

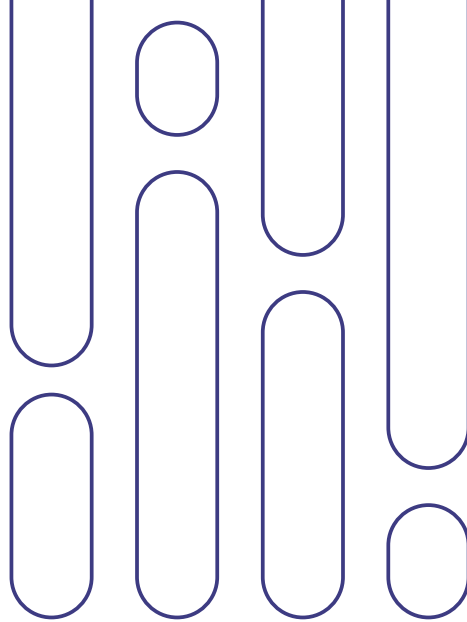
REPORT

Fatwa and Assassination: A Review of Khomeini's Fatwa Calling for the Death of Salman Rushdie

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Scholars have rarely addressed how Iran's 1979 revolution acted as an inspiration for violence across the Muslim world. Once limited to groups, violence was unleashed and sponsored by Khomeini and his clerics. This meant that violence became much more destructive and state sponsored, breeding terrorism and bloodshed. The ideological foundations of the Iranian state promote violence and the oppression of people.

In February 1989, Khomeini, the Iranian supreme leader at the time, issued a fatwa calling for the death of writer Salman Rushdie because of his book *The Satanic Verses*. The book was published in September [1988](#), and Khomeini issued his fatwa six months later. It was issued to exploit the writing of the book and strengthen the legitimacy of the Islamic revolution in the eyes of Muslims who were deeply offended over the contents of Rushdie's book. This fatwa was issued while the Iranian government faced domestic crises and conflicts among the different poles of [the system](#). It is believed that Khomeini verbally attacked Rushdie after the author criticized the former's policies.

This fatwa was a serious matter as it was issued by the supreme leader and it carried more weight than one issued by any other religious marja. Therefore, the fatwa carried great legal importance and was of significance even according to [modernist clerics](#). The supreme leader's fatwa can either lead to bloodshed or the eruption of religious and sectarian strife or create fertile ground for stability, peace, and tolerance. However, Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie encouraged violence and violated international law and the principles of the Islamic judicial system. Islamic Sharia limits the enforcement of legal edicts to the executive authority (the ruler), after conducting a fair trial in which the defendant exercises his right to defend himself/herself by providing evidence to counter the prosecution's charges.

The Text of Khomeini's Fatwa and Its Objectives

The text of Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie [mentioned](#), "I would like to inform all the intrepid Muslims in the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses*, which has been compiled, printed and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet and the Qur'an, as well as those publishers who were aware of its contents, have been declared *madhur el dam* [those whose blood must be shed]. I call on all valiant Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they find them, so that no one will dare to insult Islam again. Whoever is killed in this path will be regarded as a martyr." In addition, Khomeini closed the door for Rushdie's repentance by saying, "even if he repented and became the most pious on earth, it is incumbent on every Muslim to employ everything he has got, his life, and his wealth to send him to [hell](#)."

Khomeini's call for the execution of Rushdie holds significant legal implications, prioritizing the murder of the author as a necessity and not a minor issue. Current Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reaffirmed the [validity](#) of the death sentence against Rushdie in 2017, confirming that this matter is of immense importance to Iran's religious elite, and that Khomeini's fatwa was not temporary nor based on circumstances.

Following the attempted murder of Rushdie by an American Shiite of Lebanese origin, Iran did not disassociate itself from the fatwa, but rather the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan* lauded the attacker by writing, "Congratulations to this duty-conscious man, who attacked the apostate and the vicious Salman Rushdie." The newspaper further stated, "Let us kiss the hand of this person who tore the neck of [the enemy of God with a knife](#)." A cleric affiliated with the Lebanese Hezbollah praised the attacker of Salman Rushdie, adding that the author is not merely a

murtād (apostate) but someone who “fights” against Islam.

It is worth mentioning that Khomeini did not issue a fatwa to kill Rushdie alone, but rather to kill all those who helped him in editing, printing and publishing his book including those who sold the book. He called on “all” Muslims in the East and West, not governments or institutions, but rather the common people to kill all of them without delay “wherever they find them,” either in an Islamic or non-Islamic country. Therefore, he called for violence beyond the legal parameters of nation states and international norms. This approach is no different than the one adopted by ISIS and al-Qaeda in terms of killing and spilling blood without resorting to fair trails. Khomeini’s address to all Muslims reflects his arrogance as if he was the supreme leader of all Muslims not just Iranians, or the “Guardian of Islam and Muslims” as the Iranian media always echoes.

Legitimizing the Assassination: Implications of This Incident

This incident raised a question: how will Iran benefit from Rushdie’s assassination attempt even though it brought much negativity for the Iranian government? The answer is that the ruling elite of Wilayat al-Faqih in Tehran considers itself as the only legitimate representative of Islam. This traditionalist elite unquestioningly adheres to Khomeini’s legacy without considering its intended dimensions, following customs and norms which do not take into account time and place. This Iranian ruling elite makes no difference between inherited traditions and God’s intention on a particular matter, and it does not believe in the “theory of approval” (taswib), neither in main nor sub-principles of religion. The supreme leader’s say or perspective is above all marjas and jurists; thus, the opinions of people regard-

ing religious, political, economic and social matters are negated, according to Abdolkarim Soroush, an Iranian philosopher.

The other significant implication of this fatwa is to exclude the Other, i.e., people who hold different views. The Iranian religious elite excludes those who hold different ideologies at home and abroad. The authority does not listen to or respond to those who adopt variant ideologies and utilizes hard power policies against the Other.

Here, the issue is not to defend Rushdie's writing but to review Iran's policy in dealing with those who hold different beliefs or embrace different religions. Is the only solution according to the Iranian perspective to kill them? Why does not the Iranian ruling elite open dialogue or attempt to convince them of its point of view? Why does it not follow the Quranic verse "there shall be no compulsion in religion."? The Iranian ruling system should provide fair trials which abide by international laws and norms.

The main problem is not about the Shiite or Sunni heritage; i.e., their traditional ideologies, but about their extreme rightists who aspire to revive their old heritage without taking into account its contexts, outcomes, purposes, and circumstances.

The Iranian religious elite, headed by Khomeini, was and still is religiously traditional, conservative and politically radical. Their contributed interpretation is an extreme version of Shiism, similar to the Safavid interpretation that shifted Shiism from the waiting principle to state representation of the Infallible Imam. Jurists used to depend on jurisprudential tools, and the objectives of the Shariah (maqasid al-Shariah), however, after they took over power, they started to use the tools of statehood. The traditional conservatives cannot successfully lead the state because traditional perspectives of jurisprudence rarely tackle nationwide issues; these must be examined by po-

litical jurisprudence. Traditional conservatives often address issues related to individuals, which has constituted the main weakness in the religious seminary in the past and the present. However, Khomeini dealt with the state as a jurist and talker, rather than taking into consideration the logic of politics or the jurisprudence of necessity, reality, and priorities.

The fatwa calling for the death of Rushdie is not the first nor will it be the last. Takfiri fatwas and statements fuel the contemporary Shiite extremist right, especially their theory of the “centrality of the imamate for religion” theory. If someone denies this theory, he will be designated as leaving Islam. Al-Shaykh al-Sadiq said that whoever denies the imamate is a denier of the prophets. Al-Shaykh al-Mufid said that the “imamate theory agreed that whoever denies one of the imams is an infidel and deserves to stay in hell forever.” Ibn Naubakht said that “whoever denies the text is an infidel.” These opinions, even if they were stated in the past within certain doctrinal and verbal contexts, actually reflect mere sayings in history and cannot be implemented nowadays. If state institutions adopt these sayings, there is no doubt that extremism will erupt. Even if the sayings do not directly call for violence, they may fuel it somehow.

Significantly, the one who enforces legal decrees, according to Sunni and Shiite fundamentalists, is the ruler, historically known as the caliph or imam. This issue is not entrusted to the people, otherwise chaos and confusion will erupt. Al-Juwayni mentioned that, “In case the public is in charge of bloodshed and pulling guns, it is madness, wise men will never deny this fact.” The same position is adopted in traditional Shiite jurisprudence. Andrew Newman stated that the Hudud chapter in al-Kafi “does not contain any evidence for any official authorization by the infallible imams to implement the Hudud.”

Scholars of the World; Delusional Ambition

Jurists of Wilayat al-Faqih believe that they are scholars for the whole world, shunning the possibility of coexisting with any other culture or ideology. The Iranian jurist Morteza Motahari in his book *Society and History* mentioned these views on this matter. Iranians exercise violence in the region, which stems from their ideology in order to subject the region to their own perspectives. If Iranians delay confrontation and discrimination against those who hold different perspectives, they use taqiyya (conceal their affiliation with their faith) and resort to pragmatism to evade any excessive deterrence of international powers. If they have the opportunity, they will adopt the same behavior they have been using against the region, including destabilization attempts, supporting militias, and the violation of international law.” Henry Kissinger referred to this in his book *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*:

“A theocratic wielding supreme spiritual and temporal power was, in a significant country, publicly embracing an alternative world order in opposition to the one being practiced by the world community. The Supreme leader of contemporary Iran was declaring that universal religious principles, not national interests or liberal internationalism, would dominate the new world he prophesized”.

However, Kissinger concluded that by repeating such rhetoric and statements for over more than 30 years, the world became more acquainted with such Iranian radicalism whether in words, emotions, or deeds.

Despite the crime of the attempted murder of Rushdie, according to Western principles and values, the level of Western

condemnation was not equivalent to the actual incident. This attitude can be understood within the context of Kissinger's previous words (the world is acquainted with radicalism and violence), or Western interests with Iran, and the attempt of some American spheres of influence to create some kind of balance between Sunni and Shiite Islam in the region. Therefore, some of Iran's reckless actions in its domestic and foreign policy are tolerated.

Ironically, while the Iranians propagate the idea inside and outside the country that the Iranian government is the custodian of religion, the latter is sponsoring at the same time some writers of the extreme secular right who reject the decrees of Islam more than Rushdie, just because they serve the Iranian agenda, or oppose the policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, such as some Egyptian, Iraqi and Jordanian writers, and others.

Iranian elite jurists use specific parts of their religion and adopt pragmatism and taqiyya to delink themselves from any kind of dependency, so they can easily take political decisions and adopt even conflicting/opposing attitudes at the same time.

The assassination attempt on Salman Rushdie reflects the Iranian elite's concept of domination and mastery, and raising the supreme leader to a level of infallibility; so he is not subjected neither to criticisms nor suggestions for rectification. If Iran does not face backlash from regional and international actors, it may maintain an integration policy between fatwas and assassinations and shed more blood of Iranian and non-Iranian citizens. Such acts violate international law and norms and the principles of Islamic Sharia in terms of governance and judicial values and rules.

