

Egypt Hosni: director general of UNESCO or Not?

Contributed by Tamer Ibrahim
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The election of UNESCO's new director general gets underway as a row over anti-Israeli comments overshadows Egypt's bid by the frontrunner Egyptian Culture Minister Faruq Hosni to head the world's premier cultural institution

Egypt's campaign to have Hosni, appointed to succeed Japanese Koichiro Matsuura,

the outgoing director general underscores the continued prestige associated with the mammoth organisation that brings together no less than 193 countries.

Egyptian authorities have thrown their full weight behind Hosni's candidacy, going so far as to lobby UNESCO's host country, France, during the first Mediterranean Union summit in 2008.

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Farouk Hosni and UNESCO Presidency

His candidacy has been mired in controversy amid charges of anti-Semitism after comments he made in May 2008 when he said he would "burn Israeli books"

himself if he found any in Egyptian libraries.

He later retracted his words, which were in response to a question in parliament, and apologised, that there are contradictory voices behind Hosni's nomination as

a head of UNESCO.

In May, three prominent French intellectuals -- Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel, philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy, and filmmaker Claude Lanzmann

called for his candidacy to be blocked, branding him a "dangerous man."

A recent article in the prestigious American Foreign Policy magazine described Hosni's bid for the job as "scandalous" and accused him of echoing the "rampant Judeophobia" of Egyptian intellectual circles.

For his part, Hosni is defending his controversial bid to head UNESCO, fighting off accusations of anti-Semitism abroad while ducking attacks at home for his soft tone with Israel.

In an interview with AFP, Hosni said that "The candidacy for director general of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation "is based on a basic philosophy which is reconciliation between peoples"

Hosni, who rejects a full normalisation of ties between Egypt and Israel until there is a signed peace deal with the Palestinians, said that "Normalisation will come in time, not now. When peace (with the Palestinians) is established, I will be the first to normalise"

However, as head of UNESCO he would encourage "a rapprochement in the whole region, without exception," he said.

Hosni, who wrote a column in the French daily Le Monde "regretting" his book-burning comments, is constantly attempting to keep a lid on the controversy.

But his words have cost him dearly in Egypt, where he critics have accused him of trying to accommodate Israel in order to preserve his chances for the job.

"I am angry with him. The fact that he apologises in this manner fills me with deep sadness," respected poet Abderahman al-Abnudi wrote in the pro-government weekly Al-Mussawer magazine.

Last year, a group of 26 intellectuals condemned Hosni for saying in an Israeli newspaper interview that he was prepared to visit the Jewish state.

The interview amounted to a "humiliating surrender to Israeli demands for the sake of personal gain," the signatories charged.

About UNESCO

UNESCO

The (UNESCO) United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is a specialized agency of the United Nations established on 16 November 1945

History of UNESCO

As early as 1942, in wartime, the governments of the European countries, which were confronting Nazi Germany and its allies, met in the United Kingdom for the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education (CAME).

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Egypt candidate Hosni and UNESCO election

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