

Mayor: 'Without Jews Paris would not be city that it is'

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Jews and Muslims are part of the fabric of French society, despite recent terror attacks in Paris that shined a light on long-running discrimination and attacks aimed at both groups, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo said last week.

"Without Jews Paris would not be the city that it is," Hidalgo said in an interview.

French society must provide more education and job opportunities to its Muslim immigrant community, but "we can't ask them to integrate into French society because they are [already] French," she said.

French citizens of all stripes are part of a "national community" that transcends religion, village, and country of origin, she said.

"We cannot accept this opposition or violence of one group over another within a national community in Paris," she said.

Hidalgo, in town this week for the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, said jobs and education are the answer. She plans a conference March 12 in Paris to bring together religious and lay people from across French society to focus on living together in peace.

Democratic nations must fight terrorists with "the weapons of democracy," Hidalgo said. "It's important to deconstruct the myth the terrorists create around their activities."

While militants may appear as heroes to some, real "heroes are people who succeed, go to school, engage with society and can talk to their neighbors even when they're different," she said.

However, Hidalgo's emphasis on education and jobs is misplaced because many non-Muslim immigrants in France do not engage in terrorism, and many terrorists are not poor, said Tawfik Hamid, a senior fellow for the study of Islamic radicalism at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, a Virginia-based think tank.

"The only difference here is the ideological factor," Hamid said. "Approaching the problem only from the economic angle is ignoring the real cause of the problem, which is ideology. And if we ignore the real cause of the problem, it will get worse."

Hidalgo, who has come into the spotlight since the attacks on the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher market in Paris that killed 17 people, acknowledged anti-Semitic attacks doubled in 2014, which also saw a 10 percent increase in anti-Muslim assaults.

The Anti-Defamation League, a New York-based group that documents anti-Semitic reports around the world, says the anti-Semitic violence in France has been perpetrated by members of the Muslim immigrant minority, which is plagued by poor education and under-employment.

Michael Salberg, director of international relations at the Anti-Defamation League, said Hidalgo's response shows she is in denial about the divide between French authorities and many of the country's Muslim communities.

"That's a politician's response—I'm not going to admit the services in my city are defective," Salberg said of Hidalgo's remarks.

Hidalgo's attitude also reflects a commitment to a fierce French form of secularism that encourages people not to accentuate their differences, Salberg said.

"It means you're going to give up your differences to fully become a French person, or it means you'll be marginalized," Salberg said.

While Hidalgo said American Muslims seemed "very integrated," she disagreed with the American practice of allowing Muslims to express their religion in the public sphere, by allowing women wear the headscarf or veil at school or work.

"When in a public space you should be neutral, not dominated by religion, but dominated by knowledge," she said.

Hidalgo, who was voted into office in March, said Paris in the past decade has poured resources into improving the architecture, streetscapes and libraries of the city's outskirts, where most of its immigrants and poor live. It has also improved public transportation from those areas to the job centers in the city's center, she said.

In a new effort, she is ordering the city's schools to open on Saturdays to provide tutoring and programming that counters racism and radicalization. And she wants to introduce programs like ones in Los Angeles and Minneapolis that she learned about at the White House summit, where young people who succeed are highlighted as role models for others.

"You have to give opportunity to young people and give more value to those who succeed," she said.