

The Israeli Question: Sparks Fly At Turin's Book Fair

Maria Rita Latta (May 15, 2008)



Turin's annual Book Fair, Italy's largest, became the subject of political debate for the first time in its history when it honored Israeli writers this year. Demonstrations associated with pro-Palestinian groups preceded and lasted well into the event. Intellectuals from all sides of the ideological divide weighed in, while Italy's president, Giorgio Napolitano, was called to oversee the fair.

The decision to select Israel as guest of honor at the [International Book Fair in Turin](#) [2], held from the 8th to 12th of May, has aroused a vivacious debate among Italian, Israeli and Arab authors and intellectuals. Even months earlier, when the communication that Israel—this year celebrating its 60th anniversary as a nation—had been chosen as the Book Fair's guest of honor, the protests started. Those opposing the Israeli presence made calls to boycott the event, which is Italy's largest annual gathering of the publishing world. The motivation for the protests is Israel's policies toward Palestinians.



"The aim of culture and literature is not to build barriers among people, but to open up to others," these are the words of novelist and playwright [A. B. Yehoshua](#) [3], who tried to respond and create a dialogue with opponents of the initiative. Since the date of the announcement, many Italian intellectuals and artists sent a letter to the Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, asking him to preside over the opening of the fair and to speak out "against any discrimination and blind intolerance towards the citizens and culture of Israel."

The book fair, established 21 years ago, had never stirred so many polemics in its history, and Rolando Picchioni, president of the [Foundation for Books, Music and Culture](#) [4], which runs the fair, reminded: "Some years ago we honored Catalan writers, and they essentially presented themselves as an independent state, but Spain didn't protest." Vincenzo Chieppa, a local leader of the Italian Communist Party, raised the objection that a "prestigious event like the book fair can't pretend it doesn't know what's happening in that part of the Middle East," and that it would have been positive to ask the Palestinian Authority to send some authors, and become a second special guest. "It would be good to use the fair as an opportunity for dialogue and reconciliation between the culture of Israel and Palestine," Mr. Chieppa said. The organizers, however, disagreed. "A country has to be able to come to the fair without being counterbalanced by another country," Mr. Picchioni said. "What's next? If we honor Russia, do we also have to invite Chechnya? Or what about China? Do we bring in Tibet?"

It appears evident that when the facts focus on Middle Eastern conflicts, everything inevitably becomes "politics", and even a cultural event, such as a book fair, has deeper ramifications that go beyond mere culture.

Through the months, small groups of protesters connected with local pro-Palestinian organizations, stormed the book fair offices in Turin, asking that the invitation to Israel be rescinded. Their statement of protest was clearly explained in a pamphlet distributed during the demonstrations: "We are appalled to see the world of culture take the side of those who methodically operate to annihilate Palestine and the Palestinians." After the refusal of the Foundation to rescind the invitation, the protesters pre-announced acts of disturbance at the fair.

The disputes endured until the event's opening day, but reached their lowest point on May 1st, when, during a rally held at Turin's San Carlo Square, a group of Italian youngsters and members of a pro-Palestinian movement set Israeli and American flags on fire. Of course the incident was strongly condemned by leaders of Italy's Jewish community, while the protesters said: "We realize that our act was harsh, but what is even harsher is the daily killing of Palestinian civilians."

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano inaugurated the Turin fair by saying: "No dialogue is possible if there is a refusal to recognize Israel." The new Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi said that Italians are closer to Israel than any other people, saying protesters who targeted the fair earlier in the week represented "0.00 percent" of the population.

The demonstrators were supported by Italy's 1997 Nobel Prize winner for literature, playwright and director [Dario Fo](#) [5], for having "raised the problem of the absence of the Palestinian question at the fair". Fo criticized the organizers for not having invited Palestinian authors.



The Muslim academic [Tariq Ramadan](#) [6] observed that Napolitano was the first head of state to open the fair since its foundation, making it “a political and not a cultural event.” Award-winning Israeli writer, playwright and poet [Nava Semel](#) [7] said of the controversy: “I never boycott my enemies because I want to know them. Ignorance breeds fear.”

President Napolitano arrived in Turin for the inauguration by helicopter along with Israeli novelist Abraham B. Yehoshua. Among the other featured Israeli authors, were David Grossman, Amos Oz, Aaron Appelfeld and Meir Shalev.

During the five-day expo, several Muslim writers, intellectuals and artists as well as the Free Palestine association, staged a two-day protest seminar at the University of Turin titled “Western Democracies and Ethnic Cleansing in Palestine.”

Aaron Appelfeld, who is a Holocaust survivor, was asked by some journalists whether he represented Israel. He replied: “I cannot represent a state, I can only represent my thoughts.”

Yehoshua said, for his part: “The aim of a writer is to create personalities and landscapes, but the other side of my writing is about the Jewish identity in relationship to the Palestinians.”

On the 10th of May, two days after the inauguration, there was another protest against Israel and, luckily, apart from the usual slogans the situation was held under control by the police and there were no incidents. Similar protests happened during the March book fair in Paris, which also honored Israeli writers.

At the end of the Book Fair in Turin, the organizers expressed their exasperation at the rumors that had started months ago and that cast a shadow over such a meaningful cultural event. They remarked on the irony of the situation, that a book fair is meant to broaden horizons, not build barriers. Their feelings are well represented by the [front-page editorial cartoon in the Corriere della Sera](#) [8], depicting books that form a Star of David, each with a slogan: “Reading is [Freedom](#) [9].”

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