Shoshana Abrams:
All right. Hello, everyone. Welcome to our August national call, FCNL advocacy teams, national call. It's really good to be with you all tonight. We have a wonderful call. As you heard, as you were coming on, we have participants from literally all over the country, from Hawaii, to Maine, and pretty much everywhere in between. We are gathered tonight with over 120 teams across 42 states, and we are lobbying Congress for peace and justice in our policy.

Shoshana Abrams:
As you know in 2020, we are working to campaign to end endless war, and prevent a new war with Iran. My name is Shoshana Abrams. I am FCNL's advocacy teams manager, and it's just really good to be in community with you all tonight.

Shoshana Abrams:
For tonight’s agenda, we have a wonderful guest speaker for you tonight, Imani Countess. We will have time for question and answer after she shares her thoughts with us.

Shoshana Abrams:
I'll give you an update on the important work that you all are doing around the country. We're going to hear some helpful and encouraging framing that Tracy from the Madison, Wisconsin team shared with her team and then asked her to share it with you all as well. I thought it was really beautiful.

Shoshana Abrams:
We have a special treat for you tonight with our policy update. Hassan is on vacation, good to take vacation. And so we have Diana Ohlbaum, FCNL's Director of Foreign Policy to give us an update on the policy. Then I'll walk us through the action sheets. Then I have some announcements to close us out. Can I get some thumbs up if it sounds good? Ready for this agenda? Okay, great.

Shoshana Abrams:
At this point we have 198 people on the line. Sarah Freeman Woolpert, has a very important job tonight of making sure everyone stays muted so we have a nice clear recording and so everyone can be heard. She will go ahead and keep everyone's lines muted. If you do speak, please remember to re-mute yourself afterwards. And for our friends joining on the phone, you can unmute yourself by pressing *6 when we get to that portion of the call.

Shoshana Abrams:
For questions that you have for the different pieces of our call tonight, you can use the chat function if you are on the computer or on the app, and you just type your questions into the chat and we will ask them as they come up. If you are on the phone, just when we get to the question and answer, you can unmute yourself and just state your name and we'll recognize you.

Shoshana Abrams:
So for the framing of tonight’s call, I thought there was no better way to start than to read the ends of Representative John Lewis' farewell published in the New York Times. And if you haven't read it at least five times, go back and read it again. It's really worth it. So many things that he has said and done over
the years are really worth studying and reading. It's very inspiring and important part and messages to remember as we do this work for peace and justice.

Shoshana Abrams:
So he said, "Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.

Shoshana Abrams:
When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last, and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression, and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide."

Shoshana Abrams:
If you are on the communicator call, I shared a different quote by John Lewis. I hope that these quotes speak to you and that you find urgency and a call to action in his words.

Shoshana Abrams:
Let's get started with the call tonight. I would like to welcome and thank Imani Countess. Imani, are you on the line?

Imani Countess:
Yes.

Shoshana Abrams:
Okay, good. Good to have you. I just wanted to make sure you're still there. Great Imani. We are so happy to have you on this call tonight. I hope you're doing well and staying safe during this time.

Shoshana Abrams:
I'll just take a moment to introduce you to the people that you're speaking with tonight, and then I'll give an introduction for you. The advocacy teams program has 2000 advocates on 120 teams in 42 states. We are focused on building longterm positive relationships with members of Congress. We have teams on the call tonight that have been doing this work for a short period of time who maybe just finished their training, and we also have teams who have been doing this for years and years with us.

Shoshana Abrams:
Every year we focus on one strategic campaign and this year we're focused on preventing war with Iran, and encouraging Congress to really take back its authority over issues of war and peace.

Shoshana Abrams:
Imani Countess is an Open Society Fellow focusing on economic inequality. She is also currently working on a project called African Focus Beyond Eurocentrism and US Exceptionalism, starting points for a paradigm shift from foreign policy to global policy.

Shoshana Abrams:
She has spent more than 30 years in US foreign policy circles working primarily with civil society groups, social movements, and governments in Africa. She has served as Africa Regional Program Director for the Solidarity Center, the chief of party for the Zimbabwe Program at the National Democratic Institute and the national coordinator for the American Friends Service Committee's Africa program, and as the Executive Director for the Africa Policy Information Center.

Shoshana Abrams:
Imani, thank you so much for being with us tonight. We are really hoping that tonight you can speak to us about the direct relationship between US institutionalized racism and the violent militarized foreign policy by which the US engages with the rest of the world.

Shoshana Abrams:
Now, we know that is a big topic and something you have written a lot about and spoken a lot about. I want to thank you for beginning to start the conversation with us and beginning to share your opening thoughts.

Shoshana Abrams:
I also will mention that we're very hopeful that you'll be able to also share some resources with us that I can pass along to the network after this call because I know you're going to share a lot of wonderful important thoughts. So again, we're looking forward to hearing from you and thanks again.

Imani Countess:
Well, thank you, Shoshana and thank you everyone that's on the call. It's a real delight to be with you. The work is impressive and necessary and so happy to be here with you. I want to start off with some obvious points. I'm an African-American woman. I've been black all my life. I've experienced racism. I've done presentations, as Shoshana said, on the intersection of racism and foreign policy.

Imani Countess:
But, friends, I am in new territory, and I think that we are all in new territory. The pandemic, the related economic recession/depression, and the impact of growing right with populism and authoritarian leaders, any one of these factors puts us into new territory. But all that along with the unrest sparked by three horrific deaths this year, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd have pushed conversations about race, racism, and structural racism front and center.

Imani Countess:
And so before talking about foreign policy, I just want to spend a minute or so on racism because definitions are shifting in really interesting ways. In the New York Times bestseller, How to Be an Anti-racist, Kendi, the author explains that there are many forms of racism.
He says the term racist is like appealable name tag that can be placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing. DiAngelo in, White Fragility, sees white people as singularly responsible. "Only whites have the collective social and institutional power and privilege over people of color." She writes.

Imani Countess:
Metzl, in Dying of Whiteness, hones in on the fact that racism hurts everybody. White people are dying from racism. He starts his book with the story of a poor white working class man in the South who's dying of cancer. That man did not have health insurance, yet he opposed Obamacare because he thought it benefited Mexicans and welfare queens.

Imani Countess:
So here we are in the midst of these really dynamic, evolving conversations and new thinking about race and racism. There is some consensus though, right? Racism exists. In some form, or fashion we've all been socialized by it. And as a result, it's become a part of our public policies, institutional practices, and cultural representations.

Imani Countess:
If you accept these facts, racism exists, we've all been socialized, and it's now part of all of our policies, institutions, and cultures, then of course, the international relations community and by extension policies created by that community are imbued with racist notions, which thereby impact people of color differently.

Imani Countess:
In thinking about this conversation, I came across a really interesting article in Foreign Policy magazine that explains racism in international relations. The author states that, racism isn't going away. He, the author, Micah Zenko, identifies four main reasons for his conclusion that structural racism will remain embedded in foreign policy.

Imani Countess:
First, he notes that the think-tanks experts, media specialists, and government officials responsible for implementing policy are 68% white, mostly male, and 87% of senior civil service executives are white.

Imani Countess:
Second, he notes that the dominant foreign policy frame centers on national security interests, which is defined vital and important interests as maintaining military superiority, preventing the emergence of regional [inaudible 00:11:15], protecting allies from external aggression, and protecting the market.

Imani Countess:
Third, he lifts up the fact that the foreign policy establishment doesn't really focus on people. Doesn't focus on actual human beings. And finally, the defining manifestation of US foreign policy for 75 years, has been the threat or use of military force. All of you on this call know better than I, how the threat or use of military force impacts our national budget, other military forces, global arm sales, and the impact on countries hosting US troops overseas.
Imani Countess:

So in sum, Zenko who himself is part of a foreign policy elite says that structural racism exists, and it isn't going to go away anytime soon, because the majority of people creating and implementing policies are white men. Those men are guided by a very narrow foreign policy frame that at its core is about maintaining military superiority. Policymakers don't focus on human beings and undergirding all of this is the threat of military force.

Imani Countess:

I fundamentally agree with Zenko's points, which kind of capture my experience with the international relations community, which operates in a self reinforcing bubble. But the biggest problem that I see is the absence of a human centered framework that's based upon an accurate understanding of where we have come from, who has been hurt, who is marginalized, what kind of country do we want and where have our choices resulted in differential treatment that's led to the under-development of whole countries?

Imani Countess:

Because where I sit with the Focus on Africa, the results of structural racism and narrow self interest, narrow interest-centered framework has been devastating and have cost the lives of millions and in some countries derailed human development for generations.

Imani Countess:

A really quick story because I know we all want to get to discussion. In the early 1990s, I was the Executive Director of the Washington Office on Africa and I was invited to an Africa consultation in New York. Herman Cohen was the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs under President George Bush at the time, and he was also present.

Imani Countess:

After the meeting, the assistant secretary and I shared a cab. I don't know where we were going, the train station, I don't know airport. I can't remember. I'd met him before, but never had an opportunity for a one-on-one conversation. The one question that I wanted to ask him, I wanted to understand why the US continue to support Mobutu, who was a murderous dictator, a kleptocrat to believe he stole billions from the country and from international donors.

Imani Countess:

The US installed Mobutu in the mid 1960s. By the 1990s, which is when this conversation took place, Zaire, as it was known then had a strong internal opposition party, brave civil society leaders, international support for change in the country. Yet there was no movement in terms of US policy toward that country.

Imani Countess:

I asked ambassador Cohen, "Why did the US continue to support this dictator?" He shrugged and he said, "Better to go with the devil you know." In other words, it was more important to have a willing ally that helps secure perceived interest in Southern Africa, even if that ally was internationally known as a murderous dictator and thief who stole the wealth of his country, including some of your money. This policy existed for decades. It existed in Democratic and Republican administrations.
Imani Countess:
Where I differ with Zenko is that I do think change will come, and it will come because we have to change. The narrow concept of interest doesn't work. It never did. The problems facing us are transnational in nature, and we need transnational solutions.

Imani Countess:
Good ideas don't only come from the United States. Others have good ideas too. We need ideas that are outside of our policymaking bubbles where structural racism and narrow national interest intersect.

Imani Countess:
The work that you are doing calling on policymakers to end harmful policies and to use diplomacy, are critical steps in that direction. Thank you for what you do. Thank you for the invitation to be a part of your conversation. And I really look forward to the discussion. Thank you.

Shoshana Abrams:
Thank you so much, Imani for sharing with us, for sharing the framework of what's happening, the framework of what others have said, and also your personal experiences with this and with the work. I'd love to hear questions from our network. So if you have a question, go ahead and put that in the chat box. I'm seeing lots of praise, hooray for Imani, and thank you, Imani. Questions in the chat box, as well. You can also unmute yourself if you're on the phone by pressing *6.

Shoshana Abrams:
Ingrid has posted, "Human centered framework. Yes. The narrow concept of interest doesn't work. It never has." So highlighting this great wisdom that you shared with us. We have a question from Fran, which you can choose to answer or not, which is, who do you feel is the best candidate for vice president, maybe with this in mind?

Imani Countess:
Wow. You want me to answer that?

Shoshana Abrams:
Only if you feel comfortable. You're not running for office, but we are a nonpartisan organization as you know. But you're a guest speaker, so only if you feel comfortable.

Imani Countess:
Well, I think that's a really interesting question. I was watching the news before this event started, and the CNN host was interviewing the Mayor of Atlanta who was on a list. He asked her who, if she wasn't selected as the VP pick, who would she recommend? She laughed, and she said, "I have two dogs in the backyard. If I thought that those dogs would help Biden win, I would pass them on."

Imani Countess:
I think that's how we all feel, right? We want a change. We want a different kind of leadership, both of our country and in the world. And so, I will be out there supporting the candidate, whoever he picks.
Shoshana Abrams:
Thank you. So many more questions have rolled in since. Imani, have you been following the tension between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, and is there any initiative for peacemaking over this? Worried about war.

Imani Countess:
Yeah, I'm worried about war too. It's very personal for me because my sister in-law who lives with me along with my brother and their kids, she's from Ethiopia. And so we hear and discuss the country a lot, and the fear of war is very, very real.

Imani Countess:
The dam, for those that don't know it, is really a point of national pride for everybody in the country, regardless of where they fit on the political spectrum in Ethiopia, because everybody's contributed to it. People contributed labor, people contributed part of their salary to build this dam.

Imani Countess:
In terms of, are there any initiatives? There have been initiatives over the past several years that have failed. The last initiative was being mediated by the state department and that didn't get anywhere.

Imani Countess:
The US really isn't an impartial actor in this. But South Africa has sort of stepped up and offered to bring the parties together, which are Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan to try to make a way. Because the only way that this will be a structure that really benefits the entire region is if they are able to come to some sort of negotiation around the use of the dam.

Imani Countess:
And also quite frankly, the extent to which Egypt can really focus on its use and misuse of the Nile River, that will help as well because they're deeply concerned.

Shoshana Abrams:
Thank you. There are quite a few questions that are coming through the chat. So I'm trying to combine a few that have similar themes. One of the questions that I keep seeing are, people are very interested in the term that you used, human-centered framework.

Shoshana Abrams:
I'm wondering if you could flush out for us a little bit more of what that looks like. Some people asked about, what kind of aid would be useful and human centered? And that's something that's being debated in Congress. So if anything else you could share about what a human-centered framework would look like?

Imani Countess:
Well, human-centered, it's just another term. For decades, people have been talking about the need to put people first, right? It's people and people's interests that have to be front and center in policy making.
Imani Countess:
In the past, I've done programs, and for those folks that are actively engaged in program development and so forth, you know there are these things called problem trees, right? Before you create a program, which would be kind of like the branches and the leaves of a tree, you got to dig down, you got to look at the problems that you see, that's the trunk. And then you got to look at what is underneath.

Imani Countess:
When you've asked yourself again, and again, and again, why and what? It gives you some sense of where you actually have to begin. When I look at Africa in particular, what I see, yes, there are governance issues. Yes, there is corruption. Yes, there are issues of leadership. And there is a deep centuries-long history of economic under-development.

Imani Countess:
There is a centuries-long history of differential treatment by the West where Black and Brown lives have not been valued. So if you start by looking at the actual conditions of people, then you are able to come up with policies that look very different because they're designed to address the needs of people.

Imani Countess:
We could have a whole long conversation about that. But in short, it really is just a reiteration of what, 20, 25 years ago, people called, people-first policies. And now we're revamping and talking about people-centered, human-centered.

Shoshana Abrams:
Thank you. I don't know if you can see the chat, Imani, but people have a lot of things to share and a lot of questions to ask. I'll pick a couple others and then I'll end by asking if you have any ideas for resources that we can, that people can go to, to find more information about the things that you brought up on this call.

Shoshana Abrams:
Okay. So a couple of questions before we get there. Jenny Bear asks, "In some ways, Trump is taking apart pieces of the American military colonial empire, or at least talking about it, which is kind of what we've been advocating for, for decades. So how should friends respond to it?"

Imani Countess:
Wow. What a really interesting question. Yes, you see that, bringing the troops back, re focusing alliances, and at the same time, he's directing more and more resources to the military. He's investing more money into the purchase of arms and the creation of new arms and the creation of a space force, like we want to go colonize the space.

Imani Countess:
And so at one, I agree a hundred percent that on the one hand, yeah, you do see that kind of slow dismantling. But then on the other hand, you see buildup. Look at what's happening domestically. There has been an investment in shifting police and military units within Homeland Security and releasing them on US streets. Re-purposing border forces to address perceived chaos on US streets. Although, if you talked to somebody in Portland, they have a very, very different perspective.
Imani Countess:
There was one question that I saw kind of flooded by that I did want to address. And that was from someone who asked, "If Republicans and Democrats are racist, then what are we supposed to do?" I think that is such a really great question. One of the reasons that I raised this book, How to Be an Anti-racist, which I'm reading, it's challenging for me to read. It's challenging with a lot of notions and definitions that I've heard.

Imani Countess:
Because what that office says is that we all are racist. At different points in time, that label, depending on what we do, that label, racist, you peel it, you put it on, and then you peel it off when you do something that's anti-racist.

Imani Countess:
The reason that I kind of focused on in my quick remarks about systems and structures is because we've all been impacted. We grew up in this. The choice isn't like Republican versus Democrat. It's not you versus me. It's, what are we doing to follow the words of John Lewis? It's, what are we doing to advance a peace agenda, which is based on putting people first, on caring about people and the environment?

Imani Countess:
And so I thought that it's such an important question that I just wanted to kind of lift it up. What you guys are doing... I mean, this is a Thursday night, right? And you guys are sitting around a virtual table to discuss issues and to plan your advocacy agenda. This is phenomenal. This is what takes us out of that binary. Good, bad, racist, not. You're coming together and you're trying to advance a piece which ultimately benefits all of us.

Shoshana Abrams:
Thank you, Imani. May I trouble you for one more question? [inaudible 00:28:00] was a particularly interesting one and maybe a little different than what we've talked about so far and it's certainly an important piece of this.

Shoshana Abrams:
So West asks, "With so many out of work and desperate, how can we employ people for positive change instead of the military-industrial complex?" I think this question could touch on a lot of things, military recruitment for one, which has been targeting low income and people of color in the US for a really long time. So I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about that before we close.

Imani Countess:
Yeah. There are a lot of interesting ideas out there that relate to job creation. I'm not necessarily an expert on any of them, but the kinds of things that are really interesting to me relate to the number of jobs that could be generated by all hands-on deck approach to climate change.

Imani Countess:
The Green New Deal, which kind of gets bandied about it's a framework, but it's not really a fully fleshed out plan. If it were possible to come together around a fully fleshed out plan, that would help us address the climate crisis, that would help generate good paying jobs for a lot of people.
Imani Countess:
And then also, this notion of investing in people's needs, if we did that, if we were investing in education, in teachers, in the health sector, which we know has been decimated, public health sector, if we were to invest in the kinds of things that we know that people really need, that would also lead to good paying jobs that would benefit lots of people.

Imani Countess:
I think the ideas are out there, and not only are the ideas out there, but the money to pay for these investments is out there. If you look to reducing military expenditures, if you look at reducing corruption, if you look at issues of tax evasion and tax havens, there's literally billions of dollars that's available, that's just not available to us yet.

Shoshana Abrams:
Well, thank you, Imani so much for going on this whirlwind of a short conversation with us. I hope those on the call got a lot out of this presentation and are hungry for more. There's so much more to talk about. Imani, if you could name a couple of resources that we could point to, and then any last thoughts to leave us with, that would be really wonderful.

Imani Countess:
Well, I actually did start to jot down a couple of things and I wanted to email them to you, because it's more than one or two. I think in terms of closing thoughts, I just want to reiterate how impressive this is. I mean, a lot of times we're sitting in our rooms and we're doing our individual things, or we're on a Zoom call with a couple of people, we're out there toiling in the fields, and we don't really feel that we're making very much of an impact.

Imani Countess:
Please, let me tell you that you guys are making an impact. FCNL has an impact. The kind of really smart strategic work that you're doing, developing relationships with your Congressional representatives, that leads to change. There's a lot of pressure on the other side, the big money, the big lobbyists, the DC swamp, it's there and it's real and you're real. And what you're doing is so incredibly important. I thank you for it. I thank you really, very sincerely for the privilege of having conversation with you.

Shoshana Abrams:
Thank you. Thank you so much, Imani. I don't have words for how grateful I am for you to have started this conversation with us and for your expertise and the work that you do. Thank you for beginning this conversation, and I'll certainly take that email and forward it along with those resources. There's a lot of gratitude in the chat to you as well. So thank you for taking the time. We'll look forward to talking to you more.

Imani Countess:
Yes. Thank you. All right. Bye, bye.

Shoshana Abrams:
All right. Bye, bye. If you needed any more encouragement, that's what I'm here to do. I just want to let you know how many times you all have lobbied this year. We're at 196 lobby visits for the year, 103
media pieces published. I know a lot of that effort happened within the last couple of weeks, getting published and getting letters to the editor up. So that's really wonderful and I'm really excited for next month for us to break the 200 mark with our lobby visits and for us to move forward with that work.

Shoshana Abrams:
You can send us your lobby reports and your media reports. In fact, we insist that you do. You do that by going to the team tool kit, which is fcnl.org/team toolkit, and you'll find just at the top of the page, all of the links that you need.

Shoshana Abrams:
I'm going to turn things over to Tracy from Madison, Wisconsin, to share a little bit of the framing that I thought she shared so beautifully with her team. Tracy, are you on?

Tracy Betts:
Yes. Can you hear me okay?

Shoshana Abrams:
Yes. Go right ahead.

Tracy Betts:
Perfect. Okay. Hi, everybody. My name is, [Tracy Betts 00:34:07]. I'm a proud member of the Madison, Wisconsin advocacy team. I was recently heartened by a reference to the work we do in an article from an online magazine called Salon. The article was called, can the next president shift US foreign policy away from endless war? By Medea Benjamin.

Tracy Betts:
It reminded me that the purpose of faithful advocacy is to keep the long haul of what we achieve in mind. Three years into the lobbying experience, it made me see all of our office visits, all of our letters to the editors, our phone calls, our messages as preparation for the right time and the right administration to make our legislative aspirations a reality.

Tracy Betts:
The writer, Medea Benjamin, she's one of the founders of the grassroots organization called Code Pink for peace, and she's written a lot about war and violence. Her article traced the successes and setbacks the peace movement has experienced in the years before and after Trump.

Tracy Betts:
But what inspired and motivated me to send an excerpt of her piece to the Madison team, was when she spoke of public pressure to make our issues, like the repeals for the authorization of military force, and calls for no war with Iran as possibilities with another president.

Tracy Betts:
Here's just a brief excerpt from the article. She wrote, "Since the 9/11 attacks, Congress has been only too happy to leave war making to the president, aggregating its constitutional role as the only power
authorized to declare war. Thanks to public pressure, starting in 2019, there has been a remarkable shift. Both houses of Congress voted to end US support for the Saudi led war in Yemen, and to prohibit an unauthorized war in Iran. Although Trump vetoed the bills, they offer proof that public pressure can move Congress. If we remove the obstacle in the White House, these bills would become law of the land."

Tracy Betts:
FCNL advocacy teams were and are the public pressure that Benjamin mentions. Even under the Republican led Senate, it's good to remember we have enjoyed success. With another administration, we've laid the groundwork for the passage of the bills that we visited, called, written, and emailed about to our members of Congress. We've been doing this for years, and many of us are just getting started. Thanks everybody for your fatal advocacy. You inspire me all the time.

Shoshana Abrams:
Thank you so much, Tracy. Thank you for sharing that. It's important and I think sometimes I was in a conversation with a team member who is in California and they said, "I prefer the communicator calls because there's less cheerleading." But I think in this moment, the national call, the cheerleading, it's so important. It's so important for us to remember all that we're up against, the things that Imani shared, and how much progress we're making.

Shoshana Abrams:
So thank you for sharing that, Tracy. I love when it comes from a team member that it's not me telling you that. It's really, you really are doing incredible work and each letter and each letter to the editor, each media piece, each call, it makes a difference. It adds up to that public pressure. So thank you for sharing that.

Shoshana Abrams:
Okay. We have a special guest for you tonight, which is, Diana Ohlbaum, to share our policy update. Diana, are you on the line?

Diana Ohlbaum:
I certainly am. Can you hear me?

Shoshana Abrams:
Loud and clear. Thank you. Go ahead.

Diana Ohlbaum:
Excellent. Well, thank you so much, Shoshana. Let me first say how delighted I am to join this call. I always get such energy and inspiration from hearing from all of you and speaking with you. So thank you for having me.

Diana Ohlbaum:
As many of them know this past month of July was a very busy one. There were some serious disappointments, but also some real cause for hope. It was deeply disheartening that both the Democratic leadership of the House and the Republican leadership of the Senate blocked floor votes on
preventing an unauthorized war with Iran. But your persistent campaigning has had some real success and we have some real major opportunities moving forward.

Diana Ohlbaum:
As I review the state of play, let's remember that there are two separate processes that are happening simultaneously in Congress, the authorization process and the appropriations process. So authorizations are the way Congress sets policy. When we talk about the National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA, that's an authorization bill, a policy bill. It does have numbers in it, but you can't take those to the bank. It's just a guideline.

Diana Ohlbaum:
The appropriations process is the actual permission to spend the money. There's 12 different appropriations bills each year, and in theory, they're supposed to take their overall guidance from the authorization bills.

Diana Ohlbaum:
Let's talk first about the National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA, the defense policy bill. In July, both the House and the Senate passed their own versions of this bill by overwhelming margins. But the big takeaway is that neither bill had any of the main things we wanted in it.

Diana Ohlbaum:
The House NDAA, which is basically written by chairman of the Armed Services Committee, Adam Smith, gave the administration pretty much everything it wanted. There were no votes in committee or on the floor on repealing the 2001 or 2002 AUMF or on preventing war with Iran.

Diana Ohlbaum:
So really, how could that happen? First, Smith just decided that this year, all he cared about was passing a bill and getting it enacted, not a progressive bill, just something that could get signed into law. We think it was the wrong decision, but that's the decision he made.

Diana Ohlbaum:
The next thing that happened, was that Congress have decided that in the midst of this coronavirus pandemic, there was no way they were going to vote for this obscene levels of Pentagon spending. And so they were going to oppose the NDAA, unless there were significant cuts to overall Pentagon spending. And we agreed with that.

Diana Ohlbaum:
So because Speaker Pelosi and Chairman Smith were not willing to cut overall spending or to include other progressive priorities like, preventing unauthorized war with Iran, they needed support from Republicans in order to pass the NDAA, not just five or six outliers, but a majority or near majority of Republicans.
So basically, Democratic leaders prevented the addition of any amendments that would jeopardize Republican support. On the final vote, 43 Democrats voted against the NDAA and 108 Republicans supported it.

Diana Ohlbaum:
Now, on the Senate side, it was a little less complicated. Leader McConnell has the ability to block amendments he doesn't like. He blocked Tom Udall's amendment to prohibit a war with Iran that is not authorized by Congress. So in the end, we didn't get NDAA votes on Iran in either the House or the Senate. Now, we've always said this is a hard issue to lobby on, but that's why your persistence is so important.

Diana Ohlbaum:
Now, the good news is that the cumulative effect of our lobbying in Washington and your lobbying around the country, still had results. We had big wins on the appropriations side. As you probably heard, Representative Barbara Lee, of California offered successful amendments to the defense appropriations bill to repeal the 2001 AUMF in eight months, to repeal the 2002 Iraq AUMF immediately, and to block funds for unauthorized war with Iran.

Diana Ohlbaum:
Those amendments were adopted in committee one on a voice vote, the other two on a party line vote. And then there were no floor amendments to strip those out. So they stayed in the final bill that passed the House.

Diana Ohlbaum:
Now, the reason that the situation was so different between the NDAA and the defense appropriations bill, was that Democrats knew they could pass the appropriations bill without Republican support.

Diana Ohlbaum:
When the defense appropriations bill came before the full House, they packaged it together with a whole bunch of other domestic appropriations bills. Most notably the labor, health and human services, and education appropriation bill, that they knew that Democrats are never going to vote against.

Diana Ohlbaum:
So the leadership actually didn't need any Republicans votes to pass that package, and on the floor, this big package passed by a pretty narrow margin, 217 to 197. Not a single Republican voted in favor of the package and only 12 Democrats voted against it.

Diana Ohlbaum:
So what's next? Well, you're not expecting to have more votes on these issues until after elections. The NDAA will probably go to conference soon, but there's nothing much we like in either bill, House or Senate. And it's unlikely to wrap up before the elections because both of the bills require renaming of Confederate bases and the president has threatened to veto the bill because of that.
Then the defense appropriations bill can't go to conference until the Senate passes it, and the Senate hasn't even started working on it. There's a slim chance that they might start their work in September, but much more likely they'll wait until after elections. At that point, it's going to be all part of some big omnibus deal.

Diana Ohlbaum:
That's why we're asking our representatives to make public statements now. If you go to your members and start talking about conference negotiations, they're probably going to say, "That's a long way off. And I'm not on the conference committee, so there's nothing I can do." We don't want to put you through that. We want you to ask them for something they can do, and they can all make public statements in support of these provisions.

Diana Ohlbaum:
Just before I finish, let me just put this in a larger context. For 15 years, after the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs were adopted, I don't think we had a single vote on the House or Senate floor on approving or ending a war. When President Obama requested authorization for an intervention against ISIS in Syria, neither house held a floor vote. They just let it happen.

Diana Ohlbaum:
But in just the 116th Congress, the last two years, we've had multiple successful votes on the House floor on repealing the 2002 AUMF and both the House and the Senate passed S.J.Res.68, the Iran War Powers Resolution.

Diana Ohlbaum:
There's no question, we still have lots of work to do to get Congress to stand up and take back its power. But we have seen massive progress over the last two years, as Medea Benjamin's article, explain. I think that's due in large measure to all of you. So thank you. I hope that's helpful. I look forward to your questions, and I am going to turn it over to, Shoshana. Right?

Shoshana Abrams:
Yeah. Wonderful. Thank you so much, Diana. I think you really explained things well. You framed out all of the complicated things that happened this month. So thank you. And of course, if you have questions, everyone, please feel free to ask. We [inaudible 00:46:35] Diana, much more than me. So we're happy to answer your questions.

Shoshana Abrams:
There's one question that came through the chat already. David Ross asks, "Doesn't there need to be an appropriations vote before October 1st? Appropriations aren't needed to spend money after October one?"

Diana Ohlbaum:
Yes, you are absolutely right. They do need to pass appropriations before October 1st. But what they will do is commonly referred to as a CR, which means Continuing Resolution. And all that does is say you're allowed to keep spending money in exactly the same pace, the same rate for the same things that you've been spending at last year until a certain date. So they'll probably pass a continuing resolution.
that allows the government to continue spending the money the way it has been over the past year, probably until December. That will buy them three more months to figure out what they want to do for next year.

Shoshana Abrams:
Great. Thank you. Lucy, from Wilmington, Ohio asks, "With this month's action for meeting with candidates, are there specific rules, legally speaking?"

Diana Ohlbaum:
Are there specific rules? I'm not sure I quite understand, Jim Hurt, or Shoshana, do you know what kind of rules?

Lucy:
Let me just clarify my question.

Shoshana Abrams:
Sorry, go ahead.

Lucy:
With some other organizations I do work with, lobbying during an election year, there's rules on who we can speak to and what we can put out. Are we just allowed to lobby our candidates for Congress like we would our actual representatives in Congress or is there stuff we're not allowed to say? I don't want to get FCNL in legal trouble basically. Are there any boundaries we should be watching out for?

Diana Ohlbaum:
FCNL as an organization is nonpartisan and we don't endorse candidates. So we don't do that. But you are private citizens and you should engage with candidates in the same way that you do with your representatives by asking them questions and trying to get their positions on issues.

Diana Ohlbaum:
If you're speaking as an advocacy team member, I would be careful not to say, "We support you as either a candidate or a member." But if you're speaking on your own personal behalf, there are certainly no rules. You're allowed to support verbally, and with money and with time, whatever candidates you like.

Speaker 6:
As a tax lawyer, I'll just say FCNL is a 501(c)(4), not a 501(c)(3). So essentially, there's not a problem.

Shoshana Abrams:
Yeah. One of the things that we hope that you all do is use this moment, use the lobbying that you're an expertise on to find out information about candidates and ask them to state their positions on the foreign policy that we care about.
I highly encourage you to talk to candidates on both sides of the aisle. You want to know what's going to happen, and you want to know that both candidates have these things in mind and many candidates don't formulate, especially people seeking new election, don't formulate foreign policy positions until they're actually in office. And what we'd like to do is for this not to be their first exposure to thinking about it.

Shoshana Abrams:
Thank you for all of that back and forth. We have a couple other questions that I'd love to ask Diana while we have her on. David Mendon asks "Our representative, Representative Plakon votes against both NDAA, NDAA the defense appropriations bill. This continues to be a stance. What are other stances that we can ask for him to support to progress the bill?"

Diana Ohlbaum:
Well, I mean, he's great. He does so many things that we want. So we're really happy to have his leadership. We can certainly ask him to make the public statements that we're talking about, and that is leading towards the appropriations conference that will eventually take place as part of some big deal in December.

Diana Ohlbaum:
I noted that somebody else in the comment mentioned that Barbara Lee's amendments could end up being stripped out and they're absolutely right. That is the danger. And so to be extent that, Mr. Plakon can help us create pressure to keep the Lee amendments in the final appropriations bill that is approved in December, anything he can do to help us keep those provisions in, would be great. We aren't focusing too much on the conference right now because it's not going to happen for awhile.

Shoshana Abrams:
Great. Thank you. Larry, from Tucson asks, "Do you want us to draft a statement for an outline for our representatives regarding Iran?" Sometimes to encourage public statements, we can offer those things. Do you have any suggestions about that?

Diana Ohlbaum:
Yeah. There's lots of young overworked staffers in Congressional offices who would like to be helpful, but they just don't have very much time. And so sometimes having the draft of a statement would just make their life a lot easier. I would make it as short and sweet as possible because the longer it is, the more things they find that they don't like about it. But it could definitely make the life of a staffer a lot easier to have a draft.

Shoshana Abrams:
Wonderful. Thank you. Joseph Deravea says, "Can the president veto the appropriations bill?"

Diana Ohlbaum:
Yes. He absolutely can. That's why they usually work out a deal. Before they do the final conference agreement, it's really the White House, and House, and Senate leadership sitting in a room, horse trading, what their bottom line and their most important things to have in or out are, that's when the big decisions get made.
Shoshana Abrams:
All right, thank you. Just a couple of their comments in the chat about lobbying. Trace, from Irvine, California said that their team lobbied candidates from the last election and they treated it as an opportunity to educate candidates on the AUMF. So there has been some success with that, and I'll send out some resources about how to do that in the followup email.

Shoshana Abrams:
Betty Guthrie, from Irvine says, "Our Congresswoman Katie Porter is awesome. However, she is in a district where she faces heavy opposition. From our lobby visit with staff persons, we have the impression that it is risky for her to be out there on foreign policy. Do you have any suggestions?"

Diana Ohlbaum:
Well, that's really interesting. I don't know which staff person you've been talking to, but she has a new legislative assistant for foreign policy who we've worked with on AUMF and war powers issues very closely, and who I know would want to be helpful. His name is, Jacob Marks, and I don't know if he's the one you've been working on.

Diana Ohlbaum:
But yes, this is a general matter. This is a problem we have with all the members who we call frontline Democrats. There are Democrats who recently came to Congress flipping previously Republican districts, and they're all very nervous about losing their seats and they feel that they have to take moderate positions.

Diana Ohlbaum:
And so we've just been focusing a lot of effort on building relationships with those offices and letting them know that these issues are actually really popular with the public, that even Republicans want to get out of all these Wars. One of the things that I'd like to share with people is some polling data we have on how popular it is to end these wars.

Shoshana Abrams:
Wonderful. Thank you. Well, we can pass some of that along as well. I see one more question in the chat that I think is interesting from Sarah P. who says, "Do the national party conventions this month impact our lobbying. Are they more focused on party platform?"

Diana Ohlbaum:
There are a lot of groups that have been working hard to press for specific kinds of language in the Democratic party platform and I suppose in the Republican platform as well. I have to be brutally honest with you in saying that I don't think that the party platforms count for much. They don't bind anyone to support or oppose anything and it's like on piece of paper.

Diana Ohlbaum:
So I personally don't think that they're worth a lot of effort because the president will still have whatever policies he wants and members of the parties will still have whatever policies they want.
All right. Diana, I saw one question in the chat that made me very sorry for not introducing you. I think some people on the call don't know you yet. Would you just explain a little bit about what you do at FCNL so that everyone makes sure to know who you are?

Diana Ohlbaum:
So sorry. Yes. I'm Diana Ohlbaum. I lead the foreign policy lobbying team at FCNL. I've been with FCNL for two years, but I spent most of the last three decades working on Capitol Hill for this House and Senate foreign relations committees.

Shoshana Abrams:
Thank you so much for giving your own bio. I'm sorry, I didn't do it. Diana is a wonderful resource for us at FCNL. She really works closely with us as we kind of figure out the best actions for you all to take around the country, the most salient and good arguments to make in Congressional offices.

Shoshana Abrams:
Thank you so much, Diana for stepping in for Hassan and giving us a wonderful policy update. I think it was really wonderful and lots of things are happening for you in the chat.

Shoshana Abrams:
Okay. So just a couple of things before we close out for the evening. Our next national call will be on September 7th. The August communicator calls start next Thursday on the 13th and the 27th.

Shoshana Abrams:
I will be on vacation next week. So I might take a little bit longer to respond to your emails. But Sarah Freeman-Woolpert will be leading the communicator call on the intersectionality of ending endless war with other issues. So a little bit on continuing some of the themes that we talked about. So we're really looking forward to that.

Shoshana Abrams:
Just a couple other things to note for you. The action sheet, I was just pointed out, there was a typo on the action sheet. I will fix it and send it back out to all of you. But the action sheet is really to get your members of Congress to make public statements about these Barbara Lee amendments that we support.

Shoshana Abrams:
One of the things I just wanted to emphasize from what Diana has shared is that one of the reasons we really pushed for votes, even if something is not likely to pass, is because it sets a record. We have a record of what the member of Congress voted and we can hold them to those votes. And a public statement does something very similar. So while we're not looking for votes that are likely to happen before the election, we can still look for those public statements and hold people accountable to the statements that they make. I just wanted to reiterate that.

Shoshana Abrams:
The other thing on your action sheet this month is to start getting involved with talking to candidates about their foreign policy positions. I'll send some resources on that in the followup email.
Shoshana Abrams:

Two more things to note. On the lobby report back form, we have a new lobby report back form that's found at the same place on the team toolkit. But Justin, our strategic advocacy data guru has recorded a video on how to do that. So if you need some guidance, it's just a six-minute video and it's really helpful.

Shoshana Abrams:

We've also added a candidate report back. So if you meet with a candidate, it's a separate form, but it's linked too on the same page. We will have a new leaf behind for your lobby visits that will be up in the coming days. So be on the lookout for that.

Shoshana Abrams:

I want to thank you all for being on our very full, very information heavy, and hopefully also inspiring call tonight. It's really good to be with all of you. I think we had 260 people on at the height of the call, it's really just amazing.

Shoshana Abrams:

I am going to invite you all to unmute yourselves and say, onward and good night. We have a lot of work to do ahead.

Doug:

Shoshana, before we close, may I say something? Today is August 5th, but in Japan, it's August six. 75 years ago, today [inaudible 00:59:56] bomb exploded on Hiroshima, and I thought we should commemorate that event.

Shoshana Abrams:

Absolutely. Thank you so much for calling that. Let's hold for just a moment of silence and then we'll say good night. Thank you, Doug. Thank you so much, everyone. Let's hold them in our hearts. Let's hold this memory in our hearts and let's take action to make this world a more peaceful and just place. Good night. [crosstalk 01:00:48].