

Ralph Nader Radio Hour

Episode 504

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Special Edition

“Ceasefire Now!”

Steve Skrovan: Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Steve Skrovan, bringing you a special edition of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. We're recording this on Friday, November 3rd. It's just me and Ralph today. Hello Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Hello.

Steve Skrovan: Ralph, tell our audience why we are doing this special report today.

Ralph Nader: Because time is of the essence. Events in Gaza are accelerating the massive destruction of civilian infrastructure. The textbook definition of genocide is underway. The invasion by Israeli overwhelming military power is underway. All kinds of innocent lives are being destroyed. And there's a prospect of a wider war which could flash out at any time involving neighboring countries and maybe beyond. So, there's no time to lose here. We want to focus on what Congress is doing and not doing under its constitutional duties.

Steve Skrovan: And to help us with that, we've invited a guest on today. Our guest is Lara Friedman. Lara Friedman is the president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace. She's a leading authority on the Middle East with particular expertise on U.S. foreign policy in the region, on Israel-Palestine, and on the way Middle East and Israel-Palestine-related issues play out in Congress and in U.S. domestic politics. Ms. Friedman is a former officer in the U.S. Foreign Service with diplomatic postings in Jerusalem, Washington, Tunis, and Beirut. She also served previously as the Director of Policy and Government Relations at Americans for Peace Now. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Lara Friedman.

Lara Friedman: Thanks Steve, very happy to be here.

Ralph Nader: Welcome, indeed. Almost every day, Lara, we hear top U.S. officials make the following statement, “We’ll continue to send arms to Israel without conditions in order for them to defend themselves.” And Vice President Harris (in London) just said the same thing verbatim—as do many members of Congress. Now, you cover Congress on Middle East issues like probably no one else. Every Friday morning, you say every single thing that happens in Congress related to the Middle East, and Israel-Palestine is followed by you and put into a report.

So, let's start with this, “unconditional.” There's no such thing as military aid to any country—including Israel—unconditionally because there's a federal statute of longstanding that says the U.S. cannot send military arms to countries that use them offensively. And under the Leahy Amendment (after Senator Patrick Leahy from Vermont) the U.S. cannot send military shipments to countries that systemically violate human rights. And of course, Israel has done both in contradiction. So, you've listened to all these people on Capitol Hill say “unconditionally.”

Has anybody ever on Capitol Hill called their colleagues to account, that they are not supporting the implementation of laws that they passed themselves?

Lara Friedman: That is a great question. It's the \$3.8 billion question— which is how much we give Israel right now a year in military aid. For the defenders of Israel, they would argue that this point is not relevant because Israel doesn't ever do anything wrong. It doesn't violate any U.S. requirements...any law. So, to suggest otherwise, they would argue, is anti-Israel and probably antisemitic. There have been efforts for years to bring up the issue of the Leahy Law. It's clear that there is no appetite within *any* administration from *either* party to actually impose Leahy Law monitoring on aid to Israel.

I would say it's also difficult. Aid to Israel is granted in a way that is unlike *any* other aid for *any* country in the world. Which is that in pretty much every other case, the U.S. Congress appropriates money, which is then available for countries to use to buy U.S. weapons. And the U.S. retains oversight of those weapons, and how it's used, and all of that. With Israel, we appropriate money at the beginning of the fiscal year— at this point, \$3.8 billion a year. That money is then handed to Israel in cash. And Israel can use it when it wants to. It can earn interest off it while it sits in banks. And a portion of that money Israel can spend outside the U.S. It can spend it on things inside Israel, so it's not even like all of it is coming back to the U.S. But for the stuff that *is* coming back, again, normally the U.S. maintains a tight hold on it because the money isn't appropriated until there is an actual request to buy a specific weapon. And *then* there can be the oversight. In the case of Israel, the money is already out the door. So, there's just been no appetite for imposing any scrutiny at all.

Ralph Nader: Well, let's take a recent case study— the \$14.3 billion appropriation to send to Israel. Apart from the substantive pros and cons of that, to a technological, military, and economic superpower that Israel has come to be with a social safety net greater than *our* safety net in the U.S.— they have universal health insurance, for example. They have stronger union laws than we do by far, for example. This was just passed by the House of Representatives, tied into a \$14 billion cut in the IRS budget over time to allegedly pay for it— which of course would include losing all the recovery of tax evaders who are super wealthy and large corporations and create even greater deficits.

But let's look at the procedure here. Bills like this are supposed to go through the appropriation, authorization, hearing process. There wasn't any. The House Foreign Relations Committee didn't have hearings. Hearings involve witnesses, not just briefings of administration officials. It went through the Rules Committee without deliberation. And then it went to the floor and the battle was mostly a battle of epithets and accusations rather than what is in the package. And what *is* in the package includes a portion of money for R&D for advanced lasers, for example. So, a lot of things in the package that were voted on, they had no clue about it. They were just heel-clicking it through the House, the Republicans primarily. So, you have a whole sequence of violation of congressional procedures under its constitutional duties. Now, why do you think even liberals in Congress who are skittish about challenging the pro-Israeli lobby, which we'll get to in a moment, why don't they make procedural propriety an issue?

Lara Friedman: When it comes to aid for Israel, it is bipartisan and consensus. And until that changes, whether something changes at the grassroots (which really compels members of Congress to listen) or different members are elected who are willing to stand up, the bottom line is there isn't any controversy about aid to Israel. The only controversy is which party can claim to be more pro-Israel by giving more. In this package, the controversy around this \$14.3 billion...and there is controversy. This is not going to move quickly. There are political challenges for moving this forward. But those challenges are completely unrelated to giving money to Israel.

Basically, everybody agrees *We want to give this money to Israel. We want to give it as fast as we can. Let's just move it right through.* The challenge here is that Biden wants to attach to it Ukraine money and some other things, and the Republicans want to cut those off because they don't want to fund them. And the new speaker says that it has to be offset. And normally with emergency spending for things like natural disasters or wars, you don't offset it. That basically says that *we're not going to spend this unless we can pay for it by cutting something else.* I don't know if there's any precedent for that under either party to basically say, *Emergency spending has to be offset by cuts to regular spending.* Regular spending has already been cut to the bone. And that is going to slow this down.

I will say there's an interesting kind of side story playing out, which is that Speaker Johnson—by requiring this to be offset by cuts somewhere—is actually imposing for the first time ever a condition on aid to Israel. And Democrats are going to have a field day with that.

Ralph Nader: Well, let's talk about things that they should be doing that should be non-controversial. Biden flew to Israel for seven hours of consultations right after the October 7th Hamas attack. And he came back empty handed. He didn't even get the release of four to five hundred American citizens (and with their families, they total a thousand) in Gaza. And, he could have read the riot act to Israel and say *Look, we've got to let these people out. They're American citizens.* He didn't do that. And there were no champions (except very few) in Congress saying,

Let our American citizens out. This is an outrage. They're in supreme danger. Why wouldn't a majority of Congress support that?

Lara Friedman: Immediately after October 7th, the impulse from the Biden administration and many in Congress—I think correctly— was to rally around and support Israel in the shock and the grief of what was just absolutely shocking and for many people, unthinkable. I'm someone who's followed Hamas for years, and I was shocked. I didn't imagine they had the capacity. And I certainly didn't imagine that they would engage in that level of brutality against civilians or that level of kidnapping. That rallying around was to be expected. And I think it was appropriate.

But, it was fascinating for me watching the noises from Congress and this administration. The fact that there are American citizens in Gaza seems to just escape everyone's attention for at least the first couple weeks, even as Israel was bombing the crap out of the place. And this was while in parallel, you had members of Congress...there's legislation that's been introduced, basically pushing the administration harder on helping Americans get out of Israel, on making sure that Americans who are evacuated from Israel don't have to pay back their evacuation loans. There was a very progressive member from the area where I live who pushed the IRS successfully to allow people who are somehow harmed by what happened in Israel with Hamas to get a delay in having to file their taxes.

There's a lot of thinking about what is needed by American citizens on the Israel side of this. To the extent there's been any thinking about Americans in Gaza, it has been belated and has been treated somewhat as not just an afterthought. It fits into the general racism that we see toward Palestinians in general. Their lives and their concerns don't count as much.

Ralph Nader: Well, speaking of that, you are an advocate of historical context. That's why you're effective in your outspoken positions with your foundation. And Israel's allowed to have its history—the Nazi Holocaust. The Palestinians are not allowed to have their own history. So, we have pointed out that in a 1978 book, Nahum Goldmann (head of the World Zionist Organization) quotes David Ben-Gurion in a conversation with him. And the founder and first prime minister of Israel is, in effect, saying, *Why would the Arabs ever try to have an agreement with us? It was their land, and we took it.* And the whole quote is in a letter to President Biden recently that we sent.

That's the fundamental issue of justice behind the Palestinian cause. They didn't ask for this fight; this fight started in the wars in Europe. And that is often denied them. Their own history is denied them. And other histories are being denied too. The Israeli newspapers are now beginning to report again how Netanyahu for years supported and funded Hamas. In fact, Hamas was a small religious offshoot from the Muslim Brotherhood. And both the U.S. and Israel fostered it as a counterpoint to the secular Palestine Liberation Organization (known as the PLO) in the 1980s. And right up to the October 7th Hamas attack, the strategy of Netanyahu was to divide

the Palestinians by supporting and funding Hamas, which meant they enabled Hamas to get their weapons in the international trafficking business that goes on with weapons.

And I've never seen a situation, Lara, where people are being so dehumanized. Even in concentration camps around the world, they feed them food and water. They don't cut off food, water, medicine, electricity, even plunge them into darkness and then bombard them with the latest U.S. military aircraft and equipment. And so, they are denied their humanity. They don't even have an opportunity to surrender, they just have an opportunity to die. And there are babies being born where their death certificate precedes their birth certificate, as they die instantly because of the bombing and the collateral effects of the bombing on any kind of sanitation, healthcare, and even family nurturing.

So let me ask you this question. To what degree can Congress descend in dehumanizing the Palestinian people? Because if the shoe was on the other foot, it would be considered the most heinous antisemitism possible. And of course, there is the *other* antisemitism against Arabs, not only against Jews. But what has dehumanized the members to levels of savagery? Where Senator Tom Cotton, Harvard Law School graduate, can say, "I don't care if Israel makes the rubble bounce in Gaza," which is a phrase that's used for nuclear detonation— after it wipes out everything, it makes the rubble bounce. Or Nikki Haley saying, "Finish 'em off," about Iran. "Finish 'em off." Or Lindsey Graham making comments like, "Kill 'em all." He doesn't care about babies in South Carolina. He voted against extension of the child tax credit, which cut child poverty almost in half in the United States in the early period of the pandemic. What is it that has so dehumanized them and silenced dissent, as you cover Congress day by day?

Lara Friedman: Okay, that's a big question. You're talking about historical context. The historical context for this starts... the number of times I've been in meetings over the years, and I've had a member of Congress say to me, "Well, you know, land without a people for a people without a land." Or they've quoted back to me something like, "Well, listen, Israel can't make peace so long as the Palestinians hate Jews more than they love their children." That kind of stuff. It's just this basic language, which at a fundamental level dehumanizes Palestinians in such a way that you don't have to question whether what Israel is doing is right or wrong. The answer is: whatever it is, it's right, because the other side is a monstrous, antisemitic terrorist entity.

It's why today, after October 7th...and October 7th was horrific. You don't have to do anything to pump that up. It's horrific. Hamas has distinguished himself as a horrific terrorist actor who committed war crimes. Done. But that's not sufficient. *We have to compare it to ISIS. We have to say, "It's exactly like ISIS." We have to say, "It's the Nazis."* I heard someone the other day who was saying, "Well, why do you have sympathy? You're calling them innocent civilians. You wouldn't talk about innocent Nazis." In effect, suggesting that every single German was by their ethnicity a Nazi. I've never heard anybody say that. And therefore, every Palestinian by their ethnicity is Hamas. There are no innocent civilians because they're all somehow in their DNA, virulently, viciously antisemitic and full of hate and full of terrorism. And that sort of

dehumanization, once you've established that as a baseline, deep racism, deep dehumanization, it's extremely effective because then anything goes.

And let's say, the dehumanization in Congress of Palestinians in terms of its concrete implications doesn't start with the aftermath of October 7th. Palestinians in Gaza have been under a devastating blockade for 16 years with the full support of the United States. The idea that at the start of this war, the Israeli general can declare *total* blockade as in contrast to the *partial* blockade. So before, Israel would open the tap and let in more water, more food, more medicine, whatever, but now they can just turn it off completely. Remember that this is for a place where defenders of Israel say *Well, it's not occupied anymore. Sharon got out; it's not occupied*. However, *we* have our hand and maintain our hand on the tap deciding food, water, medicine, who can leave, who can go, who is registered in the population registry. There are cases of Palestinians where a woman is visiting Gaza from the West Bank, has her baby in Gaza, and then she can't go back to the West Bank to be with her family because Israel says *Well, your child is now in Gaza and you are illegal in Gaza, but if you go back*. This is occupation. This is total control of people's lives. And the world, including Congress, basically says this is fine. The idea that this is fine, and that one of the most populated places in the world is living under this kind of blockade, including during periods of time (and we only know this because an Israeli human rights group went to the Supreme Court) when the Israeli military literally calculated the number of calories it needed to allow entry into Gaza to prevent the population from starving. And that was all [the calories] they were letting in.

Ralph Nader: Part of the focus on Hamas now is to cover the horrendous intelligence and defense failure of Israel on October 7th. They had all kinds of sensors and videos and soldiers, and they were caught napping. And now they want the U.S. taxpayer to help pay for it and focus entirely on Gaza. But there are a lot of people inside Israel of great goodwill. Not only the human rights groups like B'Tselem, the newspaper *Haaretz*, and others who are pointing out the Israeli government's failure to protect its own people (along with the migrant workers, by the way—there were about 70 people from Thailand in that 1400 count.) But over the 75 years that you mentioned, the innocent Palestinian casualty toll—death, injury, correlative diseases, devastation— is 400 times or more the innocent Israeli toll in the clashes between the two imbalanced forces.

So, let's tap into your expertise here: the power of the pro-Israeli-do-anything-you-want government lobby in the U.S. Now, it's often stated— and there have been books written on this, as you know— that AIPAC and its associated groups around the country have a whole number of PACs that contribute to their friends in Congress. That's one factor. The second factor is that they mobilize as civic activists. I've often said, if AIPAC could only give a tutorial to progressive citizen groups on how to really influence Congress, progressive citizen groups would increase their influence immeasurably. Nobody has perfected the art of organized civic action on Congress... You never see a march or a rally by AIPAC. They don't have to march or demonstrate or rally. They bring 10,000 people here every year to their annual meeting and they

summon the members of Congress and administration to say the right things on the podium to the audience.

So that's two. One is: mobilize citizen action. Then there's campaign money, but most people don't realize that it's more granular than that. And I want to ask you about the almost fearful syndrome of not just wanting to be a friend of Israel—now the standard is a “strong” friend of Israel, an “unconditional” friend of Israel, regardless of what U.S. law and U.N. charter stipulate. They make life miserable for these members of Congress. I've had people in Congress say *The slightest deviation from the path of AIPAC and they swarm over us, they swarm our local offices, they call, they threaten, they indicate a primary challenger, they never give up.* Now, why don't you characterize the granular nature of this extraordinary power—which even exceeds that of the NRA—on Israeli and Middle East policy? Because we've got a lot to learn from the Israeli lobby on how to mobilize the grassroots. Someone who knows about all this told me that AIPAC doesn't have any more than 300,000 really active people in the congressional districts. Well, that's a lot of active people—auditing the military budget probably doesn't have 10—but tell us more about this remarkable unanimity. Over 400 votes in the House and anywhere from 98 to 100 votes in the Senate.

Lara Friedman: Sure. So first, there's a couple of things. When I hear you describing this, part of me thinks, “Oh, this is controversial. And every time we talk about this, people get mad.” And then I find myself thinking, “Everything that you've just said about AIPAC is something that AIPAC says to its own supporters proudly.” They're very proud that they do this. They're proud of these very effective methods. They have developed an incredibly effective way of being a grassroots and an election-financing force. They're proud of that. So, I don't think people should feel uncomfortable talking about it.

I do want to say, when we talk about 400 people voting “Yes,” there is genuine support for Israel in Congress. Setting aside the idea that there's a lot of activity from AIPAC, you cannot talk about this without talking about the evangelicals who are arguably as engaged at the grassroots and at the election-financing level. They are maybe even more narrowly focused than pro-Israel forces from the Jewish side. The evangelicals have made Israel and support for Israel, one of their red-meat issues along with abortion and anti-trans and all those things. It's right up there. So, I wouldn't leave that out of the analysis.

But in terms of what they are doing today... and today it's much easier to say how AIPAC does what it does. In the past, if you said about AIPAC, “Well, you know, they're a PAC,” and they'd say *Well, obviously you're an antisemite, you don't know us. We're not a PAC. We're the Public Affairs Committee. We don't give money. How dare you say it?* And the fact is, everyone understood, everybody who ever worked with AIPAC knew that there are actual PACs that are aligned with AIPAC, that gave money aligned with AIPAC's priorities. And there's enormous influence there. Influence that AIPAC was proud to have when talking about it to its supporters. But if anyone who was critical of AIPAC talked about it, it was framed as antisemitic.

But today we don't have to even talk about it that way. In the last election cycle, AIPAC launched a PAC, an actual political action committee. They raised money and they invested money, and they targeted races. And it's exactly what you're saying. They targeted races where they essentially targeted progressives. And they backed challengers in progressive primaries, where they thought that the incumbent was insufficiently pro-Israel or was anti-Israel. And they basically ran incredibly well-funded campaigns in races across the country to ensure that the person who was the Democratic candidate in what was seen as a Democratic safe seat would be somebody who was friendly to AIPAC and Israel. And they succeeded in almost every race where they played. They brought in such enormous money that it was arguably impossible for the people in those races to contend with it. And in the two races that they didn't win in, arguably— one they engaged too late, and one they would argue they didn't put enough money in. So, that speaks for itself.

And they were proud of it. They put out press releases, how they had actually beaten back all of these anti-Israel forces and all these primaries. And interestingly, in almost all of these primary races in the last election cycle, they invested the money via a PAC that doesn't have the word "Israel" in it. It doesn't say anything about their actual agenda. And they ran ads that largely didn't talk about Israel at all. Which suggests, when they announced proudly that they had proven that pro-Israel was good policy and good politics, and that's what the people wanted, when in fact they had actually run against the progressive candidates on issues that had nothing to do with Israel. And the votes against them had nothing to do with whether people liked or didn't like them on Israel. They ran on other issues. But it was enormously effective. And it was meant to be.

The question was asked immediately afterwards, can they do this again? Can they do this over and over? And the answer is— probably they can do it again. They have plenty of money and plenty of energy. But they probably won't need to do it again because the chilling effect here is real. If you're a candidate or if you're a sitting member of Congress— and let's remember, House members, when you're having an election every two years, you're always running. The minute you win is the minute your next campaign starts. And if you now understand— as a Democrat in a safe Democratic seat—that if you get an inch off the reservation on Israel-Palestine, you are going to likely face a primary challenger who is going to be so massively funded, it is going to hijack your entire campaign. And if you're the Democratic Party and you know that going forward, if people in your caucus step off the reservation an inch on Israel-Palestine, the party is going to have to divert resources from competitive races in other places to support Democrats in what are supposed to be safe seats because of an AIPAC-backed challenger? This is a sign that has a chilling effect on elections everywhere.

Ralph Nader: Well, let's look at the opposition to that. Because there are rallies and demonstrations day after day in the United States now on the situation in Gaza. Jewish Voice for Peace has demonstrated extraordinary organizational skills in getting people out. Muslims, Jews, Christians, a big rally in Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, D.C. coming up. How do you

characterize that? In the drumbeat up to the Iraq War—the criminal war in Iraq by Bush and Cheney—there were massive demonstrations in the U.S. and all over the world. And it didn't change anything in Congress's rubber stamping of that war. Ron Paul once said that Bush and Cheney “lied us into the war in Iraq.” There were no weapons of mass destruction, we might recall. How do you characterize the demonstrations? They're remarkably diverse and heroic in many ways. How would you describe what's going on? Do you think it's going to change one vote in Congress?

Lara Friedman: I agree. They're remarkable and heroic and they're one of the few points of hope and light. I feel this way. I know a lot of my colleagues, both Palestinian and Jewish, feel this way. And it's JVP [Jewish Voice for Peace], it's If Not Now, it's a whole grassroots movement, and it's intersectional. I know that that's a dirty word for people on the right—I'm going to claim it as something that's good. It's people who are recognizing that the equities at stake in Gaza today are not just Israel-Palestine equities. They're not just about Jews, Muslims, whatever, these are about everybody and the implications of what's happening on the ground are far-reaching and frankly terrifying. That it is amazing and heroic, and the fact that they are happening in and of themselves is important.

And it's important at the societal level where we are seeing an unquestionable resurgence in antisemitism...When I say “antisemitism,” I do not mean that to refer to pro-Palestine activism or Palestine-rights activism are criticism of Israel. That is a false conflation and needs to be resisted. But there is actual antisemitism resurgence. On top of that, we have actual Islamophobia resurgent. We have anti-Palestinian racism. In a country where since this war started, we had a six-year-old stabbed to death because he was Palestinian, stabbed to death in his own home. You would think this would be a higher priority. These demonstrations of solidarity and joint values and purpose are hugely important.

In terms of what impact they have on elected officials, already we're seeing some shifting in Congress away from *You can't talk about a ceasefire*. We're in the most bizarre place where we have almost 10,000 Palestinians dead on the ground in Gaza. And the narrative that is being pushed out by the Israeli government and its supporters here, including in the U.S. administration, is that to talk about ceasefire is repugnant. It's just utterly surreal. And the grassroots mobilization, combined with the facts of what's happening on the ground, are having an effect. We're seeing at least more humanitarian concern, more willingness to talk about “humanitarian pause.” I don't know why that's somehow better than a “ceasefire.” That term makes people more comfortable, or “stop the bombing,” as I think Mark Pocan said the other day. So, that's positive. That does reflect that there is pressure beyond that.

This is a generation that is taking lessons from the failures of the grassroots during the Iraq War. They're much more focused in their mobilization. They're more focused in their message. They are targeting members in their offices. And on top of that, I don't think anyone's quite figured out what the implications are for the Democratic Party in the next elections. Because polling

suggests that the Biden administration's policy thus far...and I don't know if it's already a point of no return. I suspect it is, frankly, it's just so horrific. At the point when, in the middle of massacres, the Biden administration decides it's time to start questioning the numbers of how many have died, which is utterly dehumanizing—and I'm sorry, it's utterly racist. There are clearly massacres going on, and that's the point you want to take? There's a question of whether or not Biden can win Michigan. And there are suggestions by pollsters that this is not just going to be at the top of the ticket, it's going to be down-ticket as well. And that speaks to the absolute sense of betrayal and outrage from Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and that goes further into the progressive world.

But this is intersectional. When you listen to some of the most brilliant Black American intellectuals saying, “This isn't complicated. Here's why.” People recognize what's going on. They recognize what Israel is doing, and it does not suggest support for Hamas or lack of empathy for Israeli victims and for Israeli hostages and their families. But they recognize that Israel is *exploiting* that empathy and that victimhood to commit war crimes, and the administration is supporting it. And they sense that the administration is supporting it because Israel gets special rules, and because there is deep racism against the people who are being killed. The implications for that for the next round of elections are going to be huge.

Ralph Nader: Well, blunders by Biden are increasing. First of all, he's doubting the fatality count of the Gaza Health Ministry, when it's a vast undercount because the health ministry just takes the numbers from hospitals— that are being bombed. Over 115 health facilities (the *New York Times* said) have been bombed. That was a week ago. Well, there are people under the rubble, their children, their infants under the rubble. There are people dying in their homes from contaminated drinking water, immediate bouts of deadly dysentery, diseases, the elderly, infirm, not getting medicine, not getting treatment for injuries. So, he's going to look very bad on that.

And the second area, which is really so contradictory, he's talking about humanitarian aid flowing into Gaza. At the same time, he's unleashing shipment after shipment of military arms and aircraft and missiles to Israel to blow up the civilian infrastructure— which is to *receive* this humanitarian aid and distribute it. So, he's destroying all those trucks that are coming in. The roads are being blown up. The facilities where they can be distributed—schools, hospitals—are being attacked. And he's like oblivious.

Well if you know Joe Biden's history as I do, he's always been a warmonger. He's always been a hawk. He's always been a frustrated bomber pilot. He's supported every war of empire except Libya—he broke ranks with Hillary Clinton and the overthrow in Libya, which is producing violence and chaos to this day there, and in neighboring countries. And the same thing with Ukraine, “We're going support Ukraine as long as it lasts.” There are no peace negotiations by him, there's no ceasefire. “As long as it lasts?” You mean, until the last Ukrainian family? Who's getting the brunt of this destruction on our side? It's the Ukrainian families and the Ukrainian towns and villages, which can go on for 10 or 20 years, the way Afghanistan went on that long.

So, in terms of the protests in Congress, I really want your insight on this. There have been silent sit-ins in about a dozen members of Congress' offices so far, and the members called the Capitol Police. And they take the silent protesters—open, nonviolent, civil disobedience, with a long tradition in American history—they take them away. Maybe arrest them or fine them. Sometimes they just get them out of the office. At what point do you think Congress is going to lock people out? They're already locking doors to Congressional offices. I see that if there are another two dozen of these sit-ins, they're going to basically lock the citizenry out of their own Congress, to which they have delegated enormous constitutional authority... 535 members of Congress. What do you see in the next few weeks in that area of possible suppression? And the way they're increasing the penalties on people like Medea Benjamin standing up and saying, "You're not having hearings, you're not giving voice before the Senate Appropriations Committee debriefing," which they mistakenly called the hearing—a hearing involves witnesses. What do you predict?

Lara Friedman: I have not heard anything indicating they're planning to lock people out of Congress. It's not impossible. If the pace of protest continues? Maybe. I just don't know. It's really since the Iraq War, they've been effectively not tolerating any dissent in hearing rooms. You stand up and hold the sign, you get dragged out or you get escorted out. It doesn't matter what the issue is. There was a certain period of time (not kidding), this was years ago when I was lobbying the Hill still, and I had a jacket that I loved. It looked really good on me. I looked good in pink. And I wore it up to the Hill once. And one of the guards, as I came in, said, "You need to not wear that jacket up here. People are not going to let you into hearing rooms because of Code Pink." It was just surreal. I don't think that's new. This is just the most urgent rush of protests we've seen in a while.

In terms of how this protest affects members of Congress...and here I'm going to say something... I love this mass protest. It makes it so amazing. Again, it has great value societally. The Women's March at the start of the Trump era had great value societally. But members of Congress are only responsible to the people that vote for them or give them money. They care about their constituents and their funders. In terms of having impact, the most important work that's being done at the grassroots level is being done in people's districts. And that's happening as well. I know JVP and If Not Now are approaching members in their state offices and in their district offices, because members can't shut out their constituents— or they can, but there's more of a cost.

So, it doesn't surprise me that members of Congress are—unless they're already sympathetic to the message of the protesters—it doesn't surprise me that they're not particularly interested in a group of protesters, unless those protesters are carrying an ID card that says *I live in your district*. The protests at the Capitol make a difference, and they make news, and they're powerful symbolically, and I'm happy they're happening. Protests at the district are what's going to make a bigger difference. And funders.

Ralph Nader: Reflect on the use of the phrase “antisemitic.” They seem to be cheapening the word antisemitic by overusing it and using it to attack anybody who dares criticize U.S. policy in Israel. How effective is that word on Capitol Hill?

Lara Friedman: It’s a very effective word on Capitol Hill. I’d argue it’s not just that it’s being overused, it’s being *actively* weaponized, and this isn’t new. I’ve been covering for the past decade the efforts to normalize and codify (including into law) a definition of antisemitism that comes out of the IHRA (the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance). And it’s a definition of antisemitism that explicitly, in its examples, conflates almost any meaningful criticism of Israel with antisemitism. And there’s been a massive push internationally, including in the U.S., including in U.S. state capitals and legislatures, and at the federal level, including going on right now, to take this definition and put it into law. And Trump has already put it into law partly, when he was president, via an executive order which has to do with free speech on campuses. And there’s been no question—the entire use of this definition... You say, “Well, we have surging antisemitism in the Trump era with Nazis marching and these MAGA people. Just open antisemitism.” And they say, “Oh, well, we all know that. That’s not important. The real antisemitism we have to watch for is this left-wing antisemitism that hides behind criticism of Israel and anti-Zionism. And the way to deal with it, to fix it, is to declare anti-Israel commentary, pro-Palestinian activism, and anti-Zionism to be ipso facto antisemitic, and therefore *exactly* the same as Nazis.” And that’s where we are today. And by the way, the White House isn’t helping. When the spokesperson in the White House, I think a week ago, was asked by a Fox News reporter what they thought of—the Fox News reporter characterized them as these “anti-Israel marches” or something like that. And the spokesperson in the White House said something like *We were clear on our views on the marchers in Charlottesville, and it’s the same thing*. Directly connecting, If Not Now and JVP and all of the other young and old Jews and people from other backgrounds at Grand Central Station with people marching with tiki torches saying, “Jews will not replace us.” It was just...it was stunning.

Ralph Nader: Well, you may be surprised to learn there was a civil debate on antisemitism against Jews and antisemitism against Arabs in the United States by two Jewish Americans (which included the brother of the former Prime Minister Olmert of Israel, as well as two leading Arab Americans). And that is available on the website debatingtaboos.org, if you want to see an hour of civil exchange on those two phenomena—antisemitism against Jews and antisemitism against Arabs.

But you, Lara Friedman, are president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace. Why don’t you tell us something about that Foundation and whether you think you’re getting an honest break in the news media for what you’re saying and reports you’re putting out.

Lara Friedman: The Foundation for Middle East Peace has been around for decades. We are a grant-maker. We have a small endowment. We give grants to organizations working for peace, justice, tolerance in Israel-Palestine. We give grants both on the ground in Israel-Palestine, and

in the U.S., and a little bit in Europe. But increasingly, we also have been functioning (certainly since I came on board) as a think tank. We do our own research—I produce a tremendous amount of research on things like this antisemitism-conflation issue and legislation around that. Around legislation trying to shut down boycotts of Israel, the anti-BDS laws and related lawfare—which is this effort to use lawsuits and SLAPP suits and legislation to shut down free speech around Israel and Palestine issues. And we also do research on settlements and lots of other things, and we do a lot of public programming. Before I sat with you today, I co-moderated a webinar with my colleague Khaled Elgindy from the Middle East Institute with three legal experts looking at the issue of red lines in the Biden administration with respect to what's happening in Gaza now. I highly recommend that. It was a great conversation.

Ralph Nader: And the media coverage? Have you been on NPR, PBS, the *New York Times*?

Lara Friedman: As far as a fair shake... So, we're not a public advocacy organization. I do a fair amount of media. I'll tell you that my rule—and this is not the first Gaza war that has happened since I've been doing Israel-Palestine work. I take my cues from my Palestinian colleagues, and my rule generally is I don't do media. If people call me, I say, "There's plenty of American and Jewish voices in the media. Let me give you a list of Palestinians to talk to because their voices are the ones that aren't being heard." And I've done that really faithfully over the past few wars. This time around, after the first week or so—when it became clear that the media was pushing out Palestinian voices, was starting to exclude them—Palestinian colleagues basically made the case for me and other people to start saying "yes" to media appearances, which I've been doing. So, I've done a number of appearances.

I have to say, I don't think it's a question of a fair shake. A lot of the media is wrestling with how to cover this at all. And, if you can get a 30-second hit and get two sentences in just to offer some context, that's great. I feel like there isn't a lot of room for that. I've actually started saying no to those little standup hits, because I don't even think they're worth the time. But there's tons of podcasts. I've done Al Jazeera. I've done this show. I've got to say, the most important thing is getting Palestinian voices out there. And I'm doing everything I can to berate and shame my media contacts into bringing Palestinians on board.

Ralph Nader: One of the tragedies of this warfare is that Israel has killed a lot of Palestinian journalists and their families in Gaza. And there seemed to be a lot of suppression against journalists free speaking in Israel itself, people like Gideon Levy and Amira Hass. What do you think of the journalistic performance of the free thinkers and newspapers like *Haaretz*?

Lara Friedman: There's been some really superb journalism out there. There's some people who are writing amazing things at *Haaretz*. There's some things being published by *Haaretz* that I find deeply troubling and arguably very problematic. Journalists are people too. And a lot of my friends and colleagues who are Israeli journalists are going through their own process, or trying to process the grief and trauma of what's happened. They have kids in the military. And that that

is definitely impacting some of the coverage. And that's regrettable, but I respect where they're coming from.

There's been tremendous journalism coming out of what are not the main sources that people think of... but *+972 Magazine* has just been unbelievable, presenting both Israeli and Palestinian voices. There's nothing like it. *Jewish Currents* in the U.S. has been just doing an extraordinary job. The *Intercept* has had great stuff. And, no joke, the *Onion* has been tremendous. The *Onion*—by taking the genius of comedy, where you can basically zero in and shine a bright light on the most glaring obvious hypocrisy or intellectual, logical, moral failing of the popular narrative, and just put that in the headline. In some ways, the *Onion* has beaten everybody in substance of coverage. But there's been some excellent coverage out there. I did *Democracy Now!* They're bringing on incredible guests. But even MSNBC, there's been some really wonderful, wonderful, thoughtful pieces of coverage.

Ralph Nader: Well, that is a change from past warfare conflicts over there...the media certainly is covering more. Do you think the Israeli government is going to sacrifice the hostages (over 200 of them) in their invasion against Hamas? It's very rare for an Israeli government to give up on hostages. It's very much rooted in Judaic tradition that they come first, as an op-ed in the *New York Times* pointed out recently. Are they going to be sacrificed instead of having a temporary truce and a prisoner exchange with all the thousands of Palestinian prisoners languishing in Israeli jails, most of them without trials, due process, and even charges? What do you think? They've had prisoner exchanges several times with Palestinians in the past.

Lara Friedman: I've said this on the record before in various ways. From the moment that Netanyahu launched his offensive against Hamas—which turns out to be an offensive against every man, woman, and child in Gaza—it has been clear that the hostages are valuable to this Israeli government as a rhetorical point they can raise when they want to say to people, “How dare you talk about ceasefire? How dare you talk about pause? Not until they release the hostages.” Beyond that, there seems to be very little interest in actually getting the hostages released.

According to media, there have been multiple opportunities where Hamas has said they wanted to have a pause and release hostages. They would release hostages in exchange for a ceasefire. They would release hostages in exchange for prisoners. If releasing the hostages was a priority—and that doesn't preclude Israel going after Hamas after the hostages are released—you would think that they would actually act like it's a priority. Whereas carpet bombing Gaza suggests that there is no benefit to Hamas in releasing them. I don't quite understand the negotiating tactic there. The argument seems to be *There will be no ceasefire until you release the hostages. And then we'll keep killing you either way.* So, the logic actually seems to be *We will continue bombing and killing as many people in Gaza until Hamas... which has now clearly demonstrated it doesn't give a crap about the people in Gaza and them dying...But we're going to keep doing*

this until it's enough people that they give a crap and release the hostages. And if along the way, we kill all the hostages ourselves, that's still Hamas' fault. So, it's okay. It's just surreal.

There's a movement now of the families of the hostages, and they're calling for prisoner exchange. They have the phrase is “All for all”— all the hostages in exchange for all the prisoners or all the women prisoners or whatever it is. And it's pretty clear that Netanyahu has zero interest in them, and doesn't have any interest in meeting with them, and effectively seems to consider them a pain that he doesn't want to deal with, because there is a broader agenda at play here, and releasing the hostages is not at the top of it.

Ralph Nader: And if there's a pause, a temporary truce, as there was in 2014, it would break the momentum of Netanyahu's military eradication of Gaza. So that's a calculus in his political mind as well. Before we close, Steve, do you have some comment or question for Lara? This is a good opportunity to ask about what's going on in Congress.

Steve Skrovan: Well, that's exactly what I was going to ask. Lara, how do you see this playing out in Congress? We're recording this on Friday, November 3rd. Things are moving rapidly. What do you see as the timeline and how do you see it playing out in the back and forth over the next week?

Lara Friedman: The main event in Congress with respect to Israel is the aid, and I don't know how it plays out. I'm going to be publishing my roundup later on today, and I'm going to be referring to what is happening in Congress right now as a “politically high-stakes game of chicken” with each side trying to argue that the other side is getting in the way of giving all this money to Israel that everybody wants to give them. I don't know how it's going to be resolved. And by the way, the package for Israel is even more complicated because the version that was approved in the House not only cuts out the other things that Biden wanted with respect to Ukraine and some other stuff, it also cuts out any humanitarian aid for the Palestinians. Which for Biden is important as sort of a sock, right, to say that *I'm not not concerned with the humanitarian needs*. Even though as Ralph pointed out, you're basically going to be feeding them while they're being bombed. Which is kind of... nobody believes that that's a serious concern.

So, this now goes to the Senate. The Senate is not going to take this version because Democrats control the Senate. I don't know how it gets resolved. This is the first test for the new speaker, and maybe this will be the test that brings down this new speaker and paralyzes things again. I just don't know. In the meantime, though, the House is moving apace. They passed four or five Hamas- and Iran-related bills and resolutions this week. Some of those may pass the Senate. I don't know. We're in a moment of just huge political grandstanding, and it is bipartisan, and it is grandstanding to say who can be the most supportive of Israel, who can be the loudest in their hatred of everything Palestinian. And it's not just Hamas. There are resolutions and letters out there that basically say *Not a penny for any Palestinian until Hamas is completely eradicated*

from Gaza—including the West Bank, no money for UNRWA, anywhere in the world, ever again. It feels like the cruelty is the point when you read some of this.

And the other trend of this is just outright, growing, open racism, McCarthyism, all of that towards anyone who is speaking in support of Palestinians. So, we have legislation calling for essentially changing the law so that you can't get a visa to the U.S. if you're seen as sympathetic to a terrorist organization. Which, criticizing Israel's conduct in Gaza is seen as supportive of Hamas. They're looking for ways to strip... the concern over what they call antisemitism on campuses... and there is surging antisemitism on campus. I don't want to discount that. But what they're talking about is activism in support of Palestinian rights, and opposing what Israel is doing in Gaza—and they're saying *that* is virulent antisemitism.

It has to be stopped. There are letters in legislation demanding that the FBI and the federal government get involved in investigating students. They're demanding that visas be revoked from foreigners who are doing this. They're going after the professors. They're going after the leadership. It's just quite amazing. You sort of wonder where it's going to end. And, in this context, we're seeing a resurgence in Congress of efforts around this definition of antisemitism that I mentioned— efforts to put this into law, which they've been trying to do for the past seven years. Maybe it'll work this time.

Ralph Nader: Lara, the blackout in Congress started in 1948. The peace advocates in Israel over the years—and they have included ministers of justice, they've included retired heads of the security and intelligence units, and about that documentary that gave them a voice. —they have never had a single hearing in Congress to give the *other* Israeli viewpoint, either in the House and Senate... completely blacked out. And the other aspect of it is— what is the strategy of Netanyahu bombing U.N. schools and UNRWA relief buildings that are clearly marked from the roofs (and ending up killing, already, 65 U.N. staff)? Why is he doing that?

Lara Friedman: Rather than attribute intent, I'm going to take them at their word. And the Israeli argument is—all of these places that they are bombing, they are viewing as military facilities. Because they're either saying there are Hamas people inside of it, or there's Hamas facilities under it, and all of them are there for legitimate targets. And they're arguing *Well, we warned people to leave. So anybody who is killed now is either Hamas, or Hamas bears responsibility.* Now, every piece of what I've just said does not comply with international law. Every piece of it. You cannot bomb a school because you think there's one guy from Hamas there. You can't bomb an entire neighborhood out of existence in a refugee camp because you're going after one Hamas leader. That's just not allowed.

You *must* distinguish between civilians and non-civilians, and civilian infrastructure and non-civilian infrastructure. And Israel basically has adopted a new doctrine of war—which so far the U.S. is tolerating— which says, “Nope, we can target anything and everything and there are no innocent civilians. And if civilians die, we have no agency, no responsibility. It's all on Hamas.”

And that's what they're doing. There are pictures from just a couple of hours ago, they bombed the entrance to one of the major hospitals that's still open, al-Shifa Hospital. And there's video online. It's horrific. There's bodies all over the place. And they're saying that the hospital has a Hamas Operation Center underneath it, and therefore they've warned people to get out, and they can do what they can do. And so far, the world says, "Yes, we see those pictures of mangled children's bodies on the road. Israel has a right and it's right to self-defense to do what it's doing." And this is where that question of red lines comes in, going back to what we said before about how this will play for President Biden's legacy for the future and also maybe more importantly for him, in the immediate future of the next elections.

Ralph Nader: Well, the international law expert Bruce Fein (who's argued cases at the Hague) calls what's going on now the textbook definition of genocide under the Genocide Convention Treaty. And the Center for Constitutional Rights (highly respected in New York City) has put out a report on October 18th on the issue of genocide and what Israel is doing in Gaza. And one of these days, the international rule of law will get the respect it deserves, we hope, by the U.S. Congress, the White House, and other chiefs of state. Because otherwise, it's just devolving into the power of might and the destruction of human rights across the board. This war in Gaza is going to have ricochet effects across the world and may even expand into a larger theater of hostilities very shortly.

So, we're out of time. I want to thank Lara Friedman, who has been a longtime advocate for peace and justice internationally, a former Foreign Service officer stationed in Jerusalem, Tunis, Beirut, and president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace. Thank you very much, Lara Friedman. Is there anything else you want to say that we haven't asked?

Lara Friedman: The one thing that you didn't ask is what should be happening. How do you defeat Hamas? What should be happening? And I just want to say, we're in an era when people don't want to call for a ceasefire, which is just morally unbelievable. But, if people still believe that you can defeat an ideology by killing a lot of people and essentially taking a whole generation and killing their parents and injuring them, and they think that's going to defeat an ideology, then they've learned nothing. They've learned nothing from the horrible experiences of the past few decades of the U.S. experience in the war on terror, and they know nothing about human nature.

If the conversation is, "How do you defeat Hamas? You have to let Israel kill everybody," there's a basic failure to understand the context. Which is, if you take away all the rights and all the dignity and all the political horizon and hope for a future for a people, then they are going to try to find a way to break out of that. And the only people that have any credibility with a people that is oppressed are the people who try to fight to end the oppression. If you want to discredit the people fighting to end the oppression, then you end the political context. You fix the political context, you give people hope, you let them have a future. And unfortunately, when it comes to Israel-Palestine, that path— which is the only path to security for both Israelis and Palestinians—

is a path that is foreclosed by those who say *No, there is one nation that has national rights between the river and the sea, and it is the Jewish nation, and nobody else, and anybody who questions that is antisemitic.* And what I've just said, as a principle, is almost (if not word-for-word) one of the founding principles of the current Israeli government. That's the framework.

Then if you think that you can root out Hamas by killing everybody, watch the videos. Look at the video of the 11-year-old, 10-year-old boy who's shaking and crying and tearing at his clothes because his entire family has just been massacred. Assuming he survives this war, that child is going to grow up to be deeply broken and maybe suicidal, or maybe a terrorist. It's hard to believe that that generation is going to just somehow wake up and say *You know what? We're fine with the boot of the oppressor on our throat. You're right. Our existence is wrong. Let me find a way to be a refugee someplace else, and let you have this land and leave you alone.* And that seems to be what people think.

Ralph Nader: Well, there are people who say the two-state solution is gone, and the one-state solution—Palestinian and Jews living in peace—is very unlikely. So, the Israeli government now has a plan to try to push all the Gazan people who've survived into Sinai, Egypt. You see that playing out at all?

Lara Friedman: I certainly see that that is an Israeli plan. We've seen that directly from the Ministry of Intelligence because we have a leaked document making clear that's the plan. And you hear that in the annihilationist, racist, and sometimes genocidal language of senior Israeli military officials and government officials. They make clear that that is the intent. Whether it's possible, I don't know. Egypt doesn't want it. It's very clear Egypt doesn't want it. And the U.S. is so concerned about Egypt not wanting it that we've heard more and more statements from Secretary Blinken and others making clear that *This isn't the plan. We're not going to support it, don't worry.* But that's clearly the Israeli plan.

And looking at what's happening in the West Bank today, I don't think Palestinians are crazy to think there's a plan to push them into Jordan. They're not crazy. One reason I'd say that is because a week ago, settlers placed leaflets on cars all over the West Bank saying *Grab your stuff and get to Jordan. Flee there now. The Nakba's coming. If you don't flee now, we're going to expel you to Jordan.* So, it's not crazy to worry that that actually is an intention here. Whether it is the guiding intention, I can't say.

Ralph Nader: Well, the brutal envelope keeps pushing forward and forward without abatement, in no small part due to the Congress and the White House in our country. We've been speaking with Lara Friedman, president of Foundation for Middle East Peace. I hope you continue speaking out and writing and monitoring Congress, with detail that few can match. Thank you.

Lara Friedman: Thank you.