



Wars and Weapons Will Not Save Us

By Diana Ohlbaum



Seven hundred and fifty billion dollars.

That's roughly how much the United States is spending annually on weapons and war. About \$35 billion of that is for nuclear weapons, which, in a best-case scenario, sit in holes in the ground and never get used.

But the most advanced and powerful military in the world didn't deter the coronavirus. It didn't provide us with the tools to prevent, treat, or cure COVID-19, the disease caused by coronavirus. The Pentagon can't even save its own personnel from succumbing to the virus.

Someday the COVID-19 pandemic will be seared into our memories much the way 9/11 was. By the middle of April, COVID-19 had claimed more than 10 times as many American lives as the 9/11 attacks. This year it is expected to kill more Americans than all the wars since World War II combined.

If nothing else, this global catastrophe should illustrate the waste, futility, and immorality of spending so much on ways to destroy life when we are spending too little on ways to preserve it. How is it that the richest country on earth can't seem to find the test kits, ventilators, and face masks to protect its own people? No other industrialized nation has so profoundly failed its population.

As former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev said, "Is it not clear by now that wars and the arms race cannot solve today's global problems? War is a sign of defeat, a failure of politics."

He is right. Now is the time for governments to put aside their differences and come together to address

the common challenges that face all of us. Not only health security but climate change, extreme inequality, environmental degradation, and large-scale migration.

Rather than engaging in finger-pointing and blame over the COVID-19 crisis, the U. S. must respond with generosity and compassion. Instead of withdrawing from treaties and withholding funds from multilateral institutions, the administration should seek to extend and strengthen them.

Negotiated agreements like the New START and Open Skies treaties not only save money by preventing arms races and uncontrolled nuclear spending, but also save lives by making war less likely and freeing up funds for better uses. Agencies like the World Health Organization may not be perfect, but to suspend funding in the middle of a global crisis is like denying lifeboats to passengers on a sinking ship.

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*Protests on the anniversary of the Iraq War.
Photo by Rick Reinhard.*



Sanctions and COVID-19 Are Changing Iran

VIEWPOINT » By Ethan Azad



I have been fortunate to regularly travel to Iran since my childhood. I have seen how living conditions have improved and how social restrictions have gradually been loosened.

However, life has changed significantly for Iranians since President Trump withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018. The administration has claimed that the resulting sanctions were intended to pressure Iran's leadership.

In reality, Iran's civilian population—including my relatives—is bearing the brunt of these crippling sanctions. Unemployment has grown and critical life-saving medicines are increasingly rare. Simultaneously, sanctions have boosted the influence of hardliners in the government.

Now, the COVID-19 pandemic is making an already tenuous situation almost unbearable for millions of Iranians. Iran is a Middle Eastern hub for the pandemic, with over 95,000 confirmed cases and over 6,000 deaths.

While the Iranian government has mismanaged its response to the crisis, U.S. sanctions have made the acquisition of medical equipment and supplies almost impossible. A 2019 Human Rights Watch report stressed, "U.S. economic sanctions on Iran, despite the humanitarian exemptions, are causing unnecessary suffering to Iranian citizens afflicted with a range of diseases and medical conditions."

In a desperate attempt to keep the economy afloat, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani recently started lifting the lockdowns needed to contain the pandemic. This will undoubtedly produce a second surge of infections.

President Rouhani's desperation is reflected in Iran's first loan request to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since 1960. It is a loan that the Trump administration intends to block. The IMF estimates that Iran's economy contracted by 7.6 percent in 2019; this year it projects a further 6 percent contraction.

Blocking Iran from exporting oil has reduced government revenue by as much as \$200 billion, leaving thousands of public sector employees jobless or without wages. The Iranian rial's value has been halved as well, undercutting the life savings of millions of ordinary people.

The most overlooked outcome of U.S. and international sanctions combined with COVID-19 is that they have emboldened hardliners in Iran's military and have enabled their consolidation of power. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has authorized the military to overrule President Rouhani's orders in responding to the pandemic. Iran's civilian government is losing public support, as well as its control over the military.

Many Iranians I know have long thought of America as a nation embodying noble values, which makes it more heartbreaking to me that U.S. policy is causing them to suffer. Fortunately, more people are speaking out and members of Congress are responding.

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY-14) and Senator Bernie Sanders (VT), along with 34 other members of congress, recently wrote the Trump administration voicing their concerns. Senator Bob Menendez (NJ) and Rep. Eliot Engel (NY-16) have offered policy recommendations, and Senator Dianne Feinstein (CA) has been vocal in calling on the administration to allow the IMF to approve Iran's loan.

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Not so faded memories. *The author and his family in 2001 vacationing in Iran. Photo courtesy of Ethan Azad.*

Ending the Afghanistan War Responsibly

By Don Chen and Elizabeth Beavers



After nearly 20 years of war, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement on February 29, 2020. It called for a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops in exchange for counterterrorism assurances from the Taliban. The agreement set the stage for intra-Afghan talks.



To be clear, this was an exit deal and not a peace agreement. It did not involve the Afghan government, women, youth, civil society, and other key actors. But after numerous lost opportunities for peacemaking, this deal is now the only viable option.

Moving forward, it is critical that Congress does not double down on the failed militaristic status quo. Instead, our leaders must embrace peaceful, non-military tactics to support a responsible end to the war and acknowledge the limits of U.S. power. It must also recognize the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on humanitarian conditions and our overall understanding of security itself.

FCNL has written a series of issue briefs, *Peace in Afghanistan*. This new report is informed by interviews with experts who have worked in Afghanistan such as diplomats, military officials, civil society representatives, and aid workers. Its main recommendations are:

Support full military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The war has been perpetuated by the false assumption that there is a military solution to the problems in Afghanistan or that a military intervention will exert the pressure necessary to achieve a political settlement. Members of Congress must oppose any legislation that would only further perpetuate endless war by impeding or conditioning full military withdrawal.

Ramp up bilateral and multilateral diplomatic efforts.

The intra-Afghan talks that will follow the U.S.-Taliban deal will be complicated and challenging. The U.S. has a major role to play in supporting these talks and using its leverage to ensure they are inclusive and successful.

Yet it cannot act alone. Many other countries also have interests and leverage in Afghanistan. The U.S. must engage them diplomatically to improve the chances for a stable peace.

Support long-term Afghan-led solutions.


Military withdrawal need not mean abandoning Afghans. On the contrary, the U.S. should help galvanize a robust international response to the coronavirus crisis. It should continue to provide economic, development, peacebuilding, and humanitarian aid so the country can address the root causes of its insecurity and suffering. However, aid must be carefully calibrated to avoid doing harm and must include oversight. Any economic assistance to the Afghan government should encourage progress toward human rights, good governance, and the rule of law.

End militarized counterterrorism inside and outside Afghanistan.

Military counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and around the world have only worsened the root causes of terrorism. Responsibly ending the Afghanistan war should also mean winding down the relics of the so-called “War on Terror.” Instead of fearmongering, the U.S. should reach for peacebuilding tools that reduce the power of terror networks.

Those who advocate for a continued militarized approach in Afghanistan lean on fear and false assumptions, not evidence or realities on the ground. The result—for nearly two decades—has been that Americans are no safer, and Afghan civilians pay the heaviest price.

There are no easy solutions to the war in Afghanistan and the U.S. cannot determine the ultimate outcome. But we can choose to help or harm the people of Afghanistan in securing their own future. The U.S. Congress must seize this opportunity to do no further harm. Download the report: fcnl.org/afghanistan.

Don Chen is program assistant, militarism and human rights. Elizabeth Beavers is an attorney, analyst, and advocate for peace and security. She was previously legislative analyst, militarism and civil liberties at FCNL. 

(Virtual) Spring Lobby Weekend 2020: Changing the Conversation on Climate

By Larissa Gil Sanhueza



In early March, when reports hit that the coronavirus was spreading throughout the country, we knew that FCNL had to shift our 500-person Spring Lobby Weekend from a physical event in Washington, DC, to a virtual gathering. As FCNL staff, we also knew that the coronavirus impact on the world was both an immediate emergency and a message from the future about the interdependence of the world and the need for Congress to act on climate change. Spring Lobby Weekend 2020 was focused on addressing this crisis.

Ahead of us was an unprecedented challenge. We had spent more than 6 months visiting nearly 60 colleges and organized delegation leaders who were bringing new groups of young people from some 40 states. I had worked extensively with our team of 20 Advocacy Corp organizers to energize their communities to travel to Washington from as far away as Mississippi and Utah.

Our first step was to reach out to the local leaders we have worked with, some of whom have been with FCNL for years. In a series of Zoom calls, the answers came back quickly: “We’re in. We will bring our people to participate.”

We were excited to have a diverse group of participants from all over the country, including communities of color, rural communities, and various faith communities.

We also started talking to producers who could offer advice on how to use our existing technology platforms—Zoom, YouTube, and Facebook Live—to bring people together. What mattered was how we used these technologies to create a sense of community for people logging in from around the country. We invested in improving its production value and rehearsed repeatedly to eliminate bugs in the system.

These consultations gave us the strength to condense three days of programming into two sessions lasting about four hours followed by nine workshops. We were adamant that the virtual Spring Lobby Weekend

should not feel like an online class, despite being separated by screens. So we asked: how could we remain connected while being disconnected?

We faced the fact that the climate change message itself was not the easiest to explain in a short amount of time. We had set out to urge lawmakers to put a price on carbon—a step many economists consider the most cost-effective in reducing carbon emissions at the scale and speed necessary for viable change.

FCNL’s young adult team, working with our lobbyists (many of whom are also young adults) transformed the plenary sessions into interactive exchanges and with expert speakers and a member of Congress.

The workshops and questions kept the 500 participants engaged the entire time. But we knew that expert speakers could only go so far, particularly with an audience that was largely tuning in from their living rooms or watching the program on a smart phone. We put together a program that had one or two people from around the country responding to every speaker who talked about climate change, giving our young adults the chance to own this experience

Rachel Cleetus of the Union of Concerned Scientists reminded us of the power of bringing diverse voices to the table and putting pressure on policymakers to



respond to the climate crisis. FCNL Advocacy Corps alumna Itzel Perez Hernandez came on the screen from New Jersey to ask her a question.

Alicia Cannon, our program assistant for energy and environment, joined me to talk about why our personal stories and our faith journeys are critical parts of effectively lobbying members of Congress. Young people from Tennessee, Arizona, and Ohio appeared onscreen to tell their own stories.



After a powerful presentation by Mustafa Santiago Ali of the National Wildlife Federation, Jameelah Lewis, popped up to ask the first question. Lewis is our Advocacy Corp organizer in Las Vegas.

Other questions were asked by young people from Atlanta Friends School, from Quaker colleges and universities, as well as individuals from community organizations and activist groups.

Former FCNL Young Fellow Jamie DeMarco talked about his own journey from sit-ins to lobbying with the Citizen's Climate

Lobby. Current Young Fellow Bobby Trice talked about FCNL's Quaker approach to advocacy. And we had hundreds of other questions asked on Facebook and YouTube—all of them addressed in real time by co-hosts assigned to those channels.

To underscore the importance of this event, Representative Jimmy Panetta (CA-20) kicked off day two. He thanked the participants for working to build bipartisan support for the carbon pricing legislation that he introduced.

Congressman Panetta's talk was followed by a panel featuring Democratic and Republican congressional staff talking about the importance of bipartisan action on climate change. They stressed the importance of young people meeting virtually with their congressional staff—even in the middle of a pandemic.


The meetings with members of Congress and their staff were the final part of Spring Lobby Weekend and a key part of the power of our advocacy on Capitol Hill. My colleague Justin Hurdle worked with Bobby Trice to shift the scheduled in-person lobby visits to telephone meetings and then had to secure enough telephone conference lines to make them happen. In consultation with congressional staff, we assembled a new guide to making virtual lobby visits.

We had 130 lobby visits in all. Congressional members and staff were not only glad to meet, they were particularly appreciative of the planning and structure of these lobby visits as they were also transitioning from in-person work to virtual meetings.

"My favorite part of my entire experience was when we actually got on our calls with our representatives or staffers," said Ben Trenka of University of Mount Union, Ohio. "It was amazing to have the opportunity to talk about climate change. Also, it was awesome to see how we as constituents could have a pretty typical conversation with our representatives who were willing to listen and ask us questions!"

Again and again, we heard that congressional offices were delighted to hear young people talking about the importance of bipartisan action on climate change. Several of the participants told us this was transformational for them. About 70 percent of the participants to Virtual Spring Lobby Weekend had never lobbied before.

Lobbying Congress by young people is even more important now with COVID-19 and climate crisis. As I said in my final message to participants, "Keep using your voice, keep telling your legislators what you care about, and keep advocating for a better world."

Larissa Gil Sanhueza is Advocacy Corps coordinator. 

Wars and Weapons *(from page 1)*

We should also use this opportunity to examine the violence wrought by our broad economic sanctions. The current crisis illustrates how financial and trade sanctions have prevented innocent civilians in Iran, Syria, Venezuela, North Korea, and other countries from getting food, medical equipment, and basic health supplies.

And the humanitarian impact of our sanctions is not limited to times of global pandemic.

U.S. sanctions have caused suffering and deprivation for millions of people around the globe without undermining—and sometimes even strengthening—repressive regimes.

Many U.S. politicians who oppose military operations view economic sanctions as a kinder, gentler alternative, but it's time to acknowledge that these attempts to bully countries into submission are neither ethical nor effective. FCNL's stand on sanctions is clear. All economic sanctions must be carefully calibrated to minimize their impact on innocent civilians.

After the end of the Cold War, the world expected to see a “peace dividend” from the de-escalation of superpower tensions. It was a time for Americans to reflect on what kind of power and presence they wanted their country to have around the world, and what the new U.S. global role would be.

That deep introspection never happened, and when we awoke to planes hitting the twin towers that sunny September morning in 2001, our immediate reaction was to treat it as a war.

Nearly 20 years later, we are fighting never-ending, ever-expanding, and increasingly expensive wars across the globe. We fight enemies we have not publicly named and we do it largely out of sight of the American public.


The COVID-19 pandemic has made it plain that our current path is unsustainable. We must make a choice. We can unite in recognition of our common humanity, or we can ratchet up the threats and rivalries.

We can reorient our budget to address the most serious challenges to the health and safety of people at home and around the world, or we can continue providing a blank check for limitless wars.

All economic sanctions must be carefully calibrated to minimize their impact on innocent civilians.

No doubt we'll hear arguments that defense spending stimulates jobs and growth, and that cutting arms purchases would hurt the economy. But it's worth remembering that investments in the defense sector produce far fewer jobs than investments in other sectors, such as health and education. A single year of nuclear spending would pay for 300,000 intensive care unit beds, 35,000 ventilators, and the salaries of 75,000 doctors.

The choice is between a world of violence and war, and a world of human security. It ought to be an easy choice to make.

Diana Ohlbaum is senior strategist and legislative director for foreign policy. 

Iran and Sanctions *(from page 2)*

So far, the Trump administration has not eased its hard line—but now is not the time to give up. Americans must keep urging Congress to challenge the Trump administration's sanctions in Iran and everywhere else. The actions we take now will set not only the future of U.S.-Iran relations but global perceptions of our country.

Each email or phone call by advocates, each response by members of Congress, strengthens my hope—and that of my friends and relatives—that life will be better when the sanctions on Iran are lifted.

Ethan Azad is program assistant, Middle East policy. 



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Friends Discuss the Future of Quakerism

By Christine Ashley



In April, 225 Friends gathered online for the event, “The Future of Quakers.” The conversation focused on several queries, including what Friends have to offer during this pandemic and how inward transformation can grow prophetic ministries.


The conversation was led by former FCNL clerk Marge Abbott (North Pacific Yearly Meeting) and Quaker Voluntary Service communications coordinator Liz Nicholson (Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting).

Abbott discussed how Friends connect to the spark within and shared stories from her recent publication, “Walk Humbly, Serve Boldly.” She encouraged Friends to listen deeply for divine guidance toward justice, generosity, and peace. “[Friends should] see ourselves as a band of everyday prophets,” she said. Abbot is currently an FCNL Friend (not) in Washington.

Nicholson spoke about the importance of listening and discernment as Quaker tools. She called on Friends to be present for their communities in whatever way possible. “[Lean] into an uncomfortable edge,” Nicholson said, “and ask ourselves: ‘What does love require of us in this moment?’”

The discussion, which was the most-attended Quaker Changemaker event to date, ended with participants taking collective action to address food insecurity in the federal response to COVID-19.

To sign up for future events and to view a recording of “The Future of Quakers,” go to fcnl.org/qwc.

We bid Christine Ashley a fond farewell. She joined FCNL as Quaker Field Secretary in 2015. Throughout her journey with FCNL, her heart resounded with civil rights activist Bayard Rustin’s call for “angelic troublemakers.” 

We Have No Other Earth

Put the Environment on the Ballot

During this pandemic, our democracy needs us to be engaged more than ever.

In the 2020 elections, get your candidates on the record for peace, justice, and the environment.

Download questions for candidates at
fcnl.org/candidatequestions

There's No Weapons System that Can Defeat COVID-19

QUESTION & ANSWER » With Dr. Alex Stark



What has been the focus of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East?

Since the end of World War II, U.S. policy in the Middle East has been built around a quid pro quo: access to oil in exchange for military protection. Since 9/11, the military defeat of terrorist groups has been added to that fundamental bargain. Democratic and Republican administrations have tried to thread the needle of fighting terrorist groups without putting many U.S. troops on the ground. This has meant using drones, arming proxy forces, and supporting dictators in the name of "stability."

Is this premise still valid during this pandemic?

It has never worked particularly well! Two decades after 9/11, we're still fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. ISIS and Al-Qaeda have metastasized. We've been unable to stop our partners from fighting a devastating war in Yemen.

The COVID-19 pandemic shows that this paradigm no longer works. It has had a far more direct effect on most Americans over the past couple of months than terrorism has in almost two decades. Like terrorism, the spread of infectious disease is not best fought by military means; there's no weapons system capable of defeating COVID-19.

How are Middle Eastern countries coping with the pandemic?

The only thing we know for sure is that things are going to get much worse before they get better. Many countries in the Middle East already have poor health systems and governments that lack legitimacy to provide good crisis leadership. U.S. policies have made conditions even worse, such as the Saudi-led coalition targeting healthcare workers in Yemen.

Armed conflicts in several Middle Eastern countries have resulted in massive population displacements. Our humanitarian response has been inadequate.

In Yemen, Libya, and Syria, U.S. policy has focused on arming and supporting the right proxy actors, rather than providing aid to alleviate the humanitarian fallout of these proxy wars. The federal budget has consistently prioritized funding for military solutions rather than diplomacy and aid. As the global spread of coronavirus has clearly shown us, what happens to vulnerable populations in the Middle East will have a direct effect on our well-being.

Is peace ever attainable in the Middle East?

It's easy to feel hopeless when looking at the conflict and humanitarian suffering in the Middle East, but I'll always believe there's hope for peace. For inspiration, I often think back to the legislation that FCNL helped pass in Congress on the Yemen war.

Yes, this legislation was ultimately vetoed by the president, but it helped lead to the 2018 Stockholm Agreement. Peace rarely happens all at once; rather, it's usually due to many years of hard work by activists and governments.

What advice would you give those lobbying Congress as we seek a world free from war and the threat of war?

Polling consistently shows that Americans support withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and Iraq. They support cuts to defense spending, and they oppose war with Iran.

Even in an age where Americans are particularly polarized, don't forget that the majority of Americans are on our side when it comes to a world free of war and the threat of war.

Dr. Alex Stark is clerk of the FCNL policy committee. She works as senior researcher at New America Foundation. Dr. Stark worked as a research fellow at Harvard University's Middle East Initiative and the United States Institute of Peace. She was an FCNL Young Fellow, 2011-2012. 