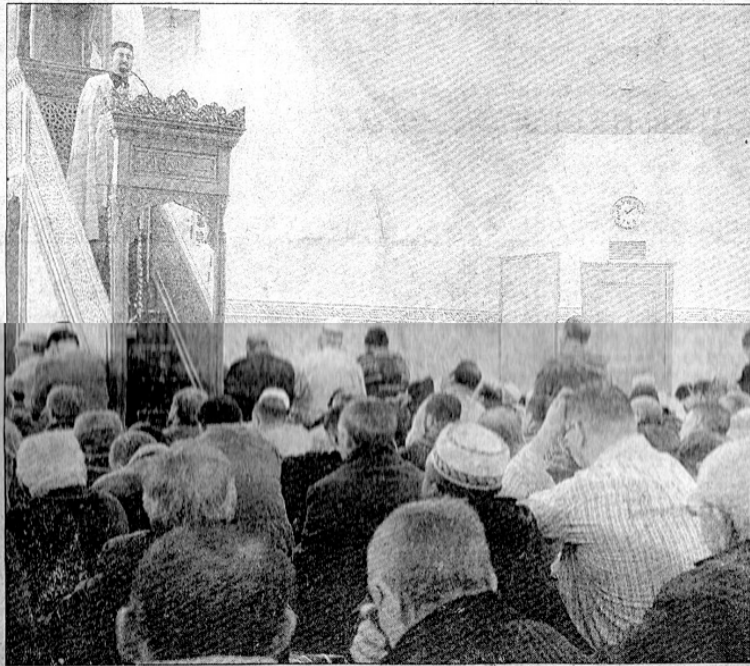


## BRIEFING/EUROPE

France

# Women tackle Islam-Jewish rift



More than 3,000 Muslims attend Friday prayers at the Lyon, France, mosque on Jan. 16. The imam's sermon was unmistakably conciliatory, but it did little to cool the anger of some French Muslims over Israel's Gaza offensive. A Jewish-Muslim group of women called Peace Builders aims to overcome their differences over the Middle East conflict.



Rabbi Israel Belimow (left) stands in the pizzeria of Ohr Menahem Community Center in St. Denis, outside Paris. The center, which also houses a day care center for autistic children and a synagogue, was attacked with Molotov cocktails recently. It was the latest in a series of anti-Semitic incidents in France since Israel began its offensive in Gaza.

## Learn about each others' faiths over films and pastries

By ELIZABETH BRYANT  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

**A** PARIS s Israeli troops pushed deeper into Gaza and anti-Semitic attacks hopped across Europe, Hakima Milati worked the phones, inviting Jewish and Muslim women to visit the main mosque and synagogue in the east-central French city of Lyon.

It didn't take long to book the 60 places available for Sunday's event, which included a kosher meal. "I've had to turn people away," Ms. Milati said.

Tensions between Jews and Muslims are on the rise here as a slice of the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict is playing out on European soil. Nowhere is this more apparent than in France, home to Europe's largest communities of Muslims and Jews, at roughly 6 million and 600,000, respectively.

More than 55 anti-Semitic attacks have been registered here since the Gaza offensive began Dec. 27. Synagogues have been firebombed and spray-painted with graffiti, and Jews have been taunted and attacked on the streets.

In one of the most serious inci-

denits to date, a Jewish man was stabbed four times in a Paris suburb on Thursday. He suffered only minor wounds.

Over the weekend, Israel declared a cease-fire. On Sunday, Israel began pulling out its troops and Gaza's Hamas rulers declared a one-week halt to rocket fire at the Jewish state.

If the past is any indication, anti-Semitic attacks, however, are unlikely to cease with political decisions in the Middle East unless they are followed by a sharp drop in violence.

France is hardly the only country witnessing a spike in attacks against Jews. The Paris-based European Jewish Congress (EJC) has registered more than 100 anti-Semitic incidents in Britain. Others have taken place in Belgium and Denmark, among other countries.

The attacks bring memories of the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, that began in 2000. Nearly 750 acts or threats against Jews in France alone were recorded that year.

"It is unacceptable that Jews be targeted and that a wave of anti-Semitism is spreading again over Europe," said the EJC's secretary-general, Serge Cwajgenbaum. "No country in Western Europe is

spared."

The violence represents the biggest challenge to date for the Jewish-Muslim women's group, "Battisseuses de Paix," or Peace Builders. The organization was founded in 2002 by French Jewish journalist Annie-Paule Derczansky, after she covered a story on Israeli-Palestinian women's associations.

"What I realized was that women there could still construct something together when it came to artistic and cultural things. You can't stay completely independent of events of course, but still exceptional things were happening," said Ms. Derczansky, during a recent interview at her Paris apartment.

"It was on that basis that I told myself that I had to disconnect women in France from their differences over the Middle East and connect them with things that brought the two sides together."

Ms. Derczansky began organizing debates over the women's common heritage — many Jews and Muslims in France hail from North Africa — that inevitably included a kosher meal.

She organized movie nights featuring a film about how the Paris mosque saved French Jews during the Holocaust. The women began visiting mosques and synagogues,

learning about each others' faiths.

More recently, they began gathering once a month in a suburban Paris restaurant to bake baklava and other pastries.

"Obviously, we don't change the world. But women who spend several hours making pastries and eating them together can't go home and start saying bad things about the other community," Ms. Derczansky said.

Peace Builders opened a chapter in Lyon in September, and there are plans to start another in the seaside city of Marseille. The women sometimes bring their families to the events, and Ms. Derczansky spins dreams of school trips and sporting events. The only area off-limits is politics.

"When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, each of us has our position, but we respect each other," said Ms. Milati, the Muslim co-president of Peace Builders in Lyon.

Other interfaith groups have sprung up in France in recent years. But some are unraveling over the Gaza conflict. Muslim members of the Jewish-Muslim Friendship Society reportedly resigned last week to protest the silence of their Jewish counterparts over the Israeli bombing campaign.

Richard Prasquier, president of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France, said relations with the country's Muslim umbrella organization — the French Council of the Muslim Faith — were good. But, he added, "much of the violence comes from youngsters who are not part of the organization, and within the organization there are elements that take radical positions."

Both Ms. Milati and Ms. Derczansky say there are plenty of people in their respective communities that question the point of Peace Builders. And few devout Jews or Muslims have joined the group to date.

Mistrust runs particularly deep among ethnic North Africans, despite their common heritage. "The thinking among many of the Jewish women is, 'the Arabs threw us out [of North Africa during independence] and now they want to throw us out of Israel,'" said Ms. Derczansky, who is of European descent.

But Ms. Derczansky is keeping her goals modest.

"If we were the catalyst for peace between the two communities, of course we would be very happy," she said, breaking into laughter. "But if people leave our debates seeing things differently, learning things, then that's very good."