

Association of American Publishers
INTERNATIONAL FREEDOM TO PUBLISH COMMITTEE

The Fund for Free Expression
A DIVISION OF HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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THE THREAT AGAINST SALMAN RUSHDIE

1,000 Days Later

SUMMARY

Even though Salman Rushdie and others connected with *The Satanic Verses* are every bit as much in danger today as they were on February 14, 1989, when the Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced a "fatwa," or death sentence, against them, virtually all governments -- including the United States -- seem to have contracted amnesia about this continuing human rights outrage. The state terrorism represented by the fatwa against Rushdie has all but disappeared as a point of concern between Iran and the rest of the world. Salman Rushdie has lived under a sentence of death for 1,000 days.

BACKGROUND

On February 14, 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeini issued the fatwa against Rushdie and all those connected with the publication of his novel, *The Satanic Verses*, on the grounds that it blasphemed the Islamic religion. Salman Rushdie went into hiding in England, and remains a virtual prisoner, shuttling

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from one "safe house" to another. The Ayatollah's pronouncement was met with worldwide condemnation. The International Committee for the Defense of Salman Rushdie called upon governments to "repudiate the threats made against Salman Rushdie and his publishers, and to take firm action to ensure that these threats are withdrawn." A number of Western governments broke off diplomatic relations with Iran to protest the death sentence.

The fatwa is hardly an academic or purely symbolic gesture. Even though Rushdie publicly embraced Islam in December, declaring "there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his last prophet," cancelled plans for a British paperback version of *The Satanic Verses*, and promised not to permit further translations in the future, Iran's leaders reaffirmed the death sentence, and a private Islamic foundation doubled the one million dollar bounty originally offered to anyone who would carry it out.

On July 3, 1991, Rushdie's Italian translator, Ettore Capriolo, was stabbed. On July 11, his Japanese translator, Hitoshi Igarashi, was murdered. No arrests have been made in those cases.

Earlier, several booksellers in Britain and the United States were the targets of bombs, and many others received threatening calls and letters. For a time, this resulted in the unavailability of the book at major outlets, and anyone who sells it is still at risk.

THE DIPLOMATIC AFTERMATH

While 1,000 days have not altered the threat to Salman Rushdie and others connected with *The Satanic Verses*, there has been a significant change in the attitude of other governments toward Iran, as the following chronology of diplomatic responses indicates.

On February 16, 1989, because Rushdie is a British subject, Britain issued a protest to Iran and froze plans to increase the size of its embassy staff in Teheran. Britain did not remove its personnel from Iran until February 20, following a second announcement by the Ayatollah Khomeini of the fatwa. The European Community then elevated the controversy to a diplomatic incident when ministers from the 12 EC nations recalled their heads of mission in Teheran and halted high-level contacts. The removal was proposed by French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas, who appeared to rule out the possibility of economic sanctions or an across-the-board break in diplomatic relations from the very beginning. In retaliation, Iran recalled its envoys from European Community nations.

In addition to pulling its diplomats out of Iran, Britain asked the Iranian government to withdraw its charge d'affaires and the one other Iran-based member of his staff from London. Foreign office officials said that this did not amount to a formal expulsion. Britain did not sever diplomatic relations, but insisted on what it called "reciprocity at zero."

On February 28, Iran passed a law that mandated a complete break of diplomatic relations with Britain on March 7 unless the British Government denounced Salman Rushdie and his novel. Shortly afterward, Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher asserted that the novel was offensive to many British people as well as to Moslems. However, because the British government refused to prosecute Rushdie and continued to permit the sale of his novel, Teheran went ahead and broke relations on March 7.

The West German government was the first to recall its head of mission from Iran, on February 17. The other EC nations followed West Germany's example after their February announcement. The Canadian external affairs minister announced the removal of the Canadian charge d'affaires on February 21. Austria, which is not a member of the EC, announced on February 22 that its ambassador to Teheran would be returning to Vienna for a "long stay," though he was not formally recalled in protest.

Japan, alone among the non-communist industrial states, made no change in its diplomatic relations with Iran. The Japanese government declined even to make an official protest and refrained from recalling its ambassador from Teheran.

At no time during the days and weeks following the death threat -- aimed at American citizens at Viking/Penguin, his publishers, as well as British subject Rushdie -- did President Bush or any other American official issue a forthright denunciation of this call for terrorism. Nor was there a clear public declaration that the United States government would act to protect the rights of Americans to write, publish, sell and buy books. Every comment on the matter was made in response to a reporter's question. An example was Vice President Quayle's March 16 remark at the National Press Club that while he had not read the book, it was "obviously not only offensive, but I think most of us would say in bad taste." President Bush, when pressed, said he would act if "American interests" were threatened.

Although the Bush Administration expressed support for the actions of the European nations, the only formal statement issued by the United States was uttered to disassociate the U.S. government from any activity offensive to Islam. The United States had economic sanctions against Iran and no diplomatic relations with the Iranian government at the time the fatwa was issued.

Both West Germany and France called for restrictive measures, in addition to the removal of heads of mission, to limit Iranian diplomats to a sixty kilometer radius around capital cities. The British rejected this proposal.

France quietly signaled its oil companies to slow down the purchase of Iranian oil. Japan also made import cuts, but the Japanese government asserted that the cuts were due to a seasonal decline in the use of oil in Japan.

On March 20 the European Community decided to allow its ambassadors to return to Iran in spite of the fact that the fatwa had not been revoked. They insisted that there was no change in the Community's rejection of the death order. Diplomats said that the decision to allow ambassadors to return was precipitated by Italy, Greece, Spain and Ireland, all of whom have small embassies in Teheran and found it difficult to operate without their top diplomats there. Only the British government objected. The ban on high-level contacts remained in place.

Italy's ambassador to Iran returned at the end of March. By April 10, those of Spain, Greece and Sweden had also returned. On May 24 a majority of the European Parliament signed a resolution calling on the 12 EC nations to break off all relations with Teheran and to make every effort to exclude the Iranian regime from the U.N. The resolution had little effect. All but the British, French, and West German heads of mission had returned to Teheran by the end of April. The latter two returned in June, just after Khomeini's death.

The death of the Ayatollah Khomeini produced a willingness on the part of the White House to hold talks with Iran's new leaders. Washington continues to condition the resumption of diplomatic relations to Teheran's help in freeing Western hostages still held in Lebanon. There is no evidence that the United States considers the fatwa an obstacle to the resumption of relations. The United States decided in June of this year to permit U.S. firms to buy Iranian oil for the first time since 1987.

An EC statement released at the end of July 1990 expressed respect for Islam. The conciliatory declaration was drafted to meet a condition set by the Iranian government before diplomatic ties with Britain would be restored. In return the EC expected Teheran to "modify" the threat against Rushdie, after which it would then agree to lift the ban on high-level diplomatic contacts.

On August 4, President Rafsanjani of Iran instructed its foreign ministry to restore diplomatic relations with Britain, after receiving further conciliatory remarks from British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd. Britain and Iran resumed diplomatic relations on September 27. British officials said that they understood from statements by Iranian officials that the Iranian government respected international law, and would not interfere in the internal affairs of another

country. However, the Iranian government continued to insist that it was not authorized to lift the death order. The alleged irrevocability of the fatwa was made clear before diplomatic ties were resumed.

Britain reopened its embassy in Teheran on October 28, 1990. In April of this year the European Information Service reported that Britain has conditioned the exchange of ambassadors on the release of hostages still held in Lebanon. Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd has stated that "relations between Britain and Iran have great potential but will remain stunted for as long as Britons are wrongly held in Lebanon." He has not insisted on the revocation of the fatwa.

Iran and the European Community may begin exploratory talks with a view to setting up a new trade and economic cooperation agreement. Italian Foreign Minister Gianni De Michelis said that he would recommend the EC exchange ambassadors with Iran.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Fund for Free Expression and the International Freedom-to-Publish Committee of the Association of American Publishers reiterate their strong support for Salman Rushdie, his publishers and others connected with the *The Satanic Verses*. In addition, we:

- urge that the matter of the continuing threat against Salman Rushdie and others connected with *The Satanic Verses* be restored to the top of the agenda of concerns between the community of nations and Iran;
- call upon the leaders of Iran to disavow the fatwa and condemn any actions, such as the violence that occurred this summer in Japan and Italy, or the bombing of bookstores in Britain, that are taken to carry it out;
- call upon the United States government to speak out clearly and forcefully against the death threat, the violence that has flowed from it, and the continuing danger to U.S. publishers, booksellers and readers.

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The Fund for Free Expression was created in 1975 to monitor and combat censorship around the world and in the United States. The Chair is Roland Algrant; Vice Chairs, Aryeh Neier and Robert Wedgeworth; Executive Director, Gara LaMarche; Associate, Lydia Lobenthal. The members are Alice Arlen, Robert L. Bernstein, Tom A. Bernstein, Hortense Calisher, Geoffrey Cowan, Dorothy Cullman, Patricia Derian, Adrian DeWind, Irene Diamond, E.L. Doctorow, Norman Dorsen, Jack Greenberg, Vartan Gregorian, S. Miller Harris, Alice H. Henkin, Pam Hill, Joseph Hofheimer, Lawrence Hughes, Anne M. Johnson, Mark Kaplan, Stephen Kass, William Koshland, Jeri Laber, Anthony Lewis, William Loverd, Wendy Luers, John Macrae, III, Michael Massing, Nancy Meiselas, Arthur Miller, The Rt. Rev. Paul Moore, Jr., Toni Morrison, Peter Osnos, Bruce Rabb, Geoffrey Cobb Ryan, John G. Ryden, Steven R. Shapiro, Jerome Shestack, Nadine Strossen, Rose Styron, Hector Timerman, John Updike, Luisa Valenzuela, Nicholas A. Veliotis, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Gregory Wallance and Roger Wilkins.

The Fund for Free Expression is a component of Human Rights Watch, which also includes Africa Watch, Americas Watch, Asia Watch, Helsinki Watch, Middle East Watch, and special projects on Prisoners' Rights and Women's Rights. The Chair is Robert L. Bernstein and the Vice Chair is Adrian W. DeWind. Aryeh Neier is Executive Director; Kenneth Roth, Deputy Director; Holly J. Burkhalter, Washington Director; Susan Osnos, Press Director.

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