

GLOBAL

In protest rallies, tens of thousands of Jews in France and beyond demand ‘justice for Sarah Halimi’

BY CNAAN LIPSHIZ APRIL 25, 2021



A crowd of more than 20,000 people took part in the demonstration in memory of Sarah Halimi in Trocadero square, Paris, April 25, 2021. (Andrea Savorani Neri/NurPhoto)

PARIS (JTA) — Over 20,000 protesters, many of them Jewish, gathered in Paris to protest the French high court’s decision not to try a man who killed a Jewish woman while screaming about Allah.

Under the banner of “Justice for Sarah Halimi,” the rally Sunday at Trocadero Square, overlooking the Eiffel Tower, reflected the widespread indignation many French Jews feel at the April 14 ruling by their country’s top court. The decision affirmed lower courts’ findings that Halimi’s killer, Kobili Traore, was unfit to stand trial for

Halimi's 2017 murder because Traore's consumption of marijuana had made him temporarily psychotic.

Critics of the ruling said that Traore appeared to be in control of his actions during and after the murder. A lower court said that Traore killed Halimi, a 65-year-old physician, because she was Jewish. He called her a demon and shouted "Allah is the greatest" as he pummeled her in her third-story apartment, which he entered by force.

He then threw her out the window and shouted, "A lady fell down from the window!" to cover up his actions, witnesses said. He left the scene, allegedly to escape, and was arrested on a nearby street.

Traore, an immigrant from Mali and a neighbor of Halimi's, was 27 when he killed her.

Others have argued that even if Traore was psychotic at the time of the murder, he was criminally liable when he took the drugs that made him psychotic and should therefore stand trial. He has no documented history of psychiatric problems.



The protest against a ruling on the 2017 murder of Sarah Halimi drew thousands in Paris on April 25, 2021. (Cnaan Lihpshiz)

At the rally on Sunday in Paris, which was held under tight security in a cordoned-off enclosure, the umbrella Jewish organization CRIF played a video on a giant screen in which French Chief Rabbi Haim Korsia demanded another “trial of facts”, even if it ends without a sentence.

The rally is the first time in decades that a large number of French Jews have gathered to protest against institutions or actions of the French state.

Jacques Essebag, a French-Jewish comedian who is known by the stage name Arthur, said in a video message that he has “decided to start using drugs because in France you can do whatever you want, even kill your neighbor if you don’t like her, if you use drugs.” He then added: “What has become of this country.”

The event featured many French and Israeli flags, as well as those of the far-right Jewish Defense League.

A video message by Mayor Anne Hidalgo, a Socialist politician, provoked whistles and booing from many protestors at the event.

Organized by CRIF, the rally aimed “to show our astonishment at a decision that conforms to the the law, but not to justice.”

French President Emmanuel Macron has said he would advance legislation to prevent criminals from avoiding trial by using an insanity defense for actions committed under the influence of drugs.

Some Jewish organizations have used harsh language in describing the case. The conservative Europe-Israel group called the Halimi trial “the new Dreyfus Trial,” referring to the false anti-Semitic treason charges infamously leveled at a French-Jewish officer in 1894 that have long been seen as an illustration of institutional anti-Semitism in purportedly liberal European societies.

In addition to the rally in Paris, additional protest rallies are planned for Sunday in Marseille, Strasbourg and Lyon. Rallies are also scheduled in front of French embassies and consulates in Washington D.C., Los Angeles, Miami, Rome, London, Tel Aviv and the Hague.