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BRITAIN**

**Sir Salman Rushdie**

## A new chapter

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### An unusual scandal for Britain's honours system

THESE are great times for flag manufacturers. Union Jack vendors did brisk business across the Middle East this week, as mobs vented their anger with a bonfire of flags and effigies of Queen Elizabeth. The blaze was sparked by the knighting of Salman Rushdie, the prize-winning British-Indian author who angered many Muslims with his 1988 novel, "The Satanic Verses". Sir Salman was forced into a decade of hiding when Ayatollah Khomeini, then the Supreme Leader of Iran, issued a death warrant against him as punishment for the book's unflattering depiction of the Prophet Muhammad. The *fatwa* was lifted in 1998, but not before the novel's Japanese translator had been murdered and scores more injured in anti-Rushdie rioting around the world.

Sir Salman's gong, announced on June 15th, appears to have raked over the embers. The Iranian foreign ministry denounced the rewarding of the "detested figure" as another example of British anti-Islamism. Pakistan's religious-affairs minister said it justified suicide bombing, though he later took this back. Protests spread to Malaysia.

In Britain the reaction seems muted so far. When "The Satanic Verses" was first published, Muslims staged book burnings in Bolton and Bradford. Now Inayat Bunglawala of the Muslim Council of Britain, who rallied against the book as a student in the 1980s, admits banning is not the answer. "The freedom to offend is a necessary freedom. Moreover, Islam has flourished wherever there has been a free atmosphere," he wrote for the *Guardian* this week.

Still, there is talk of protests. "The issue was dead and buried, and it has just been resurrected," laments Khurshid Ahmed, chairman of the British Muslim Forum. But he doubts the knighthood will stir as big a controversy as the cartoons of the Prophet which triggered demonstrations outside Danish embassies last year. A 19-year-old magic-realist novel, however daring, lacks the punch of a tabloid caricature, he reckons.

It is hard to know who speaks for the British Muslim on the street. But the Muslim on the internet seems relaxed. "What the hell has it got to do with Pakistan or any other country who we give knighthoods to?", reads one comment on the BBC Asian Network's message boards. Many are more interested in Lady Rushdie, a 36-year-old model.

Some Iranians see the honour as a deliberate snub, perhaps in retaliation for Iran's kidnapping of 15 British sailors and marines in March. In fact, it may not have been half so calculated. The committee that recommended Sir Salman claims it considered only the merit of his books, and the Foreign Office says it plays no part when figures from the arts are nominated for a knighthood. Rather than trying to rile Iran, it appears that Britain forgot all about it. That must be far more hurtful.

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