The Fatwa

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A frail old man, wearing a black turban and ankle-length robes, stepped out of an Air France 747 into a chill February morning. His back hunched, he clutched the arm of a steward as he took faltering steps down a portable ramp to touch Iranian soil. After 15 years in exile, Ruhollah Khomeini had come home, the 78-year-old spiritual leader of a popular revolution that had toppled the shah of Iran and humbled SAVAK, his American-backed secret police force. Several million people from all across the country thronged into the capital to welcome the ayatollah, lining the 20-mile route out to Behesht-Zahra cemetery, where many of the martyrs of the revolution were buried. "The holy one has come!" they shouted triumphantly. "He is the light of our lives!" At the cemetery Khomeini prayed and delivered a 30-minute funeral oration for the dead. Then a boys' chorus sang, "May every drop of their blood turn to tulips and grow forever. Arise! Arise! Arise!"

In the decade between Khomeini's return to Tehran and the imposition of his fatwa on Salman Rushdie's novel The Satanic Verses -- and it was almost 10 years to the day that the one followed the other -- Islamism mutated from being a minor irritant to nationalist regimes in Muslim countries into a major threat to the West. The Rushdie affair, and the fatwa in particular, seemed like a warning that the seeds of the Iranian revolution were being successfully scattered across the globe, not least into the heart of the secular West.

And yet the fatwa was an expression as much of the failure of radical Islam as of its success. In 1989, the radicals in Tehran were on the defensive. Iran had been forced, the previous year, to abandon a bitter and bloody eight-year war against Iraq that cost the lives of up to a million Iranians. Khomeini was facing increased domestic opposition from reformers such as the speaker of the parliament, Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had condemned the "shortsightedness" of Iranian foreign policy for "making enemies without reason" and was pushing for improved relations with the West.

The fatwa was an attempt by the radicals to regain the initiative. And it set a template for what was to happen over the next two decades: the political failure of radical Islam matched by an increasing turn toward violence and terrorism -- and matched, too, by exaggerated fears in the West about the threat it was facing.

Through the 1990s, Islamist parties grew in influence in Turkey, Palestine, and elsewhere, shaking the very foundations of secular government. In Algeria a vicious and bloody civil war broke out in 1991 between the Groupe Islamique Armé and the secular military government, a war that spilled over into

acts of terror in France. The Taliban imposed its medieval rule on Afghanistan. The creation of Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon posed a mortal threat not just to Israel but also to secular organizations such as the PLO. Radical groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir gained a foothold within Muslim communities in Western Europe. And terror worked itself into the political landscape, from suicide bombings in Palestine and Lebanon, to bombings on the Paris Métro, the attack on American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and eventually the horror of 9/11.

While all this was happening, the Berlin Wall collapsed, and with it the vision of global socialism. Many young Muslims who had previously been attached to left-wing radical movements were now left politically homeless and searching for new ideological shelter. The collapse of the Soviet Union had also opened the way for the umma physically to extend its reach beyond the old Iron Curtain to embrace the new Muslim states of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Balkans.

Many analysts expected Islamists to sweep to power across the world. The former U.S. ambassador to Algeria, Christopher Ross, who in the wake of 9/11 would become a "special coordinator for public diplomacy and public affairs," declared in 1993 that the Middle and Near East were "fated to witness a wave of Islamist revolutions, successful or failed, over the next decade." A decade later, a CIA report predicted that Islamists would "come to power in states that are beginning to become pluralist and in which entrenched secular elites have lost their appeal."

It never happened. There was no second Iranian revolution. In places like Egypt, Jordan, and Malaysia, where the Islamists once held high hopes of repeating Khomeini's success, their influence has been curtailed, admittedly often through brutal repression. Outside of the rare cases where social convulsions shaped the political landscape for a short period, such as in Algeria in 1991, when elections took place on the eve of civil war, and with the single exception of Hamas in Gaza in 2006 (and the disputed Iranian elections of 2009), no Islamist party has ever won more than 20 percent of the popular vote. Parties that have broken through the 20 percent barrier (in Algeria, Tunisia, and Turkey, for instance) have done so largely by shedding their Islamist trappings, renouncing their dreams of a caliphate, and becoming ordinary political parties with Muslim leanings -- and in the process often becoming better democrats than the secularists they toppled.

We are left, then, with a paradox. On the one hand, Western societies have become increasingly fearful of Islamic terror, and politicians and commentators often talk as if the West is under siege from radical Islam. From the Rushdie affair to the electoral success of Hamas in Gaza, from the worldwide protests over the Danish cartoons to the increasing calls for the introduction of sharia law not just in Muslim countries but in secular Western nations too, Muslims seem increasingly drawn to radical arguments. On the other hand, not only has Tehran failed to export its revolution, but Islamist parties have mostly failed to win mass support. "For all its political successes in the 1970s and 1980s," Gilles Kepel writes in Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam, "by the end of the twentieth century the Islamist movement had signally failed to retain political power in the Muslim world, in spite of the hopes of supporters and the forebodings of enemies."

How can we explain this paradox? Terror is an expression of the impotence of Islamism; unable to win for themselves a mass following, jihadists have become impresarios of death, forced into spectacular displays of violence to gain the attention they cannot win through political means. Nothing reveals the moral squalor of radical Islam better than its celebration of the suicide bomber.

Traditional political and military movements nurtured as their greatest asset the people who supported them. For jihadists, people are like firecrackers to be lit and tossed away.

And yet this weakness has been transformed into strength by the political uncertainty and self-doubt that has seeped into Western societies. The key question, as Bill Durodie, senior fellow in Human Security at Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, writes in a 2007 essay, is not "what it is that attracts a minority from a variety of backgrounds, including some who are relatively privileged, to fringe Islamist organizations, but what it is about our own societies and culture that fails to provide aspirational, educated, and energetic young individuals with a clear sense of purpose."

The initial campaign against The Satanic Verses had minimal impact and drew little support from Muslim communities beyond Britain and the Indian subcontinent. It was Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa that drew global headlines. But the fatwa itself was a sign of weakness rather than of strength, an attempt by Khomeini to distract attention from defeat in the war with Iraq and the erosion of political support at home. In the West, it was not theological distress about blasphemy but political despair about belongingness and identity that stoked up anti-Rushdie sentiment.

One of the myths of the Rushdie affair is that the anti-Rushdie campaigners were all male, middle aged, poorly-educated, badly integrated, and devout to the point of blindness. Many were indeed like that. But many, equally, were young, left-wing, articulate, educated, and integrated. Few of these were religious, let alone fundamentalist. They were more familiar with the pub than with the mosque, had probably read Midnight's Children with more interest than they had the Quran, and were more likely to be clutching a packet of Durex than the Holy Book. Many had, like me, been involved in anti-racist campaigning in the 1980s. Many, indeed, had been my friends. And for many, Salman Rushdie had been a hero: In the early 1980s Rushdie was better known for his anti-racist rhetoric than for his incendiary assaults on Islam.

So why were people like this drawn to the anti-Rushdie campaign? Partly because of anger at the level of racism they faced. Partly because of disenchantment with the left with which many were involved. And partly because of the growth of multiculturalism as an official political policy. Multicultural policies suggested the inability, even unwillingness, of British politicians and institutions to reach out to young Asians as citizens rather than as members of a "community of communities." It suggested, too, the abandonment by many politicians of basic liberal notions of equality, individual rights, and freedom of expression. The reluctance of politicians to speak to their resentments, the aversion of many to a language of common citizenship, and the willingness to appease Islamist sentiments in the name of multiculturalism, inevitably pushed many young Muslims toward an Islamist identity, even if there was little within that identity to pull them in.

What is true of the response to the fatwa is equally true of the response to the jihad. On 9/11, the hijacked planes tore into the fabric, not simply of the World Trade Center and of the Pentagon, but also of Western self-assurance. "If a flight full of commuters can be turned into a missile of war," observed the New York Times, "then everything is dangerous." This erosion of self-belief, as much as the reality of the threat facing the West, has created a culture of fear, connecting the burning of Rushdie's book to the burning towers in Manhattan. Islam, as Olivier Roy has written, "is not the cause of the crisis" in the West; it is rather "a mirror in which the West projects its own identity crisis."

An assertive, self-confident society that possessed moral clarity about its beliefs would have little trouble dealing with the claims of fundamentalists, and indeed with the acts of terrorists. The insecurities of Western societies about the worth of basic liberal values and the emergence of fear as a dominant sentiment, have, however, made Islamists appear more potent than they are. "Vulnerability is never the best proof of strength," as the Muslim philosopher, and spokesman for the anti-Rushdie campaigners, Shabbir Akhtar put in his book Be Careful with Muhammad, mocking the doubts of Western liberals. From fatwa to jihad, Western politicians and intellectuals have not only exaggerated the threat facing their societies but have also lacked the moral and political resources to respond to it. That is the real lesson of the past two decades.

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