

# Is Salman Rushdie a Free Man?

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## Brief Analysis

On September 24, 1998, just two days shy of the tenth anniversary of the original publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi made a major statement in the presence of his British counterpart: "The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has no intention, nor is it going to take any action whatsoever, to threaten the life of the author of *The Satanic Verses* or anybody associated with his work, nor will it encourage or assist anybody to do so. Accordingly the government dissociates itself from any reward which has been offered in this regard and does not support it."

Many commentaries on this episode were near-ecstatic. For example, National Public Radio concluded that "the assassination threat is now officially lifted . . . Rushdie is about to get his life back." Rushdie himself could hardly have been more euphoric. "This looks like it's over. It means everything, it means freedom. An extraordinary thing has been achieved." He conceded that there may be one or two "self-styled hard-liners" still in England but said they had no importance.

> At first glance, Kharrazi's statement does appear to mark a substantial retreat from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death edict against Rushdie of February 1989. But like any carefully crafted document, Kharrazi's remark has to be read carefully; the more closely analyzed, the less of a change it represents.

What Kharrazi's Declaration Does Say: The statement has three parts:

- Tehran will not attempt to kill Rushdie or others connected with *The Satanic Verses*. This breaks no new ground. For years, Tehran has told the United Kingdom and other European states that, while the edict cannot be formally revoked, it has no intention of operationalizing the sentence. Already in June 1989, just days after Khomeini's death, an unofficial Iranian spokesman in London, Kalim Saddiqui, announced that whereas the death threat would not formally be withdrawn, Tehran "is prepared to let the matter drop." The Iranians have time and again repeated this formulation. In perhaps the strongest such statement, 'Ali Ahani, director general for Western Europe in Tehran's Foreign Ministry, asserted in December 1997 that the Rushdie edict "is a purely religious matter, with which the Iranian Government has nothing to do." This message was clearly heard in the West. When asked in April 1997 what benefits Europe's critical dialogue with Iran had won, German foreign minister Klaus Kinkel listed as an accomplishment "the verbal promise that Iran will not send any killer commandos against writer Salman Rushdie."
- Tehran will not encourage others to kill Rushdie. Iranian officials have only occasionally made this point before, but they have done so. In May 1997, the Iranian ambassador to Hungary clearly stated that "Iranian leaders have never said or suggested that someone should kill this person," referring to Rushdie.
- Tehran dissociates itself from the award of up to \$2.5 million put forward by the 15th Khordad Foundation for the carrying out of Rushdie's murder. Tehran has also made this point before. For instance, in February 1997, then-President 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said, "This foundation is a non-governmental foundation and their decisions

are not related to government policies."

What the Document Does Not Say: Of no less note is what Kharrazi's statement does not say. Most important, he neither repudiated the edict nor in some fashion limited it, and he did not take issue with the edict or contest its validity as the basis of government policy. In fact, there is near-unanimous agreement among the Iranian elite that the decree against Rushdie is:

- A permanent sentence. Twelver Shi'i Islam, the sort practiced in Iran, distinguishes between two types of religious pronouncements, a fatwa and a hukm, with the former remaining valid only during the lifetime of the religious authority who issues it and the latter continuing beyond his death. Through the past decade, Iranian spokesmen have unanimously deemed the sentence on Salman Rushdie a hukm. Thus, Ayatollah 'Abdallah Javadi-Amoli stated in February 1997: "This is not a fatwa which died with the death of the religious leader who issued it . . . It is a hukm which is permanent and it will stay in place until it is carried out." Iranian media have reiterated this point, sometimes expressly mentioning the hukm fatwa distinction. Tehran radio asserted in July 1998, for example, that "what the imam [i.e., Khomeini] issued against Rushdie was a hukm, an explicit ruling of an irrevocable nature that has wider scope than a fatwa."
- Beyond the competence of the government to affect. Mahmud Du'a'i, deputy chairman of the Iranian parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, called the death sentence on Rushdie "an unchangeable religious decree." The Foreign Ministry spokesman concurred: "A fatwa issued by a supreme religious jurisprudent is irrevocable." And Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the head of several powerful government bodies, declared, "The issue [of Salman Rushdie] was definitively decided by the imam and no one has the authority to revoke the imam's fatwa."
- Governmental policy. At one point in 1997, Iran's chief negotiator with London, Muhammad Javad Larijani, sought to dissociate the regime from Khomeini's edict by quoting Khomeini: "I have expressed my views as a seminarian, and the government should pursue its own path on the basis of its own calculations." In retort, the prime minister at the time of the edict in 1989, Mir-Hoseyn Musavi, vehemently replied: "Not only did the imam not say such a thing to the government, on the contrary, he sent a message to me urging the government also to adopt a position on this issue . . . on the very day when the imam's edict was issued." Musavi went on to chronicle how he fulfilled Khomeini's orders and put his government on record to "implement any appropriate action" against Rushdie.

Conclusions: The Kharrazi statement merely restates a well-worn Iranian position and in no fashion breaks new ground. Why then did Kharrazi's statement win such a momentous reception? The Associated Press was on the mark: "Kharrazi and [British foreign minister Robin] Cook sought to portray the move as something new and significant as a way to improve ties that have remained strained over the issue." And why such a push to improve ties? One can hardly provide a better answer than to quote Salman Rushdie himself, speaking in 1997: "When it's Danish feta cheese or Irish halal beef against the European Convention on Human Rights, don't expect free expression to win." The lure of the Iranian market, however small, is a mighty one.

Finally, a few words of caution directed to Salman Rushdie. He would do well to temper his enthusiasm about this latest Iranian statement. For more than nine years, the Iranians have promised that Khomeini's edict would not be fulfilled, yet Rushdie himself revealed in 1997 that the British Foreign Office had several times informed him about "real attempts" on his life. And agents of the Iranian government are only one potential source of assassins; another are Ayatollah Khomeini's devoted acolytes. Many fundamentalist Muslims hold the late Iranian leader in uniquely high regard and allow no mere bureaucrats to negate his pronouncement. For them, the death sentence remains an irrevocable legacy of Khomeini, far beyond the control of apparatchiks in Tehran.

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