

# French Jews ask: Is wearing your faith a risk, or a right?

By Angela Charlton, Associated Press

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PARIS — Religious Jews in Marseille are facing a wrenching choice: Whether to wear the skullcap that proclaims their religion or tuck it away in hopes of staying safe.

It's a dilemma about identity and freedom of faith that has confronted religious communities elsewhere in Europe and the U.S. It's becoming especially acute in France, from where a record number of Jews emigrated to Israel as it grapples with anti-Semitic violence increasingly inspired by the Islamic State group.

An attack last week was the final straw for the Marseille Jewish community's religious leadership: A machete-wielding 15-year-old slashed a Jewish teacher in the street. Under police questioning, the boy invoked ISIS.

Zvi Ammar, head of the Israelite Consistory of Marseille, asked Jews to go without the kippa "until better days." Kippa is the Hebrew word for skullcap, while it is known as a yarmulke in Yiddish.

Ammar called it the hardest decision he'd ever made. His words disturbed and divided French Jews and non-Jews alike, and evoked Nazi-era fears.

And they were a slap to the French government, desperate to reassure its Jewish community — the world's third largest — and a nation shaken by a violent year.

The president called the recommendation intolerable. Two Jewish legislators wore kippas to French Parliament in protest.

"It means that we are projecting part of the responsibility on the victim," France's chief rabbi, Haim Korsia, told The Associated Press.

"What is the limit? ... Someone who walks in the street on Saturday morning on his way to the synagogue, isn't it too visibly Jewish? It doesn't end. And then, some people won't be allowed to wear a (Christian) cross in the street, to wear such or such religious sign?" he asked. "At some point, we have to defend the model of our society and it is a society of secularism and freedom of religious practice."

Jews face this challenge routinely, and widely.

Israel's foreign ministry has a "behavior recommendations" section on its website to ensure safety for Israeli travelers, advising against highlighting "your Israeli identity (in dress, equipment, behavior) when not necessary" or engaging in political arguments.

German Jewish leaders have suggested skullcap discretion in recent years, notably in areas with large Muslim populations. The Israeli ambassador to Denmark made a similar recommendation in 2013, drawing ire.

"I have plenty of French customers, Americans, Australians, from all over the world and I have noticed customers abroad tend to buy black kippas out of fear, so it won't be noticed," said Maya Tzidon, owner of a shop called Kippa Centre in Tel Aviv.

The kippa, traditionally worn by men, is meant to remind the wearer of God's presence over him. It has become customary for Orthodox Jews to wear the head covering throughout the day, while other Jews often only do so when they enter a synagogue, pray or perform a Jewish ritual.

Public signs of faith have put Muslims at risk, too.

U.S. Muslim women who wear headscarves are sharing guidance about what to do if they feel threatened, and some non-Muslims are wearing the hijab out of solidarity. Harassment, threats and vandalism directed at American Muslims has reportedly grown recently, notably in the wake of Islamic State-linked attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California, and comments by U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump.

In France, the skullcap debate has raised uncomfortable questions about French attitudes to religious garb, and whether they are fair to everyone in the country's multi-ethnic society.

It is illegal in France for Muslim girls to wear headscarves in public school, or for any woman to wear a face-covering Islamic veil in public. The headscarf law forbids kippas or extra-large Christian crosses in schools, too, but is widely viewed as targeting France's large Muslim minority and forcing them to adhere to secular rules.

Some French Jewish figures are calling for a compromise solution, such as wearing something else on your head instead. Chief rabbi Korsia called on Marseille soccer fans

to wear "a head covering, a hat, a cap" to the next big match, "as a way to say that we are in solidarity and we share the joy of soccer together."

The teacher targeted last week, Benjamin Amsellem, was deeply shaken and exhausted by the ordeal.

"It is something that no one can imagine and very difficult to live with," he said.

He is not alone. France records hundreds of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents every year, from vandalism to a vicious hostage-taking at a kosher market a year ago that killed four people. That is a big factor that drove nearly 8,000 French Jews to emigrate last year.

An Israeli government minister viewed the Marseille move as another sign that French Jews should emigrate, saying, "This will be the best solution."