



Death to Rushdie, Again

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[Robert Spencer](#)

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The more things change, the more they stay the same: as the clamor for Salman Rushdie's death grows in the Islamic world, it is hard to avoid a sense of *déjà vu*. For many, the Rushdie Affair of 1989, when Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini first issued the now-notorious fatwa calling for Rushdie to be murdered, was their introduction to the Islamic fanaticism that now dominates the daily headlines. But now that Rushdie appears in public with some frequency and doesn't seem concerned about the death fatwa (even though it was reaffirmed by the Ayatollah Khamenei in 2005), the reaction in the Islamic world to his being [named a Knight Bachelor by Britain's Queen Elizabeth II for "services to literature"](#) may seem incongruous to Westerners. Could Muslims possibly still be angry with Salman Rushdie, after all these

years? The answer that is coming from Islamic countries this week is an emphatic yes.

In Azerbaijan, the coordinator of the Centre for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion (DEVAMM) in Azerbaijan, [Ilqar Ibrahimoglu, said](#) of Rushdie's being knighted that "such measures can be the cause of the strengthening aggression of the West against Islam. They provoke Muslims. Muslims should be very careful, watchful and cold-blooded." The reaction from Iran, meanwhile, was predictable. The newspaper [Jomhuri Eslami sneered](#): "The question is what the old British crone sought by knight-ing Rushdie, to help him? Well, her act only shortens Rushdie's pathetic life." Mohammad Reza Bahonar, the first deputy speaker of the Iranian parliament, [told the assembled](#)

[delegates](#): “Salman Rushdie has turned into a hated corpse which cannot be resurrected by any action. The action by the British queen in knighting Salman Rushdie, the apostate, is an unwise one.” Not only unwise, but insignificant: “The British monarch lives under this illusion that Britain is still a 19th century superpower and that bestowing titles is something still deemed important.”

Yet it seemed important indeed to the Iranians. Mohammad Ali Hosseini, a spokesman for the foreign ministry, [found in the knighthood evidence](#) of a moral defect among the British: “Knighting one of the most hated figures in the Islamic world is a clear sign of Islamophobia among high-ranking British officials. Honouring a hated apostate will definitely put the British statesmen against the Islamic community and hurts their feeling once again.” And he saw the honoring of Rushdie as part of a larger conspiracy against Islam: “Insulting Islamic religious sanctities is not accidental but organised and is taking place with the support and direction of some Western countries.”

An Iranian jihadist group, the Organisation to Commemorate Martyrs of the Muslim World, offered \$150,000 to anyone who finally killed Rushdie. Group leader [Forouz Rajaefar said](#): “The British and the supporters of the anti-Islam Salman Rushdie could rest assured that the writer’s nightmare will not end until the moment of his death and we will bestow kisses on the hands of

whomsoever is able to execute this apostate.”

The reaction from Pakistan was even more ominous. Protestors in Multan, Karachi and Lahore burned Rushdie and Queen Elizabeth in effigy, chanting “Death to Britain, death to Rushdie” and burning British flags also. Islamic leaders promised larger protests after Friday prayers this week. Mohammed Ijaz ul-Haq, the Pakistani religious affairs minister, [declared before the Pakistani parliament](#): “This is an occasion for the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims to look at the seriousness of this decision. The West is accusing Muslims of extremism and terrorism. If someone exploded a bomb on his body he would be right to do so unless the British Government apologises and withdraws the ‘Sir’ title.” After receiving criticism for apparently justifying a suicide attack, Ijaz ul-Haq later modified this statement, [saying](#): “If someone blows himself up, he will consider himself justified. How can we fight terrorism when those who commit blasphemy are rewarded by the West? We demand an apology by the British government. Their action has hurt the sentiments of 1.5 billion Muslims.”

Muslim leaders in Britain [were just as unhappy](#). Abdul Bari, the secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain, said that “many will interpret the knighthood as a final contemptuous parting gift from Tony Blair to the Muslim world....The insensitive decision to grant Rushdie a knighthood can therefore only do harm to the image

of our country in the eyes of hundreds of millions of Muslims across the world.” Lord Ahmed, Britain’s only Muslim peer, also criticized the outgoing British prime minister: “It’s hypocrisy by Tony Blair who two weeks ago was talking about building bridges to mainstream Muslims, and then he’s honouring a man who has insulted the British public and been divisive in community relations.”

Thus Salman Rushdie once again indicates just how large is the gulf between the Islamic world and the post-Christian West in matters of freedom of speech and expression. Freedom of speech encompasses precisely the freedom to annoy, to ridicule, and to offend. If it doesn’t, it is hollow: inoffensive speech doesn’t need the protection of a constitutional amendment. The instant that any person or ideology is considered off-limits for critical examination and even ridicule, freedom of speech has been replaced by an ideological straitjacket. For years now, Islamic states and organizations around the world have painted Salman Rushdie as a symbol of evil as they have attempted to place Islam off limits not just for ridicule, but for any investigation into the elements of the religion that encourage violence against unbelievers,

discrimination against women and religious minorities.

The entire Rushdie Affair, both in 1989 and in its new phase, is a sobering and instructive reminder of the gulf between the perspectives of the West and the Islamic world, and of the latter’s determination to silence anyone they considered to have offended Islam. British and other Western leaders thus have a new opportunity in the controversy over Rushdie’s knighthood to explain that freedom of speech is part of a view of the dignity of the human person that is ultimately rooted in Judeo-Christian conceptions that are superior to the Islamic view of human beings as slaves as Allah. They could mount an ideological challenge to jihadism by pointing out that if submission to God and abhorrence of blasphemy are really worth anything, they are much more valuable if chosen freely, rather than being coerced. But they can only be chosen freely if the freedom not to choose them is also present.

In today’s multiculturalist fog, no Western leader dares speak this way. Those who value freedom should simply be grateful that Rushdie was knighted at all, and hope that in the firestorm that is now certain to come, the honor will not be rescinded.

Robert Spencer is a scholar of Islamic history, theology, and law and the director of [Jihad Watch](#). He is the author of five books, seven monographs, and hundreds of articles about jihad and Islamic terrorism, including [Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions About the World's Fastest Growing Faith](#) and [The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam \(and the Crusades\)](#). He is also an Adjunct Fellow with the Free Congress Foundation.