

As Gaza Death Toll Mounts, the Peace Lobby Fights for Influence in Washington

The Friends Committee, a Quaker lobbying group, has been pushing in Washington for a cease-fire, going up against more powerful and better-funded groups backing Israel.

By [Kate Kelly](#) - Reporting from Washington for New York Times - Feb. 16, 2024

When the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the most influential pro-Israel group in the United States, wants to use its muscle, it can call on its considerable resources to run negative ads against lawmakers who oppose its agenda and pour money into funding a challenger.

When the Friends Committee on National Legislation, a Quaker group that is pushing for a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas, wants to push its message, its Middle East lobbyist turns to tactics like playing guitar with schoolchildren in the occupied West Bank and sharing video messages about their fears with members of Congress on Capitol Hill.

Going up against the many forces backing Israel is a challenge for any group. But the clash is especially striking when it comes to the Friends Committee, whose antiwar positions are in sync with much of the left of the Democratic Party but run counter to Biden administration policy in the wake of the Hamas terror attack and face intense opposition on the right.

AIPAC, founded about 70 years ago to promote Israel's interests in the U.S., is a juggernaut. Last year, its nonprofit arm reported more than [\\$73 million](#) in revenue. Last month, its political action committee, which supports candidates who embrace its policy priorities, reported [record fund-raising](#) — bolstering a \$40 million war chest that could be spent trying to defeat political opponents in Washington. It has the ear of congressional leaders in both parties.

The Friends Committee, which was founded during World War II, is part of what amounts to Washington's peace lobby. It does not run a political action committee. It reports about [\\$3 million](#) in annual revenue. Its lobbying approach involves looking for “the divine in the people that we're meeting with,” Sarah Freeman-Woolpert, the Quaker group's deputy director of strategic advocacy, says in a [video](#).

The group has draped a banner stating “Ceasefire Now!” in English, Arabic and Hebrew on the facade of its Second Street office, which faces the Hart Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill.

“We’re clearly being outspent, but I think the saving grace is that our ideas are just more popular,” said Hassan El-Tayyab, the Friends Committee’s Middle East legislative director.

“So our currency is people power, and getting constituents to lobby their members of Congress,” he said. “And that has a major impact. And you can’t necessarily buy that public support.”

But while polling suggests that American support for Israel’s tactics in Gaza is weakening as the civilian death toll there grows, groups like the Friends Committee and its [coalition](#) of more than 80 like-minded groups, including American Muslims for Palestine, Jewish Voice for Peace and the Episcopal Church, are struggling to get traction for their message in Washington.

As Congress grapples with providing more aid to Israel, the Friends Committee and its political allies are pushing for an immediate cease-fire, more humanitarian aid for Gazans, continued funding for the U.N. aid group UNRWA and a cleareyed assessment of Israel’s human rights record.

AIPAC, which is supporting scores of Democrats and Republicans for re-election this cycle, is well known — and feared — in Washington. “Members of both parties worried about crossing the American Israel Public Affairs Committee,” former President Barack Obama wrote in his 2020 memoir, echoing a refrain heard from lawmakers today.

AIPAC has recently run harsh ads spotlighting some lawmakers’ refusal to condemn the Oct. 7 terror attacks carried out by Hamas. It plans to challenge incumbents like Representatives [Ilhan Omar](#), Democrat of Minnesota, and [Jamaal Bowman](#), Democrat of New York, whose stances on Israel and the Palestinians it disagrees with.

The peace groups are largely focused on amplifying their influence with left-leaning Democrats — but hoping to win over more moderates along the way.

In late October, Mr. El-Tayyab pitched Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Democrat of New York, on signing a letter arguing for a cease-fire. Weeks later, she was among two dozen members of Congress to send a [letter](#) to the White House and the State Department pushing for rapid de-escalation of Israel’s offensive in Gaza and a cease-fire. Since then, the number of members calling for a cease-fire has grown to 68, according to a [tracker](#) managed by the Working Families party and Congressional [announcements](#) — including [one](#) from Representative Chrissy Houlahan, Democrat of Pennsylvania, released on Thursday.

More recently, the Friends Committee and other peace and faith groups urged support for a resolution introduced by Senator Bernie Sanders, the Vermont independent, to examine Israel's human rights record before providing the additional defense funding now under discussion. The measure was [rejected](#) by the Senate last month when it drew just 11 backers, almost entirely Democrats. (The sole Republican on board was Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky.)

"They're all, I think, very mobilized voices and have had an impact," said Representative Ro Khanna, Democrat of California, who [called](#) for a cease-fire in November after [initially hesitating](#). "They've had constituents reach out to different members of Congress, they've organized a lot of demonstrations in districts, they've done a lot on social media, they've raised a lot of awareness."

Mr. Khanna said he and his staff meet with groups like the Friends Committee "all the time."

The Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, has been lobbying since its founding in the 1600s in England, said Jordan Landes, a Quaker historian at Swarthmore College. Quaker lobbying centers on a handful of themes, referred to as "testimonies," including peace, equality and stewardship, Ms. Landes said.

The Friends Committee was founded in 1943, in the throes of World War II. It focuses on policy objectives like alleviating child poverty and ensuring funding to help fight the impact of climate change. It also promotes peace around the world, not only in Gaza.

Mr. El-Tayyab is a self-described agnostic who grew up in Plymouth, Mass., and was a musician in a roots rock band called American Nomad before becoming a lobbyist (he still plays frequent gigs). His work on Middle East policy recently took him to Jerusalem and the West Bank city Ramallah, where he and other peace advocates met with faith and political leaders.

In Ramallah, he played his guitar and sang "I want a cease-fire now" to students at a local Quaker school assembly. He comforted some who were troubled by the war and its impact on them and their family members, promising "to relay those conversations to Congress when I get back."

He also met with Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, while in the West Bank. Over cigarettes and tea, Mr. Abbas thanked Mr. El-Tayyab and his other visitors for their work lobbying for a cease-fire, according to two people who were there.

A New York Times / Siena [poll](#) in December showed that 44 percent of respondents believed that Israel should stop its military campaign in Gaza, with 39 percent believing that Israel should continue (18 percent of respondents

didn't know or declined to answer). A [January poll](#) from the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research showed that 50 percent of adults surveyed believed that the war had "gone too far," with 46 percent saying it had either been "about right" or "not gone far enough." As the Gazan health ministry reports that more than 28,000 Palestinians have been killed, Mr. El-Tayyab and his fellow peace lobbyists are pushing for a cease-fire not only on moral grounds, but also on practical ones.

"This is not sustainable," said the Rev. Dr. Mae Elise Cannon, executive director of Churches for Middle East Peace, the group that convened the recent meeting with Mr. Abbas. "It's not sustainable for Palestine, for the Israelis. Even if Gaza is rebuilt, this can't continue, and so I think that's a huge concern."