
FRANCE RALLIES TO DENOUNCE ANTI-SEMITIC INSULTS AT PROTESTS

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Mass rallies are planned in Paris and other French cities Tuesday (19 February) to denounce a flare-up of anti-Semitic acts which culminated in a violent tirade against a prominent writer during yellow vest anti-government protests last weekend.

Political leaders of all stripes called the rallies after a protester was caught on video calling the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut a dirty Zionist and telling him that France belongs to us.

Finkielkraut had initially supported the yellow vest movement, before criticising the violence carried out against police forces by a fringe of suspected far-right and far-left demonstrators.

Protesters also launched anti-Semitic abuse at Ingrid Levavasseur, who tried to lead a yellow vest list for coming European Parliament elections, in Paris over the weekend.

President Emmanuel Macron called the insults the absolute negation of who we are and what makes us a great nation. We will not tolerate it.

His office said he would not take part in the rallies, though Prime Minister Edouard Philippe will be among several government officials at a Paris march starting at 7:00 pm (1800 GMT) at Place de la République.

The yellow vest protests began last march against high fuel taxes and rising costs of living blamed on Macrons policies, which critics say favour the well-off.

But officials accuse the grass-roots movement of helping unleash a wave of extremist violence that has fostered anti-Semitic outbursts among some participants.

Extremist elements

This is the response to the national wake-up call we urged last week, said Francis Kalifat of the CRIF umbrella group of French Jewish organisations.

He was referring to a spate of anti-Jewish vandalism and graffiti discovered in and around Paris in the days following another Saturday of yellow vest protests.

Graffiti on the headquarters of French daily Le Monde used anti-Semitic tropes to refer to Macron's former job as a Rothschild investment banker.

In another incident, the words 'Macron Jews Bitch' was written in English across a garage door in the city centre, and the phrase 'Jewish pig' was sprayed onto a wall in the northern 18th arrondissement.

But the rise in anti-Semitic acts in France predates the yellow vest movement.

Last year, police recorded a 74% surge in reported anti-Jewish offences, causing alarm in a country that is home to the biggest Jewish population in Europe.

The government has tried to walk a fine line in condemning the recent surge in anti-Semitism while not criticising what it calls the protesters' legitimate complaints.

Several yellow vests have already said they plan to participate in the marches.

But a recent Ifop poll of yellow vest backers found that nearly half questioned beliefs in a worldwide Zionist plot and other conspiracy theories.

The yellow vests aren't an anti-Semitic movement, said Jean-Yves Camus of the Political Radicalisation Observatory in Paris.

But it's a leaderless, horizontal movement * and extremist elements have been able to drown out the voices of its high-profile figures in the media, he said.

The marches come the day before Macron is expected to address Jewish leaders at the Crif's annual dinner.

Kaynak/Source: