



12th World Zoroastrian Congress 2022



Twelfth World Zoroastrian Congress

New York, July 1 – July 4, 2022

PRESS RELEASE

July 6, 2022

False Claims Mislead Kurdish Zoroastrians

The World Zoroastrian Congress is an international gathering of Zoroastrians from all over the world. It has been held every four years with the first one in 1960. This year's Congress was held in New York City, July 1-4, 2022, and was attended by approximately 1,200 people. Attendees came from 16 countries around the world. There have been recent erroneous reports published in Kurdish media, by organizations, and by individuals about certain activities at the Congress. We are issuing this press release to state the facts and to make the correct information publicly available.

Every four years, the World Zoroastrian Congress features different Zoroastrian voices from around the world. The Congress seeks to feature a diverse range of active individuals. Four years ago, in June 2018, Ms. Awat Darya (who has also used the names and spellings Awat Husammaddin / Husamuldeen / Taieb / Tayeb / Derya) was an invited speaker at the 11th World Zoroastrian Congress, held in Perth, Australia. In order to provide the Congress attendees with exposure to a greater variety of voices, it was decided to feature another Kurdish Zoroastrian at this year's Congress. (And in the future, still other voices will be heard from.) Therefore, the selected speaker for this year was Ms. Faiza Foad, who was featured in the book *A Kurdistan for All: Embracing Faith and Diversity* (page 171), an official publication issued by the Kurdistan Regional Government in September 2021.

Information about the various sessions of the Congress, as well as Ms. Faiza's session, on 4 July 2022, titled "One Zarathushtra, Many Zoroastrians: Iraqi Kurds Reclaim Their Heritage," can be found on the Congress website: <https://wzc2022.nyc/program/speakers/>

This rationale for the selection of this year's Kurdish Zoroastrian speaker was conveyed to Ms. Awat months prior to the conference. When Ms. Faiza Foad's invitation became public in early 2022, Ms. Awat began a campaign of letter writing to the Congress directors and to a number of American Zoroastrian individuals, expressing her objections to the selection of Ms. Faiza and asserting that she was the sole representative of Kurdish Zoroastrians.



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The Congress co-chairs responded to Ms. Awat's correspondence with a letter dated March 4, 2022. The letter reminded her that she had been a featured speaker in the 11th Congress in Australia, that another individual was being given a turn to speak this year, and that still others will have turns in the future. The letter also affirmed that selected speakers were not limited to appointed officials and representatives.

In keeping with this rationale, at no point in this year's Congress was Ms. Faiza Foad presented or introduced as an official representative of Kurdish Zoroastrians. Rather, she was introduced as one active individual among the Kurdish Zoroastrians, and therefore an appropriate voice whose perspectives and experiences could enrich the contact of Zoroastrians internationally with the Kurdish Zoroastrian community.

Ms. Awat paid to register and attended the Congress among the other 1,200 attendees. She was welcome as an attendee but was not invited as an official guest to speak or to participate in any event or ceremony.

At the opening ceremony of the Congress, a procession of about 40 invited and preselected mobeds and mobediyars (religious priests) from around the world filed onto the stage to offer benediction and prayers. Awat Darya was not invited to participate since she is not a mobed or mobediyar. However, Ms. Awat brazenly entered the procession, without invitation and without the permission of the organizers, and walked onto the stage with the mobeds. This was insulting and extremely disrespectful to the trained mobeds from around the world. During the prayers, Awat stood embarrassingly silent because she was unfamiliar with the prayers and could not recite them.

The Rudaw Media Network reported Awat's claims with the following: "Awat was holding the rank of asrawan before, but in this conference, she has been promoted to two ranks above that, to the rank of mobed. According to Awat Darya herself, this is the first time a Kurd has been awarded this rank." This statement by Ms. Awat is a blatant lie. Nothing like this ever happened and could never have happened since the Congress has no authority to proclaim any one a mobed, or any other priestly title.

After this opening prayer ceremony, the Parade of Nations ceremony was held. One preselected attendee from each country was provided by the organizers with their country's flag and was invited to walk in a procession and to carry the flag of their nation onto the stage from the right-hand side. As this year's honored guest, Ms. Faiza Foad had been selected to carry the flags of both Iraq and Kurdistan. As the line proceeded to the stage, each individual was announced by name, along with the name of their country, and called to ascend the stage. After all the flag carriers were on the stage, Ms. Awat Darya walked onto the stage from the left side, carrying a flag that she had brought herself, and positioned herself behind the announcer for a photo op. She was followed by her personal photographer who took her photo. Her name was never called, and she was not invited onto the stage. So as not to disrupt the proceedings, the organizers let her remain there.



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This was a very disrespectful act, and the Congress is saddened by the actions of Ms. Awat Darya. These actions show complete disrespect to the Congress and to the individual whom the Congress had selected to participate in this year's ceremony. These actions also constitute the exploitation of the Congress for misleading photo opportunities.

Following this embarrassing scene, several Congress directors approached Ms. Awat the same morning and confronted her about her behavior. She was told that she had not been invited onto the stage, was not invited to participate in the flag ceremony, and that it was inappropriate to insert herself into the mobed ceremony as she is not a trained mobed. She was asked to refrain from any further disruptions during the Congress.

Despite this reprimand, the Yasna Organization began publishing posts later the same day, using the deceptive photos that Ms. Awat had obtained. These posts made false claims and presented Ms. Awat as though she had been an invited participant in these ceremonies.

The Congress is thankful to the invited speaker Ms. Faiza Foad for an excellent hour-long presentation on stage, which included answering questions from the audience. She spoke about the revival of Zoroastrianism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. She shared the work done by various Zoroastrian organizations and the hundreds who listened to her speech are now more knowledgeable about the spread and growth of the religion in that part of the world. The considerable number of attendees were moved by Faiza's personal story, and she was one of the very few speakers who received a standing ovation.

In conclusion, we believe that we have a responsibility to lay out the facts as they happened and to stop the spread of intentional misinformation and self-serving statements. We believe that Ms. Awat Darya's behavior at the Congress created an unnecessary controversy, and it is unfortunate that the reputation of the Kurdish Zoroastrians may have suffered a setback, because of Ms. Awat's words and actions. It is extremely disheartening to see that Ms. Awat Darya, a leading proponent of Zoroastrianism in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, has blatantly lied and acted completely contrary to the Zoroastrian principle of Asha—The Truth.

We also request that Ms. Awat Darya and the Yasna Organization publicly retract their false statements that have misled the Zarathushtis of Kurdistan.

Sincerely,

Astad J. Clubwala
Co-Chair 12 WZC

&

Arzan Sam Wadia
Co-Chair 12WZC &
President FEZANA