

# The Rushdie Attack

He was assaulted by an enemy of free speech while about to speak in defense of free speech, a principle of which he has been a staunch and brave supporter.



by Theodore Dalrymple

The man suspected of the attack on Salman Rushdie, Hadi Matar, grew up in the United States and was born nine years after Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued his notorious fatwa. Little else is known of him, though some people acquainted with him earlier in his life have told reporters that (as is often the way in such cases) that they were surprised by his action, for he seemed a normal and friendly person.

If Matar's profile is confirmed, it will demonstrate once again the effect that a violent, aggressive, and totalitarian ideology may exert on people, though the question remains as

to whether ideologies choose men, or men choose ideologies. No doubt a dialectical relationship exists between personality and ideology.

Future histories will see the Salman Rushdie affair, which followed the publication in 1988 of his novel, *The Satanic Verses*, as a pivotal moment in the history of Islamism: for the British response, and that of the West as a whole, was weak and vacillating, encouraging Islamists to imagine that the West was a kind of rotten fruit, ripe to fall from the tree, and therefore susceptible to terrorist attack. The Rushdie affair was to Islamists what the annexation of Crimea was to Vladimir Putin, or, indeed, the occupation of the Saarland to Hitler.

Britain did break off diplomatic relations with Iran over the matter but restored them when the regime softened its stance somewhat: it said that it would neither help nor hinder attempts to kill Rushdie. Naturally, Britain did not break relations off again after the regime hardened its stance and announced that the fatwa stood as before.

Internally in Britain, no one was prosecuted for having publicly called for the death of Rushdie, a call clearly not meant metaphorically. This inaction, no doubt, was designed to keep the peace, to avoid creating martyrs, and so on—a [Danegeld](#) payment—but Islamists interpreted it as weakness, cowardice, and a lack of real commitment to the expressed principles of liberal democracy. Again, they saw the fruit as rotten and ripe for falling.

In this, they were not entirely correct. For many in Britain, Rushdie was not a completely admirable or likeable figure. He was certainly not complimentary about Margaret Thatcher, prime minister at the time, who nevertheless defended him. In 1982, for example, he wrote an [essay](#) that begins:

*Britain isn't South Africa. I am reliably informed of this.*

*Nor is it Nazi Germany. I've got that on the best authority as well. So let me concede that . . . Auschwitz hasn't been rebuilt in the Home Counties. I find it odd, however, that those who use such absences as defences rarely perceive that their own statements indicate how serious things have become. Because if the defence for Britain is that mass extermination of racially impure persons hasn't yet begun, or that the principle of white supremacy hasn't actually been enshrined in the constitution, then something must have gone very wrong indeed.*

This is unpleasant and stupid. It implies that the absence of Auschwitz was a fact of minor significance—or, as the French nationalist politician Jean-Marie Le Pen put it in another context, that the Holocaust was but an historical detail. The logic does not do much credit to Rushdie's expensive education. It is as if the denial by a man accused of having committed a murder were taken to show just how bad he really was, if all he could say in his defense was that he didn't do it.

Despite having likened the British government to a Nazi regime, Rushdie was protected by it at public expense for several years—and rightly so. Free speech must be defended, irrespective of whether those who exercise it are wholly admirable. The person does not defend free speech who demands only that those with whom he agrees should be heard or free to speak.

Salman Rushdie is hospitalized and in apparently serious condition; “the news is not good,” his agent says. Rushdie was attacked by an enemy of free speech while about to speak in defense of free speech, a principle of which he has been a staunch and brave supporter. His assailant and likeminded others are believers in an alien ideology that we find repellent. But are they the only—or even the main—threat to free speech in the West today?

First published in [\*City Journal\*](#).