OPINION

'With the attack on Salman Rushdie, has Shiite jihadism now escaped from the national rationales of its Iranian creators?'

The fatwa issued in 1989 by Ayatollah Khomeini was meant to assert his dominance over radical Sunni groups. Political scientist Gilles Kepel analyzes the long rivalry between these denominations, leading to the attack on Salman Rushdie carried out by a Shiite Muslim.

Le Monde

Published on August 17, 2022 at 15h05, updated at 15h05 on August 17, 2022 · 6 min. · Lire en français

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On February 14, 1989, on the eve of the Russian army's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, issued the fatwa condemning Salman Rushdie to death, on the grounds that his novel *The Satanic Verses* allegedly blasphemed the Prophet. The date chosen by the Shiite leader was intended to distract the Muslim world from the expected victory of his Sunni rivals who, backed by the CIA and financed by Saudi Arabia and oil-rich monarchies, were to drive out the forces of communist atheism that had invaded Afghanistan a decade earlier.

Immediately afterward, the worldwide scandal triggered by the fatwa (an Iranian ayatollah sentencing a British citizen to death on British soil was unheard of at the time) had the effect Khomeini wanted. He had pulled the rug out from under the feet of Sunni Islamism, which had hoped to use the Soviet defeat to appear as the hero of all "humiliated and offended" Muslims around the world. Not many people noticed the Soviet defeat at the time, although it came to have decisive geopolitical consequences, leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 and to the death of communism.

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The ayatollah had won the media war, and it allowed him to regain control of the battle for dominance in revolutionary Islamism. In his 1996 manifesto *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*, Ayman al-Zawahiri (who was killed by an American missile in July in Kabul) had written about the need to strike the great blow for Sunni jihadism which would be "the blessed raids" of September 11, 2001. This allowed Al-Qaeda to monopolize the news cycle by sowing death in the West, at the expense of its rivals in Tehran.

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'Atmospheric jihadism'

Yet the fatwa continued its devastating effects after Khomeini's death in June 1989: It was even taken up by his Sunni rivals, who added to it by issuing a death sentence for Danish cartoonists who had published drawings of the Prophet deemed blasphemous in a Danish newspaper in September 2005. These same caricatures were later republished in *Charlie Hebdo*, which led to the January 7, 2015 massacre committed by the Kouachi brothers. This event marked the start of the Islamic State group's activity in Europe and the beginning of the departure of thousands of young French Muslims for Bilad al-Sham – the Islamic name for the Levant.

This shows the extreme sensitivity of the issue of "defending the Prophet's honor" for all the Islamist movements that try to instrumentalize it in order to motivate their fellow believers to carry out a global jihad against the Judeo-Christian West – or "Zionist-crusader", as they call it.

The most recent jolts came in September 2020, when *Charlie Hebdo's* editorial staff republished the cartoons at the start of the trial of the January 2015 killings. There were three new deadly reprisals. The first was on September 25, when Pakistani Zaheer Hassan Mahmood, in response to huge demonstrations in his native country demanding the beheading of "blasphemers," acquired a butcher's knife and attacked two people in front of *Charlie Hebdo*'s former headquarters. The second was on October 16, when the Chechen Abdullakh Anzorov beheaded teacher Samuel Paty in front of his school near Paris, after hate messages targeting him were posted online. The third occurred on October 29, the Prophet's birthday, when a Tunisian illegal immigrant stabbed three Catholic worshippers in the Notre-Dame basilica in Nice.

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At the time, I suggested analyzing those latest events in terms of "jihadist atmosphere." "Entrepreneurs of anger" (to use Professor Bernard Rougier's term) denounce their targets on social media, without needing an organization or network to give them orders, unlike what Al-Qaeda, and later Islamic State group, had put in place. Fueled by these online sources and brought up in environments that promote a culture of Islamist separatism from Western societies, whose values are detested according to an extremist reading of the Quran and the sunnah, individuals then end up committing criminal acts, convinced that they are the source of redemption for the community of believers (*ummah*), that they are promoting the Islamization of the world and that they are securing for themselves and their families a place in paradise.

'Like a bullet that will inevitably find its target'

This "atmospheric jihadism" – in which the extermination of supposed blasphemers is the ultimate catalyst for action – is easier to implement in Sunni Islam, the majority denomination of contemporary Islam (representing about 85%), because it has no hierarchical nor sacramental clergy endowed with infallibility. As a result, it has a particularly spongelike quality online and on social media, where clusters of individuals form and convince themselves of the veracity of their beliefs, however fanciful they may be.

Shia Islam, on the other hand, has strictly hierarchical ecclesiastical structures marked by obedience to the great ayatollahs (*marja ʿ al-taqlid*), although not all of them agree with each other. Ayatollah Khomeini and his successor Ali Khamenei also inspire Hezbollah which is dominant in Lebanese Shia Islam, which is the community that the suspect in the Rushdie stabbing, Hadi Matar, grew up in California. In Iraq, however, Ayatollah al-Sistani is strongly opposed to this political instrumentalization of faith.

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Nevertheless, the ability of Iran's current rulers to recruit followers and to mobilize their state apparatus is very strong. The reformist presidents Mohammad Khatami (in power 1997-2005) and Hassan Rohani (in power 2013-2021), who were briefly in power in Tehran, made it known in various forms that the February 14, 1989 fatwa was no longer in effect. But now they have disappeared from the political scene and have been replaced by the former prosecutor Ebrahim Raissi, who sent many of his opponents to their deaths. The real power remains in the hands of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, for whom the fatwa "is like a bullet that will inevitably find its target." Statements in the Tehran press closest to his position praised the "heroic" act committed by Mr. Rushdie's assailant, while they condemned the author, who was born a Muslim, as an apostate of Islam and therefore subject to execution.

A multifaceted jihadist phenomenon

Yet the attempted murder of the British writer of Indian origin, just as he was about to give a lecture on freedom of expression and America as a welcoming land for exiled artists, seems paradoxical in terms of the Iranian regime's interests. Iran is anxious to conclude the nuclear deal at the UN General Assembly in September, which Mr. Raissi announced he would attend. It is hard to imagine that such a criminal act, with its immense symbolic impact, could lead to successful negotiations and the reintegration of Iran into the international community.

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Even if some people in the Muslim world claim that executing a "blasphemer" is much more lawful than the killing of al-Zawahiri in Kabul or of the Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, head of the Revolutionary Guard's external force, who was killed by the American army on January 3, 2020 at Baghdad airport, such an argument is not acceptable in the United States or in Europe, and certainly not by an American president who is facing a delicate electoral challenge in November.

Just as Sunni jihadism – which was funded by the oil-rich monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula during the Afghan war in the 1980s, who were themselves equipped and manipulated by the CIA – escaped the control of those who had nurtured it when it unleashed bloody attacks in Saudi Arabia and then on September 11, has Shiite jihadism now escaped from the national rationales of its Iranian creators?

Initial results from the police investigation found that the suspect's Facebook page, which was accessible until several hours after the Rushdie attack, promoted Iran's Revolutionary Guards, General Soleimani and Hezbollah. Did this 24-year-old man, who was born in the United States nine years after the fatwa, bathe in an "atmospheric jihadism" of radical Shi'ism? Was his social media contaminated by the similar phenomenon we see in Sunni Islam, where he was encouraged to act out strict obedience and follow the instructions of the masters in Tehran?

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The judicial process will eventually provide some answers, but we are immediately confronted with the ubiquity and resilience of a multifaceted jihadist phenomenon taking place within the very borders of Western democratic countries. This recurrent threat calls for increased vigilance in the face of separatist logic that strives to divide our societies by tearing their fabric along denominational, exclusionary lines, whose outcome has been a long series of violence and crimes, of which the fatwa of February 14, 1989 is both the starting point and the symbol. It came out of the most radical political Shi'ism, then mutated into the most extreme Sunni militant movements, such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group. It is now returning, after these movements reached military and political exhaustion, to where it began.

¶ **Gilles Kepel** is a professor at the Université Paris Sciences et Lettres, and heads the Middle East-Mediterranean Chair at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. He published *Le Prophète et la pandémie. Du Moyen-Orient au jihadisme d'atmosphère* in 2021 ("The Prophet and the Pandemic. From the Middle East to an Atmospheric Jihadism.")

Le Monde

Translation of an original article published in French on lemonde.fr; the publisher may only be liable for the French version.

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