

WZO kicks off 'extraordinary' congress in Jerusalem to debate, connect

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April 19, 2023

Zionist confab

Some 2,000 people will gather in Israel's capital for three days of discussions, votes as a continuation of the virtual 38th Congress in 2020



Courtesy/World Zionist Organization

World Zionist Organization Chairman Yaakov Hagoel opens the 'extraordinary' 38th Zionist Congress in Jerusalem on April 19, 2023.

By

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An “extraordinary” World Zionist Congress opened on Wednesday in Jerusalem, with some 2,000 people from around the world in attendance to mingle, learn, debate and vote on resolutions, according to the World Zionist Organization.

The three-day event is not necessarily “extraordinary” in the positive, “amazing” sense of the word, but is instead literally out of the ordinary, being held as an add-on to the WZO’s 38th Zionist Congress in 2020, which was held in an online format because of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2020 congress, the attendees elected a new chairman, Yaakov Hagoel, and other portfolio officers, but refrained from holding discussions and voting on new resolutions.

Roughly three-quarters of the attendees will be Israelis, and the other quarter flew in from abroad. Of these, approximately 150 are Americans, representing members of dozens of Zionist organizations, from across the political and religious spectrum.

The congress is being held in Jerusalem’s International Convention Center, *Binyanei Ha’uma*, but will also include tours of different parts of the capital, including the Haredi neighborhood of Meah Shearim to learn about the community and its relationship with Zionism; the Arab neighborhood of Beit Safafa to learn about the challenges facing its residents; and the Knesset.

In addition to resolving those outstanding issues, this “extraordinary” congress also offered the opportunity to mark Israel’s 75th Independence Day, Yom Ha’atzmaut. (The conference is being held a week before Independence Day so as to not interfere with the Jewish Federations of North America General Assembly taking place in Israel at the same time.)

Despite the ongoing protests in Israel over the government’s proposed judicial overhaul, the WZO has largely succeeded in keeping its congress above the fray, unlike the JFNA General Assembly. Demonstrators have called to hold protests outside of the assembly due to JFNA’s decision to invite Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Knesset Member Simcha Rothman, one of the architects of the overhaul, to address the conference.

WZO’s success in avoiding protest appears to be the result of a conscious decision by Hagoel to not invite political leaders of any party to speak at the event, unlike in previous congresses when the prime minister and other ministers were invited to give addresses throughout the gathering. The one exception to this is President Isaac Herzog, who is at least nominally a nonpartisan figure in Israel, who is scheduled to address the congress on Thursday night.

Herbert Block, the head of the American Zionist Movement, the umbrella organization of U.S. Zionist organizations, told *eJewishPhilanthropy* that the World Zionist Congress has also stayed outside the political debate because it truly does not take a side in the issue, as it represents a diversity of opinions on the matter, with some members openly opposing the judicial overhaul and others supporting it, even just within the American contingent.

The WZO has scarcely weighed in on the matter, save for Hagoel signing a letter along with the heads of other major Zionist organizations – the Jewish Agency, Jewish Federations of North America and Keren Hayesod – calling for dialogue and consensus-building.

“Essential as the judicial reform may be, it cannot trump the risks of a, God forbid, brotherly war,” they wrote.

But that is not to say that the congress will shy away from addressing the burning issues of the day. On Wednesday evening, committees will meet to debate a wide range of resolutions, many dealing with topics currently being debated in the Knesset and in Israel in general. And on Thursday, votes will be held on the resolutions that make it out of committee.

One resolution proposed by Mercaz Olami, the Zionist arm of the international Conservative/Masorti movement, for instance, calls on the government to not amend the Law of Return, which determines who is eligible for Israeli citizenship. This is in response to calls within the coalition to remove the so-called “grandchild clause,” which guarantees citizenship to anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent, provided they don’t practice another religion.

Block told eJP that the goal of the committee discussions and the congress in general is to have “more dialogue, less contentious debate.”

“We’re hoping that this will be an opportunity to celebrate the 75th anniversary [of the founding of the State of Israel], but also to have people from all the different viewpoints coming together to better understand each other’s positions and concerns about the different issues,” Block said.

Hagoel also noted the significance of Diaspora Jews weighing in on these issues, not just Israelis.

“The current events in Israeli society require us to remember that we are brothers and it doesn’t matter where you are from in the world,” Hagoel said in a statement. “The thousands of young men and women and leaders who will attend the Congress will discuss the challenges facing the Jewish world and also marketing the State of Israel back in their countries of origin and communities as a Jewish state based on the democratic and social vision of Theodor Herzl.”

Alongside the congress, the World Zionist Organization also organized a one-day event, the Herzl Forum for Social and Economic Entrepreneurship. Over 300 people will participate in the Herzl Forum, which will include discussions of a variety of initiatives addressing environmental issues and socially responsible investment and philanthropy.

In addition to the main congress, there will also be a youth conference for over 1,000 young people ages 18-23, most of them coming from Israel, but with representatives from over 30 countries, from North, Central and South America, Europe, Africa and Australia.

The young attendees are all members of Zionist youth movements.

“The connection between the young people who are members of Zionist youth movements who will lead Diaspora Jewry and the State of Israel in the future is a strategic asset for the State of Israel,” Sergio Edelstein, member of the executive of the WZO who organized the gathering, said in a statement. As educators, it is our duty to educate to build a bridge between the Diaspora and the State of Israel. A country with 75 years of prosperity, a country that is a home, a home that welcomes every Jew who wishes to live in it, where Jews live as the norm, a home where every citizen receives equal rights.”