

# Media and Anti-Semitic Discourse in France

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**Abstract.** France is one of the countries in Europe with the highest number of anti-semitism cases. This paper discusses the existence of anti-semitism discourse in the film *24 Jours: La Vérité sur l’Affaire Ilan Halimi* (2014). The focus of this paper is on the analysis of three narrations; Ruth's narration, kidnapper's narration, and the narration of the police. These three different focalizations reveal the trace of anti-semitism discourse and the power of the media to influence public opinion. Using the concept of Michel Foucault on the discourse of power, the results of the analysis show that in addition to turn Ilan as a martyr of anti-semitism crime in France, the film also becomes a media of criticism to spread anti-semitism discourse by police officers as a strategy to cover their failure in saving Ilan.

**Keyword:** *antisemitism, discourse, French film, media*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Anti-semitism is an attitude that shows various forms of hatred towards Jewish people, including the provision of negative stereotypes, discrimination, and alienation that are conveyed through various means and media in the realm of art, social, political and economic [1]. Negative stereotypes about Jews also continue to develop both at the mythical and sociological level.[2] Over time, the number of anti-Semitic crime cases has continued to increase and significantly spread, including in Europe. Antisemitic crimes lately also associated with increased conflict in the Middle East.[3] France is one of the countries in Europe with the highest number of anti-semitism criminal cases. This fact is followed by the large number of Jews in France who emigrated to various regions of the world, especially Israel, due to the high level of anti-semitism crime. Demographically, the number of Jewish population in France is the third largest Jewish population in the world after Israel and the United States.[4]

Anti-semitism's crime largely happens due to prejudice against Jews who regarded them as powerful people in the economic, financial and media fields.[5] One of the phenomenal anti-semitism case in France the abduction and murder of Ilan Halimi in 2006. Ilan Halimi was a young Jew who was kidnapped and tortured for 24 days before being killed by a criminal gang called *Les Barbares*. The Halimi family collaborated with Paris police authorities to try to free and save Ilan. The case ends with the death of Ilan who was killed by Youssouf Fofana, leader of the *Les Barbares* gang. This case quickly shocked the French and the world because of the brutal crimes of the abduction and the controversies about the underlying reasons for this crime. The French President at the time, Nicolas Sarkozy said in his speech that the Ilan

Halimi case was a case of anti-Semitic crime. Regarding to the government declaration and media exposure to the anti-semitism status of this crime, French and world society also believed that this murder is a crime based on anti-semitism.

The film industry also helped adapt the case of Ilan Halimi in the film media. A documentary show from Canada directed by Lewis Cohen, *L’Affaire Ilan Halimi*, also spread the case to the world. This television program exposed the testimony of various characters who participated in the handling cases and events. The big screen film is also produced with a film by Alexandre Arcady entitled *24 Jours: La Vérité sur l’Affaire Ilan Halimi*.

Studies of the *24 Jours* film have not yet been found, but studies of Jews and antisemitism in the context of French cinema have been done quite a lot. One of them is Serge Bokobza's article entitled “Expression of Jewish Identity in French Cinema: The Total Jew” in *The French Review* journal[6], which describes various Jewish identities in French films. Bokobza divided the identity of Jews in France into total Jews, paradoxical Jews, and hidden Jews. The adoption of Jewish identity in French films is not necessarily directly related to the issue of antisemitism. Another article which also discusses Jewish identity in French films is “Mathieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine* and The Ambivalence of French-Jewish Identity”[7] This article discusses the film *La Haine* which explores the position of Jewish identity in the contemporary social crisis in France. Sven Erik Rose, the author of the article also found that the film places Jewish identity in an ambivalent position, namely minority figures but has special rights as part of whites and middle social class.

Based on these two articles this paper will reveal the film position and ideology against the discourse of anti-semitism that is closely related to the case of Ilan Halimi.

## 2. METHOD

The method used is cinema studies, using the narrative film of Bordwell[8] and cinematographies concepts of Boggs and Petrie.[9] The concept of power of Michel Foucault [10]will be also used to reveal the power relations and the role of the media in spreading the anti-semitism discourse

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The *24 Jours* film is 1 hour 50 minutes long, with the storyline framed by the narrative of Ruth Halimi's character at the beginning and end of the story. The plot begins with the appearance of Ruth talking directly to the audience opening the story, then turning to the past, when the day Ilan Halimi was kidnapped by the group Les Barbares. Then chronologically, the narrative shows the process of police investigation, Ilan torture at the Les Barbares group headquarters, emotional dynamics in the Ilan Halimi family, and a wave of anger in the French community after the media raised the Ilan Halimi case and frame it in an antisemitic discourse. The film closes with the reappearance of the character Ruth Halimi as the narrator who confirms that his son, Ilan Halimi is a victim of antisemitic crimes.

### 3.1. Ilan Halimi's Abduction in Three Focalizations : The Mother, The Police, and Les Barbares

The framing of the storyline begins with Ruth's narration as a mother who does not believe that Ilan Halimi's abduction crime can occur in the context of French time today.

“My name is Ruth Halimi. I have three children. It was a cold winter day, and my life suddenly fell apart. How can things like this happen in Paris in 2006? But everything is real, too real. This happens to me, but it can happen to others” (00:00:57 – 00.01.26)

Ruth's first narration is a narration of a mother who lost her child. The narration does not indicate Ruth's ethnic and social background. This shows that a mother's sadness is what this film wants to highlight at the beginning.

Ruth's next narration and her focalizations throughout the film, seems to emphasize a mother's desire to save her child in any way. We can see that since the first email to announce the kidnappings and ransom requests from *Les Barbares*, Ruth immediately had a desire to pay the ransom. As well as the demand for the next ransom, Ruth always wanted to give ransom money for Ilan's sake, but Ruth's wish was blocked by the official procedure and the attitude of the police officers against the payment of ransom. In an investigation conducted by the police, Ruth looks like she does not give full confidence to the procedure.

After Ilan's death, the film then presents various polemics in the media about the Ilan case, whether it is included in the case of anti-semitism or just an ordinary criminal case. Most of the media narrative shows the dominance of anti-Semitism discourse, including images of demonstrations of the Jews in Paris and the politician statements. The film again puts Ruth's narrative and focalization on the tragedy that befell her son. There is no anger, but rather a deep sadness and pessimism faces an uncertain reality. The removal of Ilan Halimi's body to Jerusalem shows the apocalypse of Ruth's disbelief towards the security forces that represent the French government. Ruth looked at the future in France would not be better. Hatred against the Jews will continue, even death cannot break that hatred. On the one hand Ruth expressed hatred for Ilan (Jews) will never disappear, on the other hand Ruth's statement also shows implicitly prejudice and a never-ending grudge between victims and perpetrators of violence.

The plot then closes with Ruth's narrative showing the identity of the various community groups who helped address the case of Ilan Halimi. From Ruth's final narrative, it can be seen that there is acceptance for the kidnapping and murder committed on Ilan. Ruth's emotional turmoil, which was filled with anxiety, anger, and sadness, finally ended with a resigned and acceptable attitude toward Ilan's case. As a mother who lost her son's life. Ruth is considered a victim of negligence committed in the investigation of Ilan's kidnapping case. Anti-semitic discourse does not explicitly emerge from Ruth's narrative, but the transfer of Ilan's tomb to Israel indirectly confirms Ruth's view of the Ilan case. Ruth's view is a representation of fear of Jews in France, because the last ten years, we have seen many vandalism attacks on synagogues, schools, or Jewish cemeteries in France.[11]. The distrust of Ruth also shows the failure of Jewish integration and the communitarianisation of social life in France.[12]

The second narrative is the focalization of the French police. The police responded to Ilan Halimi's case in accordance with official procedures in France. The police represented by the Deland Commander figure, looked at Ilan's case as a regular criminal case and did not view the case as an anti-semitic crime. The police gave orders to the Halimi family not to pay ransom because ransom payments to kidnappers would trigger the appearance of other abduction cases. The Deland Commander emphasizes the phrase "*en France on ne paie pas*" (in France, we do not pay ransom). The Deland Commander's statement indicates that there is no preferential treatment for the Ilan case and that the procedures or means of the French government's policies are important to adhere to.

French police focalizations explicitly show that they control the process of investigation and diving business Ilan. Orders and restrictions on various acts, such as the concentration of communication and ransom negotiations on Didier, the ban on paying ransoms, the prohibition to communicate and negotiate with the kidnappers. Didier as Ilan's father, also mentally shaped his attitude by the police by bringing in a police psychologist, Brigitte, to help Didier

deal with kidnapers. The investigation and arrest of abducted perpetrators is also systematically and procedurally demonstrated, although in its development the police are only able to identify the group of perpetrators and their networks, but always fail to make the arrests. They also failed to find where Ilan was hidden.

Paris police narration and focalisation, on the one hand shows extraordinary police investigative abilities in uncovering *les Barbares* network, but on the other hand shows the slow execution of the investigative findings. In contrast to Ruth's focalisation, which was full of emotional expressions, police focalization was more flat and tended to be more worrying about the image of the French police than the safety of Ilan. The police also ignored the possibility of an anti-semitic discourse in this Ilan case from the start.

The third focalization to be discussed in this film is the focalization of the kidnapers group, *les Barbares*. According to *les Barbares*'s focalization, Ilan Halimi's kidnapping is basically based on financial reasons. A ransom request for a sum of money indicates that this kidnapping is just a normal kidnapping case. This is emphasized by the expression of two members of the kidnapping group Ilan Halimi who said that they participated in the abduction as promised money, and not because they have hatred against Jews.

Through their dialogue, it can be seen that the main reason *les Barbares* targeted the Jews, because it is in line with the stereotype of Jewish society in France which is identical with the group that is economically deemed to have more money. Ilan's killing was done in a forest, done by Fofana himself. The murder scene is not displayed visually, obscured by the leafy leaves in the forest. Before leaving, Fofana threw insulting words at Ilan, including the curse on his identity as a "dirty race".

It appears that the murder of Ilan Halimi was done with great anger and resentment but considering the interaction with Ilan is shown very little in this film, it can be interpreted that Fofana anger aimed at the police attempt to catch Fofana by spreading his face image and his anger because his attempt to get money failed. In this section racial sentiments appear. Although the anti-semitic discourse may not be the initial motive for this kidnapping, but in the end, hatred of certain races is a driving force for the murder of Ilan.

Through the analysis of the three focalizations above, there are differences to be noticed in the three views in viewing the incident of Ilan Halimi abduction. Ruth's view as the mother of the abductees, the views of police officers as the authorities, and the *les Barbares* group as abductors. This film is very minimal in featuring Ilan Halimi as a victim. The police are positioned as government institutions acting in accordance with procedures and methods, but their actions affect the families of victims and perpetrators of crime. For Ruth Halimi, the actions of the police officers were considered slow, less responsive, and caused Ruth to lose hope. As for *Les Barbares*, the prolonged kidnapping of Ilan made the tension in their group increase and culminated in anger when they knew the police were involved.

These three focalizations do not directly convey the discourse about antisemitism. At the beginning, they tend to ignore the aspect of ideology and see it as a regular criminal event. The discourse of anti-semitism begins with the debate within society through media opinion. Both government, social observers, and the general public are busy delivering their respective discourses, including anti-semitism discourse. Anti-semitism discourse seems to be given more space by the media, thus ultimately affecting the three focalisations in this film.

### **3.2. Anti-semitism Discours: Media Power**

Anti-Semitic crime has developed far from the Holocaust in World War II.[13] There are still a lot of films that raise it, but the *24 Jours* film raises more actual problems.

In the film *24 Jours*, anti-semitism discourse began to appear when members of *les Barbares* asking for a ransom through a rabbi. They played a sound recording containing Ilan's voice that emphasizes his identity as a Jew.

(My name is Ilan Halimi. I am the son of Didier and Ruth Halimi. I am a Jew. I'm a prisoner and I'm looking for help, Rabbi. Please. They will kill me. Do not leave me. Please. Please, I need help. Mother, please. Do not leave me alone. Do not leave me. Give them the money. Give them what they want. I cannot stand it anymore. God do not leave me. My dear mother....) (1:05:44 – 1:04:55)

The quotation shows that Ilan introduces himself as a Jew. As an abductee, Ilan's position is under the control of *les Barbares*. This suggests that *les Barbares*'s conspirators wanted to emphasize the identity of Ilan who is a Jew as the reason for the criminal gang to kidnap the young Jew. The disclosure of Ilan's Jewish identity continues to the fact that there is an increase in cases of Jewish abduction. This was affirmed through a conversation by José, one of the police officers, and the Rabbi. Therefore, one member of the police immediately had the idea that crime was more ideological, based on anti-semitism. Nevertheless, this thought was rejected by the Deland commander. This conversation began a debate about the existence of the discourse of anti-Semitism in the case of Ilan.

Media is an important factor in the formation of anti-semitic discourse in the Ilan case. There are two media shown in film, radio and television. Both are described as having the ability to manage the discourse dynamics about the Ilan case. Radio is initially dominated by Ruth's discourse as a mother who suffers greatly and misses her child. Ilan's death then gave Ruth the strength to express her true feelings.

(1:40:15 – 1:41:03)

Ruth: (You know, for 24 days, I did not say anything. I do what the police tell me to do, but today, as a courtesy to the torture Ilan received, I can no longer remain silent, I have no right to be silent. My son, Ilan, was chosen by these barbarians because he was a Jew. They mistreated him, tormented him alive, burned him, because he was a Jew. If he is not a Jew, he will not be killed. I want his death to sound a warning.)

Stressing the fact that his son was abducted because of his Jewish identity, the quote shows that Ruth had the idea that Ilan's kidnapping was due to anti-Semitism. The quote, in addition to showing emotional expressions, also affirmed Ruth's belief that her child's death was caused by racial sentiment.

Ruth's statement then spread more widely through television. It triggered demonstrations that encouraged people to take to the streets for antisemitic protest. A wave of protests and extensive media coverage of the case then prompted the French government, in this case the police to finally recognize the case as a criminal case of anti-semitism.

The power of discourse according to Foucault is about choice. The choice appears either to be to oppose truths with new truths, reality with new realities.[10] The status change of the Ilan case, is suspected due to the pressure of the Jewish community and the media. However, this film, through the focalization of the police officers shows another strategy that is more profitable French police. The police's decision to recognize Ilan's case as an anti-semitic crime then indirectly covered the debate about the police's failure to arrest the perpetrator and save Ilan. News releases indicating that there are controversies within the government's scope for the reason for the case also indicate the government's inability to determine the reason for the case. The discourse of anti-semitism as an alternative discourse used to cover up the failure of the police in responding to the Ilan case followed by the fact that the police managed to

uncover the abduction system of *les Barbares*, which added to the police glorification in the case. This is consistent with Foucault who states that the power of discourse can also determine the value or ideology chosen to be displayed.[14]

The highlight of the media's role in building discourse was when a French President addressed all media that the Ilan Halimi case was an anti-semitism crime. Soon it became a dominant discourse that marginalized other discourses. Discussions about Ilan, no longer highlighted the criminal case, but turned into a discussion about racial discrimination and antisemitism in particular.



**Fig. 1.** Jardin Ilan Halimi, Victime de l'antisemitism

The picture is a shot at the end of the film *24 Jours.*, it shows a nameplate garden with writing: "*Jardin Ilan Halimi, Victime de l'antisemitisme.*" (Garden Ilan Halimi, Victim of anti-semitism). This board is located in Ilan Halimi garden in Paris, built by the government as a memorial for the death of Ilan Halimi. Writing that states Ilan as a victim of anti-Semitism shows that officially, the French government recognizes it. Matched with the study of anti-Semitic crimes in France today [15], ideologically, this picture confirms that the anti-Semitic discourse in France still exists and needs to be addressed.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the focalization of Ruth Halimi, police officers, and *les Barbares*, the film intends to show the various versions of truth in the case of Ilan Halimi. Initially, the French authorities, known to the public for its success in dismantling Ilan Halimi's abduction case and the arrest of members of *les Barbares*, were positioned as the main reason for Ilan's death for their negligence in addressing the case. The conspirators of *les Barbares*, known as kidnapers of antisemitism, are positioned as criminals who only want money. This dismisses the existence of antisemitism as the basis of brutal treatment by members of *les Barbares* on Halimi.

The debate over the existence of anti-Semitism discourse in the case of Ilan's kidnapping has emerged since the investigation into the case is still underway. The debate occurred between members of the police who went directly to investigate Ilan's abduction. This debate is also reinforced by Ruth's belief that Ilan was kidnapped for being a Jew. The debate then developed into controversy spreading in the realm of French public authority and ultimately touching the realm of society. The position of film *24 Jours* in relation to the anti-semitism discourse becomes interesting. Stressing the power of the media in developing and changing discourse, film *24 Jour*, on the one hand strengthens the anti-semitic discourse in the Ilan

Halimi case through Ruth's focalisation; on the other hand criticizing the French police who use anti-semitic crime status to cover their fiasco.

## 5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by PITTA Grant 2018, Universitas Indonesia.

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