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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Sandy English

16.08.2022

Novelist Salman Rushdie attacked in New York

On Friday, a man rushed the stage and stabbed the Indian-British writer Salman Rushdie as he was preparing to participate in an interview at a literary retreat in Chautauqua, in western New York state.

Rushdie was stabbed repeatedly. He suffered life-threatening injuries to his neck and damage to his liver and arm. The writer was put on a ventilator at a hospital for several days, though he was recently removed and is said to be speaking to hospital staff. He is expected to live, although he may lose an eye.



Salman Rushdie in 2018 (Photo credit–ActuaLitté)

The despicable attack on the prominent 75-year-old writer no doubt occurred because Rushdie is the author of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), about Islam's founder, the Prophet

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Mohammed, and his temptation by the devil. Islamic fundamentalists regard the novel as blasphemous. After its publication, the Shia cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of Iran in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, issued a fatwa, a religious ruling, that encouraged Muslims to take his life.

Authorities have identified the alleged assailant as Hadi Matar, an American citizen living in New Jersey. Matar apparently planned his attack by purchasing a ticket to the event in advance and taking a bus to the venue.

Matar, 24, is the son of Lebanese immigrants, and, according to media accounts, had a Facebook page that was decorated with images of Islamic fundamentalist leaders, including Khomeini. Matar appeared in court on Saturday, charged with attempted murder and other crimes. He pleaded not guilty.

Khomeini's fatwa had an enormous international impact when it was issued. Hundreds of thousands demonstrated in Iran and Pakistan against the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie's Japanese translator was murdered in 1991, the same year that his Italian translator was seriously wounded. In 1993, his Norwegian publisher was shot three times and an attempt on the life of Rushdie's Turkish translator resulted in the deaths of 37 Alevi Muslims in a hotel in Sivas in central Turkey, a massacre that is still commemorated by Alevis.

Large American booksellers effectively banned the novel from distribution in the United States. The imperialist powers used the incidents to fan the flames of anti-Muslim chauvinism and war plans against Iran.

Rushdie was forced into hiding and lived a semi-clandestine life for years. More recently he has become a visible part of the literary scene in New York City and a spokesman for persecuted writers. There was no extra security to protect Rushdie at the event in Chautauqua.

The Islamist regime in Tehran has never rescinded the fatwa, though it has downplayed the ruling during the last decade in which it was engaged in negotiations with the imperialist powers.

The essential political issues behind the persecution of Rushdie, however, have come alive again. The masses in Iran and the Middle East remain under threat from American imperialism. They have suffered countless depredations from the United States, Britain, France and Germany and other powers since 1989, including the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 Iraq War, which destroyed the social and physical infrastructure of the country, the 2011 bombing of Libya, which turned the country over to Islamist militias, and the intervention in the Syrian civil war after 2014 on the side of Islamic fundamentalist rebels. Muslims in America and Europe have continually suffered from discrimination and violence.

The recent media coverage given to supposed Iranian attempts on the lives of dissident journalist Masih Alinejad in New York City and that of the imperialist warmonger John Bolton indicate the immense tensions that exist and that the US still views Iran as an impediment in the region and an obstacle in its drive against Russia and China.

However, the cowardly attack on Rushdie in no way advances the interests of the working class or the rural poor in the Middle East or Iran, or those of immigrants in North America or Europe. The Iranian regime remains a reactionary bourgeois state, hostile to the working class, and, like the other states in the region, seeking compromise with the imperialist powers at every turn. Islamic fundamentalism has been used by bourgeois and petty bourgeois leaders to divide the working class along religious-communalist lines everywhere in the world.

In 1989 amidst the mass protests against *The Satanic Verses* and following the fatwa issued by Khomeini, the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, issued in *the Bulletin*—one of the print forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site*—a statement in defense of Rushdie in opposition to the fatwa. It noted in part:

“The Workers League emphatically condemns the threats which have been made by the Khomeini regime in Iran against the life of the noted British author, Salman Rushdie. We call upon the international workers movement to extend solidarity to Rushdie, whose assassination has been demanded by a crisis-ridden bourgeois nationalist regime...

“Our unflagging and continuing defense of Iran against imperialist provocation, based as it is upon the strategic interests of the revolutionary proletariat and the development of the class struggle within Iran itself, neither implies nor is reducible to support for the policies

of Khomeini. The economic foundations of his regime are thoroughly capitalistic, and the policies of the theocratic rulers have, in essence, served the interests of the Iranian bourgeoisie.”

Now as then, the imperialist leaders have bemoaned the persecution of writers and sought to posture in defense of freedom of expression. The likes of French President Emmanuel Macron—whose government is sponsoring anti-democratic, anti-immigrant legislation and persecuting the Islamic cleric Hassan Iquioussen—and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson—up to his elbows in the deaths of thousands from COVID—have each issued statements in support of Rushdie. The widely despised Johnson said that he was “appalled” that Rushdie was attacked “while exercising a right we should never cease to defend.”

US President Joe Biden issued a statement asserting that he stood with Rushdie, who, “with his refusal to be intimidated or silenced—stands for essential, universal ideals. Truth. Courage. Resilience.”

One can hardly imagine a more sickening display of hypocrisy. Biden, Johnson and company have issued their own fatwa against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who has been tortured in Belmarsh Prison awaiting extradition to the US. There American authorities plan to put him on trial for his own extraordinary courage in revealing to the world the truth about the murderous character of the US intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.

World Socialist 15.08.2022