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Egyptian's Bid for U.N. Post In Doubt Over 'Burn' Quip

By BENNY AVNI, Staff Reporter of the Sun | May 29, 2008

UNITED NATIONS — EGYPT'S CULTURE MINISTER IS A TOP candidate to head the United Nations's main intellectual body, but his declaration that he would burn books by Israeli authors has forced him to walk a fine line between appeasing extremists in his country and satisfying Western critics.

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Farouk Hosni

Several diplomats familiar with the selection process for director-general of the U.N. Education Scientific and Cultural Organization said yesterday that Farouk Hosni's candidacy could now be doomed, after he told the Egyptian parliament that if any Israeli books were found in Egyptian libraries, he would burn them.

Such a statement is "couched in the language and actions of Nazi 'Minister of Culture' Josef Goebbels," the director for international relations of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Shimon Samuels, said in a letter to the current Unesco director-general, Koïchiro Matsuura of Japan. "An aspirant book-burner, who threatens to wield culture as a weapon, cannot head the intellectual arm of the United Nations."

"Anyone who presents a candidacy for the top U.N. education body should know that incitement is one of our region's worst problems," an Israeli U.N. ambassador, Daniel Carmon, said. "Hatred helps to create the infrastructure of terrorism."

A Unesco spokeswoman, Sue Williams, declined to comment directly on the statement, but said: "Unesco does not condone book burning of any sort."

After Mr. Hosni's remarks were made public last week, he tried to backtrack, telling Western news agencies in Cairo that they were "hyperbole." While he said he supports cultural "normalization" with Israel, he added that such ties can happen only after there is

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"just and global peace" in the Middle East.

Unesco's 193 members are expected to vote on Mr. Matsuura's replacement in fall 2009. While no written rule exists on the selection, many believe a candidate from North Africa will be chosen, according to the regional rotation governing the U.N. quota system. Mr. Hosni's only real competitor for the position now is Morocco's Unesco ambassador, Aziza Bennani.

Diplomats said America would be hard-pressed to remain a Unesco member if Mr. Hosni were elected. America rejoined Unesco early in 2003, 17 years after the Reagan administration walked out of the Paris-based organization, then roiled by corruption charges. "There will be a fight in Congress. I can't see how America can remain a member" if Mr. Hosni is elected, a Western diplomat who spoke on the condition of anonymity said. America is responsible for more than 22% of Unesco's budget.

Last week, a Muslim Brotherhood member of Egypt's parliament complained about Israeli books being in Egyptian libraries. Denying that such publications were available there, Mr. Hosni retorted: "I'd burn Israeli books myself if I found any in libraries in Egypt."

Several days later, however, he told reporters that he had merely used a "popular expression," saying he had urged the translation of Hebrew books to Arabic. But forging cultural ties with Israel is only "a dream" now, Mr. Hosni told Agence France-Presse: "We cannot dance with them, sing together or watch a piece of theatre when there are bloody attacks every day against the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip."

A longtime member of President Mubarak's inner circle, Mr. Hosni is considered a centrist in the battles between religion purists and cultural reformers in his country. Egypt's U.N. ambassador, Maged Abdelaziz, noted yesterday that two years ago Mr. Hosni ran afoul of the country's Islamists when he spoke out against women wearing head scarves.

"Everything in Egypt is difficult," a spokesman for the American Jewish Committee, Kenneth Bandler, said. The committee has long tried to establish a Jewish heritage center in Egypt, with Mr. Hosni "at the center of the conversation," Mr. Bandler said.

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