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Subject: World Zionist Congress votes to support settlement freeze and two-state solution; far right storms stage and shuts down Congress



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Posted by: Hadar Susskind | June 17th, 2010 11:28 am

How did the World Zionist Congress vote to support a settlement freeze, endorse a two-state solution, and call for the Israeli government to repair relations with the American government sparking right-wing protests that effectively ended the Congress deliberation?

How is it that a body that has been marred by relative obscurity in recent years appears to have been the site of the vital conversation over the future of Israel as a Jewish, democratic home in all its rambunctious glory?

And how did it come that I, Vice President of Policy and Strategy at J Street and a veteran of the Israeli army, found myself chairing the Settlement Committee at the World Zionist Congress?

When J Street's delegation of staffers and lay leaders landed in Israel just over a week ago to join the Congress, we hoped to add J Street's voices to the chorus of over 400 delegates to the World Zionist Congress. What we experienced demonstrated the seriousness of the battle we have in front of us to finally freeze the settlements, end the occupation, and achieve a two-state solution.

We had hoped that the storied history of the Congress would be our guide. Founded in 1897 by its first President, Theodore Herzl, the Congress was where all the various Zionist streams would come to respectfully debate, converse, and argue over the future of the Zionist project, both before and after the founding of the State of Israel.

Originally asked to serve as Vice Chair of the Settlement Committee at the Congress, I was promoted to the role of Chair when the previous Chair of the Committee (who was part of Avigdor Lieberman's party's delegation) quit when confronted with a much broader range of views in the room than he and his allies on the right had expected. He took a number of his political associates with him.

Despite the rancor that resulted in the Chair's departure, what followed adhered to the best ideals of what Theodore Herzl had hoped the Congress would represent: a full and reasoned conversation about how to carry out our people's dream for a state of our own in our historic homeland.

With progressive delegates outnumbering those representing pro-occupation parties, the committee could have easily descended further into the political abyss by ramming through resolutions and not taking into account the deeply held views of all in the room. We took a different tack, recognizing that chairing this committee was an opportunity to demonstrate to the Congress and the Committee that it was possible to have a serious, fact-based, and frank discussion on these incredibly contentious issues.

At the end of more than 4 straight hours of such discussion, numerous members of the committee - from the left and the right - told me that they found the committee proceedings to be both serious and fair.

The next day, these resolutions were brought in front of the entire Congress but we only got through a single vote on Settlement Committee resolutions before all hell broke loose.

The Congress voted overwhelmingly, about 3 to 1, to pass that lone resolution (fulltext below). Immediately after its passage, a group from the right-wing parties took the stage. Ignoring calls to sit down and refusing to allow the democratic procedure to continue, they belted HaTikva as loud as they could even though the resolution that was just passed by the World Zionist Congress was, in my view, the fulfillment of the Zionist dream of a democratic, Jewish Israel far more than their anti-democratic protest.

Two young Australians from opposing political perspectives then took the stage to rightly excoriate the protesters for not living up to Herzl's hopes for the Congress. The Meretz delegation head Dror Morag also had a few choice words for the protest that inspired a standing ovation from the silenced majority of the Congress.

The Resolutions Committee then decided to halt the proceedings and refer all remaining resolutions to a later meeting of the Executive Committee (Vaad haPoel).

But the vote took place and the vote stands. The World Zionist Congress is on record supporting a two-state solution and the settlement freeze, and calling for a stabilization of the relationship with the American government.

J Street was proud to have supported and helped pass out of committee a number of resolutions that represent our viewpoints on the settlement project including sending them all to the full Congress for consideration where, unfortunately, only a single resolution was voted upon.

Our participation has helped focus the Congress conversation over the future of the Zionist project and the necessity of the immediate achievement of a two-state solution. We're already planning for next time.

RESOLUTION TEXT

Whereas the Government of Israel finds itself in a process of deteriorating relations with the American Government; and

Whereas Israel-US relations are important to the future of the State of Israel and to its security; and

Whereas these relations are critical in maintaining a warm relationship with Jewish communities in the United States,

The Zionist Congress resolves:

- To call upon the Government of Israel to stabilize the relationship with the American government;
- The Zionist Congress calls upon the Government of Israel to act in the spirit of the Bar Ilan Speech- in which Prime Minister Netanyahu called for two states for two peoples in order to maintain the democratic and Zionist character of the State of Israel;
- To support the Prime Minister in his decision to freeze construction in the Territories;
- The Zionist Congress calls upon the Prime Minister to continue his activity of this nature.

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