In August 1934, a weekend of rioting between Muslims and Jews in the city of Constantine in eastern Algeria left 28 people dead, including 24 Jews and four Muslims. The trouble began on a Friday evening when a Jewish man who had been drinking insulted several Muslim men as they prepared for their evening prayers in a room adjacent to a mosque in the center of the old city. The police and military managed to disperse the angry crowd that gathered that evening in the Jewish quarter, and both Jewish and Muslim community leaders met with French colonial authorities the next day in an attempt to calm the city's population. In spite of these efforts, however, renewed fighting broke out again on the morning of Sunday, August 5, after provocative—and false—rumors spread about the alleged assassination of a popular local Muslim political reformer. For several hours, the police and military remained strangely passive as violent crowds of men looted Jewish-owned businesses and invaded Jewish homes, in some cases killing all of the occupants. Measured by the number of deaths, this was the worst episode of anti-Jewish violence in French territory during peacetime in the history of the French republic.

The violence broke out as French Algeria was being drawn into the turmoil that beset France in the decade before the Second World War. For several years, Constantine was shaken by conflicts that pitted the colonial republican establishment against an array of newer political organizations. These included an association of elected Muslim officials, resurgent groups of right-wing anti-Semitic leagues, and the Communist Party. In the riot's aftermath, the city's residents and colonial authorities struggled to understand its cause and meaning. Was it a momentary aberration or the result of long-nurtured grievances? Were Jews targeted by anti-colonial militants because some Jews on the municipal council
were allied with the city’s conservative political establishment? Had the Muslim population of the city come under the influence of European anti-Semitism? Were they acting under the influence of newer militant ideologies such as Communism or pan-Islamic nationalism?

I am currently writing a book that explores the specific and local history of this moment of violence to better comprehend the complex system of legal inclusion and exclusion that characterized the French colonial Republic’s policies toward Algeria’s indigenous Jewish and Muslim populations. Both Muslims and Jews were native to Algeria, but their lives developed differently during the colonial period. Algerian Jews were granted French citizenship in 1870, giving them both political representation and freedom of movement. Algerian Muslims, however, remained subject to a harsh colonial regime that gave them few political or legal rights and subjected them to an exploitative tax burden. I argue, however, that the riots of 1934 were not simply a predictable outburst of frustration of a colonized people that had come to see Algerian Jews as accomplices of a brutal colonizing power. In fact, since the 1890s, right-wing groups among the French settler population had frequently tried to provoke Muslims into violence against Algerian Jews, but without success. In 1934, such provocation appears to have worked, because of a particular dynamic that emerged from attempts to reform the political system of colonial French Algeria in the years after World War I by offering greater political representation to Muslim colonial subjects. In other words, the violence broke out precisely at the moment when all Algerians were experimenting with new forms of political inclusion. It was this experiment that made the city’s population vulnerable to the machinations of provocateurs.

Constantine is an especially valuable locale for understanding these political relationships between native Muslims and Jews. It was conquered after Algeria’s other major urban centers, such as Algiers and Oran, and a Muslim and Jewish middle class survived well into the 20th century. Constantine also housed an unusually active center of concerted political militancy on the part of Muslim elites at a time when most people living in Algeria took French sovereignty for granted as a more or less permanent condition. Finally, the turbulent years of the interwar decades left an unusually rich body of local archival sources, particularly in the police and military archives, which provide a detailed account of local interactions between Muslims and Jews in the city both before and after the riots of 1934.