



MIDDLE EAST

Writer Charged With Insulting Islam Is Killed as Extremism Boils Over in Jordan

By RANA F. SWEIS and PETER BAKER SEPT. 25, 2016

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The death of the writer Nahed Hattar, who was gunned down on Sunday outside a court where he faced a charge of insulting Islam, "is a huge loss" to Jordan, his cousin says. By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS on September 25, 2016. Photo by Jamal Nasrallah/European Pressphoto Agency. [Watch in Times Video »](#)



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AMMAN, Jordan — Some of the most extreme elements in [Jordan](#) made clear in recent weeks that Nahed Hattar should pay for a provocative cartoon he posted online depicting a bearded man in bed with two women ordering God to bring him cashews and wine.

So when Mr. Hattar, 56, a prominent writer from a Christian family, showed up at a court on Sunday to face criminal charges of insulting Islam, at least one man with a gun decided a trial was not enough. As three bullets ripped through the writer in front of the courthouse, [Jordan](#)'s simmering tensions boiled over.

The brazen daylight killing of Mr. Hattar in front of his horrified family was not only the latest example of violence tied to cartoon renderings of Muslim figures, it was also the sort of manifestation of extremism that Jordan's government has struggled to contain in a nation that finds itself under pressure from multiple directions.

While presenting itself as a stable outlier in a tumultuous region, Jordan

maintains a complicated balancing act of its own, split between traditional tribes, [Palestinians](#), a potent jihadi community and now more than 650,000 refugees from the grinding civil war in [Syria](#). As Jordan strives to stay neutral in Syria and off the Islamic State's radar, the cartoon Mr. Hattar posted on Facebook proved just the sort of lighter fuel to feed the flames.

Never mind that after an across-the-board social media backlash, Mr. Hattar quickly removed the cartoon, deactivated his Facebook account and apologized, saying he "did not mean to offend anyone." If the government hoped that arresting him would tamp down the anger among the more violent sections of Jordanian society, it misjudged.

"I saw his lifeless, blood-drained body just now," his wife, Randa Kakish-Hattar, said in an interview several hours later at her home where she was mourning with friends and family. "His two children saw him shot and killed before their eyes. And for what? For sharing a cartoon on Facebook?"

Family members accused authorities of not doing enough to guard him against death threats. "Nahed apologized about the cartoon," Saif Hattar, a cousin, said. "It was misunderstood. We believe the ISIS poisonous mentality was the cause of this but the government failed to protect him."

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A suspect in the shooting was captured near the scene, according to the government, which vowed harsh action. "We will hold the perpetrator who committed this despicable act to justice, and the government will respond with an iron fist to anyone who uses this incident as an opportunity to spread hate speech in society," Mohammad Momani, a government spokesman, said in a statement.

Jordan, an important American ally surviving in part on billions of dollars of aid from Washington, has sought to find ways to keep its Islamist forces in check. The Muslim Brotherhood, outlawed in Egypt, was allowed, through its political wing, to take part in Jordan's [parliamentary elections](#) last week. The wing, along with other Islamists, won 15 of 130 seats, while women won 20, a record for the nation. By happenstance, Jordan's government resigned on Sunday, part of the normal process after elections.

But with the Syrian civil war so close, the kingdom's leaders fear that extremism will cross its borders or arise from within. In June, three intelligence officers and two other government employees were killed at a

Palestinian refugee camp. In November, a Jordanian [police officer fatally shot two American trainers](#), a South African trainer and two Jordanians at a training compound in Amman.

Parody involving Islam has inspired violence in various countries over the last decade, from cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a bomb-toting terrorist published in a Danish newspaper in 2005 to [the attack last year](#) on Charlie Hebdo, a satirical publication in Paris, killing 12 people.

Mr. Hattar wrote columns for Al Akhbar, a Lebanese newspaper, often about nationalism and Islamic political thought that reflected a secular, leftist point of view. At various points described as a communist and supporter of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, he was imprisoned several times for his political activism.

Before his death, Mr. Hattar said that he shared the cartoon not to insult Islam but to point out the hypocrisy of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. In his apology statement, he said the cartoon “mocks ISIS terrorists and their concept of heaven.”

His explanation did not satisfy his most virulent critics. “The apology and clarification from Hattar make him no less of an infidel than his caricature,” Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of Al Qaeda’s most influential ideologues and the spiritual mentor of [Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi](#), the slain Jordanian-born leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, wrote on Twitter in August.



The police cordoned off the area where Nahed Hattar, a Jordanian writer, was fatally shot in Amman on Sunday.
Ahmad Alameen/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Relatives said Mr. Hattar received more than 100 death threats, many through Facebook and some by telephone. In one message they played for a reporter, a caller said if justice did not take place, he would kill Mr. Hattar by “tearing out his heart from his chest.” The family said it went to the governor to submit the death threats but no action was taken.

“This happened despite the government knowing that Nahed is a prominent person, that he received hundreds of death threats,” said Saif Hattar, his cousin.

After Mr. Hattar’s death on Sunday, a range of organizations in Jordan spoke out against the killing, including the Islamic Action Front, the political wing of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#).

“The murder of Hattar targets democracy and diversity in our society and aims to spread darkness and terrorism,” Nidal Mansour, the president of the Center for Defending Freedom of Journalists, said in a statement. “Even though we disagree with what Nahed says or writes, this is the time to stand united against terrorism and those who killed him. They want to instill fear and silence us.”

At the family meeting hall in Amman, relatives consoled one another.

His wife, Mrs. Kakish-Hattar, said she tried to convince Mr. Hattar to leave the country just two days earlier, but he refused.

Mr. Hattar’s younger brother, Majed, 51, was with him when he was

attacked and still had blood on his clothes and shoes. He said he had chased the gunman and caught him by holding his beard.

More than 1,000 residents joined relatives on Sunday evening in Fuheis, a largely Christian suburb northwest of Amman where the writer came from. “We meet today in pain and sorrow,” said Huwaished Akroosh, the president of the municipality. “We have confidence in his majesty the king and for safekeeping this country and its people.”

The gathering [turned into a march](#) down the main street toward Fuheis Circle, with hundreds of people chanting together. “The extremists were afraid of you, so they killed you,” they chanted. “Your blood was not spilled in vain.” They also chanted, “Down with the government. Down with the interior minister.”

Correction: October 26, 2016

A headline on Sept. 26 with an article about the killing of a Jordanian Christian writer, Nahed Hattar, after he posted a cartoon online deemed offensive to Islam overstated the case against him. He had been charged with insulting Islam, but not convicted of it. The article imprecisely translated a comment on Twitter by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of Al Qaeda’s most influential ideologues, in response to Mr. Hattar’s apology. He said, “The apology and clarification from Hattar make him no less of an infidel” — not “is no less of an apostasy” — “than his caricature.”

Deborah Acosta contributed reporting.

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