

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

Paris book fair causes uproar by honoring Israeli writers

The Associated Press

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PARIS: Israeli writers will be the toast of the Paris international book fair in March but some Arab intellectuals argue that honoring Israel's literature has brought dishonor upon France.

The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization urged its 50 member states this week to boycott the March 14-19 event. The fair's organizer said Friday that he regrets the uproar he wanted to honor books, not take sides in international politics.

"I'm not a government minister, my job is to bring literature to readers," Serge Eyrolles told The Associated Press. "I'm very surprised by how political this is getting. It was not at all our goal, which was to invite Israeli literature, not the state of Israel."

Each year the international fair puts the spotlight on one country. This year it is inviting 39 writers from Israel, including David Grossman, Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua and Aharon Appelfeld. A similar controversy is brewing about the May book fair in Turin, Italy, which is also highlighting Israeli works.

The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization said its boycott call was a "response to the special standing (the fair) gives to Israel despite its atrocities, oppression and imposed starvation and siege against the Palestinian people."

It also argued that the Paris fair celebrates the 60th anniversary of Israel a claim Eyrolles denies. He said it was merely coincidence, as Israel has asked to be honored for five years in a row but there was a waiting list. Many of the Israeli writers being honored are firm supporters of Palestinian statehood, he said.

Lebanon announced Wednesday that it would boycott the Paris event, a decision that French Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Pascale Andreani said was "extremely regrettable."

Eyrolles, who is president of the National Publishing Union, said national publishing representatives from Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria had canceled their stands at the fair, though he says some writers, publishers and booksellers from those countries will nonetheless attend.

Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan, who supports the boycotts in Paris and Turin, argued on his blog that "all women and men of conscience a category by no means restricted to Palestinians or Arabs" should protest because "the guest of honor is a country that refuses to respect the rights and the dignity of peoples."

"Common sense should be our guide: The international community's silence over the plight of the Palestinians is shameful enough without adding insult to injury," he wrote.

Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun took the opposite point of view in a blog entry about the Turin fair.

"Criticize the policies of a state. Criticize a novel on its literary merit. That's possible," he said. "But don't mix up the two things and create even an even bigger lack of understanding."

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