

Tehran at the Book Fair

Frankfurt welcomes the regime's censors as a gesture of ,convergence via a sustained dialogue'

By Matthias Küntzel

Next month, the world's largest book fair opens its doors in Frankfurt. One country will take the stage with particular self-confidence: The Islamic Republic of Iran.

You read that correctly. Iran has the world's highest rate of imprisoned journalists. Tehran bans newspapers, shuts down galleries, arrests critics and flogs artists. Thousands of book drafts have been censored by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. "We cannot lift controls on the book market and thus allow harmful books to enter the market," Ali Khamenei, the leader of the regime, has declared.

None of this should be new to the Frankfurt Book Fair's organizers. Since June, the Book Fair has been funding the exile of censored Iranian author Mohammad Baharlo, who has taken refuge in Frankfurt. "Defense of freedom of speech" is an obligation of the book fair, explained Juergen Boos, the Fair's director, at a July 25 press conference honoring Mr. Baharlo. So why is the Fair willing to give a platform to Mr. Baharlo's persecutors?

The forthcoming event will not only exhibit regime-compliant publishing houses such as "Aryan Thinker" and "Sacred Defense." The Iranian embassy in Germany is planning an "effective [and] targeted presence" in Frankfurt, according to the embassy's website. A regime delegation led by Mohammad Azimi, a former vice minister in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, will also be in attendance.

In a July interview with the Iran Book News Agency, Mr. Azimi, who is currently the managing director of Iran's Cultural Fairs Institute, called the Frankfurt Book Fair "an ideal venue for cultural interactions." In order to find "an appropriate spot for Iran's pavilion," he said, "negotiations have taken place with the managers of the Frankfurt Book Fair as well as Iran's ambassador to Germany. So far we have managed to get a 96-square-meter pavilion located near the pavilions of European countries while the previous year the space was about 80 square meters." In addition, "a hall will be allocated to Iran in which speeches will be delivered on the publications and culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran and today's Iran."

It is obvious that the Iranian regime has more than just book selling in mind. A prestigious appearance in Frankfurt will strengthen the impression that the Western world is split on Iran, and that Tehran is able to thwart Western isolation.

The Book Fair has confirmed that Mr. Azimi's Cultural Fairs Institute will be given a booth but declined to comment on its size. In my correspondence with Book Fair organizers, I drew attention to Tehran's most recent anti-Semitic slanders, which have been condemned by the United Nations and the European Union. Were these grounds for the Book Fair to exclude Iran's national stand?

The Fair's officials said no. Katja Böhne, the Fair's vice president of marketing and communications, told me that "The Frankfurt Book Fair sees itself as a commercial platform in which everyone who meets the terms of business can participate as an exhibitor. . . . This includes the independent organization of promotional and informational events, that are open to every exhibitor and can be used by them, as long as they do not thereby violate German law."

The Frankfurt Book Fair has stood up for freedom of speech in the past. In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini called for the murder of British author Salman Rushdie. The Book Fair responded by excluding Iran for three years.

This June, the regime issued another call for murder, this time against Shahin Najafi, a poet and singer who lives and works in Germany. I pointed out to the Book Fair that the regime has put a bounty of \$100,000 on Mr. Najafi's head, compelling him to go into hiding.

Their answer was remarkable: The Book Fair "feels a responsibility to support the development of free structures in the field of publishing and literature all over the world. . . . This necessarily includes convergence via a sustained dialogue with precisely those countries in which the publishing of books and content meets with political difficulties."

This "convergence" sends clear signals of accommodating terror and betraying freedom of expression, while undermining those countries that want to change Iran's nuclear behavior through concerted pressure on the regime. Just as it is impossible to maintain a relaxed friendship with neo-Nazis, it is also impossible to do relaxed business with a regime such as Iran's.

Published in the Wall Street Journal on September 17, 2012.

Document: The Book Fair explains itself

I am most grateful to Ms. Katja Böhne, the Frankfurt Book Fair's Vice-President of Marketing and Communications, for her detailed answers to my questions. The following document, written on August 23, 2012, provides a typical example of the German academic elite's view of the Iranian regime and how it deals with that regime's victims.

1. Is it true that the Islamic Republic of Iran will have a national stand this year? [At the 2011 book fair in Frankfurt, the Iranian regime did not have a national stand.]

This is true: The stand will be organized by the TIBF / Iran Cultural Fairs Institute, which also organizes the Tehran Book Fair. [TIBF = Tehran International Book Fair]

2. Is it true that the total exhibition space of 80 square meters for Iran in 2011 will increase to 96 square meters in 2012?

In principle, we do not issue information about the size of our exhibitors' stands.

3. Is it true that the Iranian embassy in Germany intervened in the negotiations over Iran's representation at the upcoming Book Fair?

Traditionally, the Iranian embassy has a booth of its own at the Frankfurt Book Fair. It does not appear jointly with the TIBF.

4. For the forthcoming Book Fair, according to the Iran Book News Agency (IBNA), Iran has been allocated a hall "in which speeches will be delivered on the publication and culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran and today's Iran." Is this information, as regards the possibility of such speeches, correct?

The joint stand of the Islamic Republic of Iran will be located in Hall 5.1. We currently have no information about the organizer of the Iranian stand applying for or organizing an event.

5. In response to the Iranian fatwa of death against the novelist Salman Rushdie, Iranian publishers weren't allowed to participate in the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1989, 1990 and 1991. Since May 2012, the poet and singer Shanin Najafi, who lives in Germany, has also been threatened with death. A bounty has been placed on his head and he too has since had to go into hiding. Why has the Book Fair not responded to this recent call for murder in the same way as it reacted in 1990 to the call for the murder of Rushdie?

The Frankfurt Book Fair feels a responsibility to support the development of free structures in the field of publishing and literature all over the world – and thereby promote political development. This necessarily includes convergence via a sustained dialogue with precisely those countries in which the publishing of books and content meets with political difficulties.

6. Reasonably enough, the Book Fair co-operates in many ways with the German Foreign Office. Did the Book Fair act on its own or in consultation with the Foreign Office with respect to this year's participation by Iran?

For many years the Frankfurt Book Fair has worked with the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany in various areas. Neither the registration of joint stands nor the negotiations about them fall within the scope of this cooperation. In cooperation with the Foreign Ministry, the Frankfurt Book Fair, for example, tries to strengthen Iran's independent publishers via its invitation program or by offering training events.

7. In recent days and weeks, Iranian state agencies have once again increased their verbal attacks on Jews and the State of Israel. The antisemitism of these comments has been sharply

criticized by representatives of the UN, the EU and several governments. Is this a reason for the Frankfurt Book Fair to exclude at least the national stand of Iran from participation this year?

The Frankfurt Book Fair notes with regret the sharpening of the political tone of the conflicting parties in the Middle East. In our view, exclusion and persecution are not a means for resolving political differences. A basic maxim of the Frankfurt Book Fair consists in the establishment and maintenance of dialogue.

The Frankfurt Book Fair sees itself as a commercial platform in which everyone who meets the terms of business can participate as an exhibitor. This includes the independent organization of promotional and informational events that are open to every exhibitor and can be used by them, as long as they do not thereby violate German law.