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Syrian poet Adonis says poetry 'can save Arab world'



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Noted Syrian poet Adonis, whose name surfaces regularly as a top contender for the Nobel literature prize, says religious fanaticism is "destroying the heart of the Arab world," but sees salvation in poetry.

Agence France Presse

GOTHENBURG, Sweden: Noted Syrian poet Adonis, whose name surfaces regularly as a top contender for the Nobel literature prize, says religious fanaticism is "destroying the heart of the Arab world," but sees salvation in poetry.

The poet – who belongs to the same sect of Islam as Syrian President Bashar Assad – wrote to the leader in 2011 calling for a democratic transition.

The 86-year-old lives in exile and is equally scathing about the West's role in the conflict in his homeland which has claimed more than 300,000 lives over five years.

Now he sees hope in poetry.

"The Americans are not looking for solutions, they are seeking problems," he told AFP at the Gothenburg Book Fair.

Adonis said poetry would never be stifled.

"The Americans do not have a coherent vision. Neither do the Russians, who are only driven by self-interest. The Arab world is strategic, an area of riches and the Arab people are just a means [to oil wealth]."

Adonis, who is also an acclaimed critic, painter

The poet – who belongs to the same sect of Islam as Syrian President Bashar Assad – wrote to the leader in 2011 calling for a



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Commander of France's Order of Arts and Letters.

He was Ladbroke's favorite as Nobel Literature Prize winner in the year of the Arab Spring in 2011 .

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"Poetry cannot slit a child's throat," said Adonis, the pen name of Ali Ahmad Said Esber, "nor kill a man or destroy a museum."

Calling for a separation between religion and state, he said poets could play an important role in bringing this about.

"Arab poetry has always been against God," he said. "There are no great poets in our history who were great believers like for example [Paul] Claudel in France."

"The future lies in secularism," he added. "I had said one cannot stage a secular revolution with people emerging from the mosque to demonstrate. A revolution is one thing and the mosque another."

Adonis said poetry would never be stifled.

"As long as death is there – and death exists – there will be poetry," he said.

"Poetry will never be silenced."

Adonis, who is also an acclaimed critic, painter and essayist, moved to Paris in 1985 and has been named a Commander of France's Order of Arts and Letters.

He was Ladbroke's favorite as Nobel Literature Prize winner in the year of the Arab Spring in 2011.

His name frequently comes up in the annual run-up to the top literary award but it has so far eluded him.

Born to a farming family and with no formal schooling in his early years, Adonis has come a long way from the poor western Syrian village where he spent his early years.

"I'd never seen a car, electricity or a telephone till I was 13," he said in an interview a few years ago. "I always ask myself how I was transformed into this other person. It was almost miraculous."

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on September 27, 2016, on page 16.

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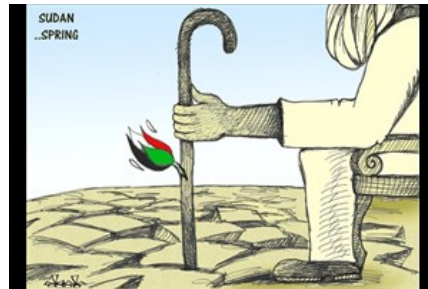
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