returning” French nationals from 1954 to 1964, but its population also grew from 650,000...
to 900,000 by 1975 (a 40 percent increase). Although Marseille had attracted large numbers of immigrants before (nearly one quarter of the city’s population before diminishing significantly during World War II), those arriving in tandem with France’s withdrawal from North Africa transported shared cultural memories of trauma and rupture with them to their new city. Approximately 100,000 French Algerian settlers (pieds-noirs) shared the space with large numbers of mostly Algerian Muslim immigrants also fleeing economic and political upheaval, whose numbers grew from 10,000 in 1949 to 35,860 in 1968, and 50,000 by 1974.

The Jewish population also grew dramatically. With a surviving remnant of 4,000–5,000 at the end of World War II, migrations from Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria brought the Jewish population to between 12,000 and 15,000 by 1955. In 1962, with the full-scale Jewish flight from Algeria, the numbers soared, reaching approximately 65,000 by the 1970s, the largest Jewish population in France after Paris.

The encounter between Muslims and Jews in Marseille reflected the specificities of this ethnically heterogeneous postwar urban landscape. Three factors in particular made Marseille distinctive. The first was the port, which as the city’s major economic engine, served as a highly visible indication of France’s link to the Mediterranean. Carrying migrants, arms, and soldiers to and from the city center, Marseille’s port created sites of conflict for those with vested interest in French actions in the Middle East and North Africa.

Second was the visible diversity of Marseille’s landscape in a period when other French cities were directing immigrant laborers to the urban periphery. Like all French cities, Marseille experienced an acute postwar housing crisis that posed problems for settling tens of thousands of incoming migrants. Most were pushed into the most squalid residential quarters near the city’s industrial and harbor districts (14th, 15th, and 16th arrondissements) and in the industrial suburbs (9th arrondissement). Built out of planks and corrugated iron and without electricity, running water, or adequate transport, these slums (bidonvilles) were a world apart from Marseille’s urban core. Unlike other French cities where a similar process took place, however, downtown Marseille also saw new arrivals move into the overcrowded unventilated apartments in the 1st and 2nd arrondissements. Centrally located between the Old Port and the main train station, these immigrant neighborhoods abutted the Hôtel de Ville (city hall), the Bourse (chamber of commerce and industry), and the Canebière, the city’s main commercial district. Symbolically cutting the city’s northern industrial sectors from its middle-class and upper-middle-class neighborhoods to the south, the Old Port was the heart of commercial Marseille. No matter where one lived in the city, all residents spent time in or passed through this area regularly, bringing the city’s mixed ethnic life into public view and giving it a cosmopolitan flavor.
These mixed neighborhoods—marked by an immigrant-centered commercial culture—provided opportunities for Muslim-Jewish interactions. If by 1975, Muslim immigrants made up 35 percent of the population of the Belsunce area, for example, numerous Jews conducted business in the neighborhood's commercial streets, and Jewish merchants—particularly jewelers—continued to populate the rue d'Aix and the neighboring markets on the rue Sainte Barbe. While such neighborhoods were not unique to Marseille (Belleville, in Paris, for example, was similarly integrated), the acute nature of the housing crisis meant that incoming repatriates and immigrants often lived for years in the same areas. As one anthropologist described the neighborhood around the porte d'Aix in 1972: "Jews, Arabs, Blacks, Italians, French of modest means... all live together. It's their complementarity that permeates the area." Although wealthier repatriates—Jews among them—moved out as soon as was economically feasible, ethnic intermingling continued to mark Marseille's urban development, as those remaining in the commercial districts continued to work in a sophisticated economic trading zone that linked the central port regions of the city with secondary markets in other parts of the city.

The third factor that made Marseille distinct was its relatively stable political landscape. Dominated by one figure, Marseille's postwar political life was linked directly with socialist Gaston Defferre. Mayor for thirty-three years (1944–45; 1953–86), Defferre controlled the city's political establishment, the local socialist party, and the major center-left newspaper Le Provençal (which he co-founded following the Liberation). Nationally visible due to his long-standing participation in the National Assembly (1945–58, 1962–86), Senate (1959–62), ministerial positions, and bid for the presidency, Defferre maintained unchallenged control over Marseille's political establishment, a position he used to confront national political figures when it suited him. Defferre felt particularly strongly about Israel. A vocal advocate for the young state, he used his position to speak out in its defense and worked closely with the local Jewish leadership to create links between Marseille and Israel. When war broke out in the Middle East in 1967 and 1973, much of Marseille's response as well as the way Muslim-Jewish relations unfolded were a product of the climate he created.

Due to the three factors described above, Muslim-Jewish relations in Marseille were clearly distinct from that in other French cities. The focus on the southern port city, however, serves more than as a counterpoint to generalizations derived from Paris, because Marseille can be understood as the space in which all the major factors influencing Muslim-Jewish conflict in France—decolonization, Middle Eastern politics, and French minority politics—came together in their most combustible form. As such, it serves less as a case study and more as the physical meeting point of all this book's central themes. And yet, despite its potentially explosive interethnic landscape, Muslims and Jews in Marseille also have a history of harmonious and even convivial exchange. As one Jewish cab driver remarked to a journalist in 2005, “I'm a Jew, my neighbors,
they’re Arabs, we understand each other fine.” Although the city experienced some of the most heightened fears of polarization during the 1991 Gulf War, widespread conflict did not break out; likewise in the post-2000 period when Muslim-Jewish relations garnered so much popular attention in France, relations in Marseille remained largely calm. A focus on Marseille thus captures the way fears of growing Muslim-Jewish conflict could take on a life of their own, divorced from the more variegated social landscape.