

## CHEMISTRY

## Organizers Panned for Omitting Israelis From Meeting in Jordan

Political tensions between Israel and the Arab world are threatening to overshadow an upcoming chemistry conference in Jordan. The verbal sparring has already created plenty of raw feelings and led to much finger-pointing.

Local organizers for the 11th Eurasia Conference on Chemical Sciences aren't saying why they didn't invite any speakers from Israel, which borders Jordan and has the region's largest chemical research enterprise. But one Israeli scientist calls the snub "intentional," and few, if any, have registered for the conference. Roald Hoffmann, a chemistry Nobel laureate at Cornell University who was among the more than 100 chemists invited to speak at the meeting, is outraged at what he views as an encroachment of politics into science. He's asked fellow invited speakers to boycott the meeting unless the organizers invite Israelis. Conference organizers, in turn, say it is Hoffmann who's playing politics and that they won't be bullied into revising their plans.

Begun in 1988, the conference gives young scientists in developing countries a chance to rub elbows with world-class researchers. Israeli scientists have been speakers and participants at previous meetings, which are held every 2 years in developing countries throughout Asia and the Middle East. The 2008 meeting in the Philippines, for example, featured a plenary talk by Aaron Ciechanover, a Nobel laureate at the Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa.

Not this year. After accepting an invitation to speak at the meeting, Hoffmann was asked to help organize a workshop to run concurrent with the 6 to 10 October conference. He and fellow chemistry Nobelist and workshop organizer Dudley Herschbach discovered that none of the workshop participants was from Israel and asked conference organizers to reach out to Israeli students. Then they learned that the workshop had been canceled.

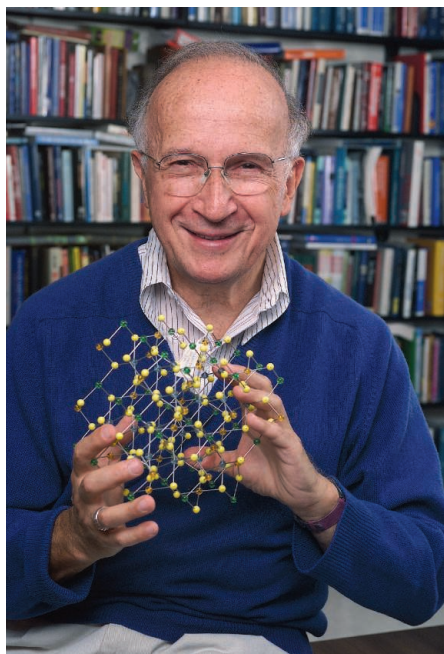
"That's when I became suspicious," says Hoffmann, who calls the absence of Israeli invited speakers at the main conference

"preposterous." He tried a back-channel effort, which failed. That's when he called for a boycott.

Other chemists from Israel and elsewhere agree that the absence of Israelis on the list of invited speakers is glaring, given their regional prominence. "To ignore Israel is something very visible," says Ehud Keinan, president of the Israel Chemical Society and a chemist at the Israel Institute of Technology.

In response to Hoffmann's concerns, the chair of the conference's national organizing committee, Musa Nazer, e-mailed the invited speakers to explain that they were chosen not by nationality but "based on nominations and consultations with eminent chemists, topics of the conference, available slots in the program," and other criteria. It was too late to make changes in the lineup, he added. "We wish to emphasize that inviting speakers at the present stage under pressure and threat does not enhance a positive atmosphere for this conference or any conference of this caliber," the letter concludes.

Hoffmann isn't just urging a speaker boycott. He also wants the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry (IUPAC) to withdraw its support. Joshua Jortner, former president of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, has asked IUPAC to investi-



gate the issue and to push for the inclusion of Israelis among the featured speakers.

That's not going to happen, according to IUPAC President Nicole Moreau. In a letter to Hoffmann, Moreau says she is not consid-

ering withdrawing IUPAC sponsorship for the conference. The choice of invited speakers is not among the list of criteria for IUPAC's sponsorship of a conference, she says, and withdrawing support based on the exclusion of speakers from a particular country would set an unwelcome precedent.

Jortner, also a former president of IUPAC, says he's disappointed by the response. He notes that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization pulled its sponsorship from a 2008 geological sciences meeting in Jordan following similar complaints. "I strongly feel the same attitude must be applied right now," Jortner says.

Others are looking for a way to defuse the tension. "I don't want to inflate this episode to levels where [the damage] would be irreversible," Keinan says. In fact, last week Keinan sent a letter to the approximately 1000 chemical society members encouraging them to consider attending the meeting.

"It's extremely frustrating for everybody," says Bernd Rode, one of the conference's founders and a chemist at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Even if nothing changes before the meeting, Rode says, conference organizers will hold a panel discussion to allow participants to discuss the issue thoroughly.

—ROBERT F. SERVICE