

Rushdie on Saviano: Camorra's fatwa worse than Khomeini's

George De Stefano (October 18, 2008)



Islamists less dangerous than the camorra, says the Satanic Verses author



Roberto Saviano, the 28 year-old author of Gomorra, the now world-famous exposé of Naples' criminal syndicates, faces greater danger than Salman Rushdie did when Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against the Indian writer nearly 20 years ago.

Rushdie himself said so this week from Paris in response to reports that camorristi from Casal di Principe, on the outskirts of Naples, had decided to kill the author before Christmas. Gomorra exposes and denounces the Casalesi, and the clan's imprisoned leader, Francesco "Sandokan" Schiavone is, not surprisingly, extremely unhappy with the book's author.

According to newspaper reports, Saviano was to be killed by explosives planted on the highway between Rome and Naples. It appeared that the Casalesi intended to teach the young author the same lesson Sicilian mafiosi delivered to mob-busting magistrate Giovanni Falcone when they assassinated him in 1992 with a roadside bomb.

Rushdie said that Saviano "is in terrible danger." "Without doubt he will have to leave Italy, but he needs to choose his destination very prudently. The mafia poses a much greater threat than the one I myself had to face."

That's really saying something, since Rushdie, with his novel *The Satanic Verses*, had incurred the wrath of Islamist fanatics not only in Iran but throughout the Muslim world. For years Rushdie was forced to live like a fugitive, albeit one with heavy police protection. But Rushdie evidently believes Neapolitan gangsters to be more proficient killers, and more capable of striking far from their home turf.

Saviano is guarded by seven heavily-armed carabinieri who live with him and accompany him everywhere. He remains alive only because of this 24/7 protection.

The Italian government gave him a bodyguard in 2006, after the first credible threats were made against his life. That year he made what was to be his last public appearance in the Naples area, when he told a crowd in the piazza of Casal di Principe, "Don't let [the clans] destroy your right to happiness."



This month, after the reports that the Casalesi had marked him for death, Saviano told La Repubblica that he was going to leave Italy, at least for a while.

"I want a life. I want a home," he said. "I want to fall in love. I want to drink a beer in public, go to a bookstore and choose a book after checking out the back cover. I want to go for a walk, take the sun, walk in the rain and see my mother without fear and without frightening her. I want to have my friends around and be able to laugh and not to have to talk about me, always about me, as if I had a terminal disease and they had to put up with a boring but unavoidable visit. Fuck, I'm only 28 years old!"

The British newspaper The Guardian, in an October 15 editorial titled "In Praise of Roberto Saviano," noted why Saviano's fears are justified. "His hatred of the Camorra...is personal," the editorial observed. "He grew up in Casal di Principe...and lived alongside the Casalesi clan whose savagery he captures. He hates them and does not mind them knowing it." But Saviano's loathing of the Casalesi would matter little if Gomorra, both the best-selling book and the acclaimed Matteo Garrone film made from it, hadn't "trained an unwelcome spotlight on his home town."

"Many authors have taken the mafia on and lived to tell the tale," the editorial observed. "But few have rubbed them up the wrong way quite as badly as Roberto Saviano."

There is no doubt that Saviano is a marked man. But Italian media reports this past week confused rather than clarified the threats he faces. Carmine Schiavone, the cousin of the imprisoned Casalesi boss "Sandokan" and the reported source of the information about the plan to kill Saviano by Christmas, denied having tipped off the authorities about such a plot. Schiavone is an ex-mobster who became a "pentito" (government informer) in 1993.



Saviano is doubtful about Schiavone's denial. "It's difficult for a 'pentito' to admit to still having contacts with the clans," he said. With Italian authorities continuing to investigate the highway murder scheme, his skepticism seems entirely justified.

Then, on October 15, the television show Matrix reported that Sandokan himself sent a fax to one of his attorneys that, though ambiguous, did seem to threaten Saviano. Sarcastically referring to Saviano as "that great novelist," the imprisoned camorrista said that the author "must stop spreading false and calumnious allegations against me."

But Neapolitan prosecutors subsequently said that Sandokan did not send such a fax. The boss, however, apparently did make threats against the author in one of the letters he recently sent to his attorneys.

Saviano, according to press reports, now is unsure whether to leave Italy. His supporters, who include such illustrious figures as Sicily's Rita Borsellino, are urging him to remain, as a symbol of the fight against organized crime.

But Saviano is paying an exorbitantly high price for his prominence. And he suffers not only because he cannot live a normal life.



"The truth, the single obscene truth, that in these times is tragically evident, is that Roberto Saviano is a man alone," wrote Repubblica columnist Giuseppe D'Avanzo.

Besides having provoked the murderous rage of the camorristi, he endures the rancor of the fearful and passive in Italy, as well as the envy of those who resent his success. Saviano, in an anguished interview with the journalist, expressed incredulity over accusations that he had only written Gomorra to become rich and successful.

"Saviano's destiny," D'Avanzo observed, "...is more than ever a matter of Italian democracy. His unarmed life, or rather his life armed only with words, has fallen into a gray area where the traditional difference between war and peace seems not to exist, if the mafia can declare war on the State and the State for too long hasn't known how to end that violence against people and property nor how to protect essential rights -- beginning with the most fundamental of democratic rights: the right to free speech. If Saviano loses, all of us will lose."

Visit Roberto Saviano at MySpace and leave him a message of support and solidarity:

www.myspace.com/robertosaviano [2]

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