Washington & the World #1: Bill Quandt on the Midterms, the Iran War and Ending the Genocide in Gaza

Transcript of the conversation JWE president Helena Cobban had with William B. Quandt on November 9, 2026. The video is here.

[Helena Cobban]

Hi, everybody. I'm Helena Cobban. I'm the president of Just World Educational, and we are recording this on the morning of Monday, November 9th. And it is, to quote an old source, "morning in America" or something like that. I guess that was Ronald Reagan, but it does feel like a new day.

So it's good to have you with us for this conversation about Washington and the world in the new chapter, which is a new project that Just World Ed is launching this week. And I'm really happy to have with me to launch this the well-known, veteran Middle East expert, William B. Quandt. Bill, it's great to have you with us.

[Bill Quandt]

Nice to be with you.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah. I mean, for those in the know, we are actually a married couple and have been for a very long time. Very happily. And we're in separate rooms [right now.] But there's a lot to talk about. I know I had said in my newsletter that we would have another guest, which was Andrew Miller, the former deputy assistant secretary of state for Israel and Palestine in the Biden administration. Somebody with some very, very interesting insight insights into how the Biden administration mishandled the whole genocide in Gaza. Sadly, Andrew has a family emergency, can't be with us today. We're hoping to have him with us later in the week.

But let's get right into current events, recent events. Here we are nearly one week after the midterms of last week. Bill, what are your two to three main takeaways from last week's elections?

[Bill Quandt]

Well, it was a very good election for the Democrats and not so good for Donald Trump and his party. I think the Democrats had expected that they would do maybe well enough to have a majority in the Senate and in the House. But they've gotten a very substantial majority in the Senate now, larger than they, I think, could have expected.

They've got at least 54 seats, possibly as many as 55 or 56 when the final count gets tallied. And there were other interesting outcomes. The House of Representatives is overwhelmingly Democratic now.

So I think what we now have to think about is how can the Democrats take advantage of the situation they'll find themselves in beginning in January? Just for those who don't know American politics extremely well, they don't immediately take their seats. They take them

January 3rd of next year. So there are still about six more weeks in which Trump has the Congress that he has been working with all along. But still, for the Democrats, this was a big success.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, that's good. How about the rise inside the Democratic Party of strongly Israel-questioning candidates and the fact that so many of them won?

[Bill Quandt]

Well, there are a lot of interesting features about this. One is, of course, the success of candidates who are willing to say that we've gone too far overboard in supporting Israel. In fact, even the vice president, who is a Republican obviously, said that that was one of the reasons that the Republicans had not done well, that they were seen as too close to Israel.

So that's pretty interesting from a Republican. And there was something to that. A lot of young people who came out and voted for the first time were critical of American Middle East policy, the war on Iran, too much and questioning support for Israel.

And I think when you look at where the real shift in participation came, it was younger people, more women voting than usual, and Hispanics who had defected somewhat from the Democratic Party coming back to the party. So a lot of interesting potential now if the Democrats can figure out how to make good use of the victory that they've had.

[Helena Cobban]

So a little bit later, we will talk about what the priorities should be for people who are anti-war and Israel-questioning. You mentioned that there is this kind of January 3rd time horizon. So there are things that we should be demanding and asking our representatives to do prior to January 3rd and things we should be demanding that they do after January 3rd.

We'll get onto that in a little while. But first of all, you know, you and I have been talking for a while about this new book, *Crossing the Red Line* by Akbar Shaheed Ahmed, which-- thank you, yeah, there it is, *Crossing the Red Line*-- which is his very detailed reporting and research on how the Biden Middle East policy was made.

And it has so much great information, insider information, including some intriguing quotes from Andrew Miller. So I'm really sorry that we couldn't get him with us today. But of course, we sent him all the best with his family emergency.

So I want to ask you at this point, Bill, what are your two to three main takeaways from *Crossing the Red Line?* Given that 50 years ago, you were in the White House as President Jimmy Carter's main Middle East person on the National Security Council staff. So no doubt you have some notes to make about the contrast between the way Jimmy Carter conducted Middle East policy. (You call it Middle East. I call it West Asia. That's OK. We can talk to each other.)

... And probably a lot of other presidents of the late 20th century, the contrast between that and what we saw in the Biden administration. So what are your two to three main takeaways from *Crossing the Red Line*?

[Bill Quandt]

Well, first, it is a very interesting book. Biden himself, Joe Biden, as president and previously as vice president and senator, is actually not a terribly interesting person on foreign policy, even though he spent a lot of time on the Foreign Affairs Committee and thought of himself as quite an expert. But really, there's-- no, he's never written significantly about it.

His role in the Senate and even as vice president did not put him in any command position where he was really pushing the envelope on foreign policy. And he was a rather conventional Democrat for his generation, kind of instinctively pro-NATO, skeptical of the Russians, against the rise of China, and very pro-Israeli. And he was conventionally one of these Democrats who took lots of assistance from the pro-Israeli lobby.

So as senator, he played that role. As vice president, he didn't actually, for when Obama was president, he was in the room, but he doesn't get portrayed as having played a very significant role in foreign policy. So he comes to the presidency with what he thinks is a lot of foreign policy experience and surrounds himself with his former staffers as his main advisors.

His secretary of state is somebody who worked for him when he was in the Senate. His national security advisor, exactly the same. So unlike some presidents who try to reach out and bring people in who have expertise that differs from their own backgrounds, he surrounded himself with like-thinking people.

And I think what it shows there is he is quite self-confident. He knows what he's doing. He isn't questioned by his secretary of state or his national security advisor.

The one person, and this is what I learned from the book that I hadn't known too much about, is the person who had the job that I used to have when I worked for Carter, the head of the Middle East office on the National Security Council staff, did have fairly strong views. Had worked with both Republicans and Democrats and was given quite a bit of leeway to shape Middle East policy. His name was Brett McGurk, not a household name, but one that appears in this book as quite important.

He adopts the idea, strange for somebody who specializes in the Middle East, of saying Middle East is no longer a central arena that we have to worry about. "We're out of Afghanistan. We're essentially out of Iraq. All of those overextended ventures on the part of the United States are kind of behind us. Now it's time to just stabilize the region. And the key to that is getting the Saudis and the Israelis and the rich Arabs together to sort of quiet down the situation in the Middle East, make money. We'll help them. But this is no longer a major area of conflict that we need to worry about."

Big, big misjudgment. But that was his starting view. And this opens the way for dealing with the bigger crisis, which is how to deal with the rise of China and Asia is going to be more important. Well, of course, that all changed quite dramatically with--

[Helena Cobban]

If I could just jump in there. I mean, what you're describing in terms of Brett McGurk, first of all, he doesn't have any substantive expertise on the Middle East slash West Asia. Apart from what he had gathered, you know, working for George W. Bush on the Iraq policy, working for Obama, I think, and working for Trump, 1 on all of this in a very technocratic way. He

never wrote anything or did any substantial research about the region, just a kind of a technocrat who looks at it in a very instrumental way.

And I think you're right. He was seeking, in essence, when he came in with Biden, when he held over from from Trump 1 to Biden, he was just like a child of the Abraham Accords and thinking that, you know, getting the the Saudis into the Abraham Accords was the main thing.

And given that the Abraham Accords were also the way that Trump and his friends and the Israelis had started to get Arab states and their militaries and the U.S. military, CENTCOM, deeply entangled with the Israeli military, and then they could confront Iran. So, you know, that was his Brett McGurk's mindset coming in. And yeah, I think there's a lot in the book about that.

And I think it would be great to talk to Andrew about it sometime soon. What else from the book you think people should take note of?

[Bill Quandt]

There are instances when Biden does get frustrated with Netanyahu. He realizes he's getting jerked around by him. And he finally does say, well, you know, this is after the the Gaza war has really been going on for four months and months.

And he finally tells the Israelis that you cannot continue to expand and take over the rest of Gaza. The population has been shifting down toward the south, toward Rafa, and that he said Rafa is a red line. You just can't cross it.

And of course, what the title of the book is telling us is that they do cross it and they don't pay. The Israelis don't pay a price for it. It's kind of Biden draws the red line, says it's really important. "You've got to stop. We've had enough. Ceasefire is necessary."

And the Israelis don't stop and he does nothing. And that's, I think, the single most powerful message in the book is that Biden as president of the United States would not even stand up for something he had defined as a red line.

And so it's kind of a and again, it's hard to know what was. We now know that Biden was, I think, showing signs of his age and was not in his peak performance. I don't know what he might have been like if he'd been younger and more intensely concerned about defending his reputation.

But he was he was really very weak on this. So that's that's an important part of the book of how he just kind of caves and lets the Israelis go. And then, of course, that that gets inherited by his successor, Donald Trump, as a fait accompli.

The Israelis are where they are already. But I think the main thing is out of the book is Biden's unwillingness to to kind of engage seriously with a region that he thought he knew well. But in honesty, every president who has to deal with a region as complex as the Middle East needs some degree of expertise that he can count on.

And Biden just didn't have it. He didn't have it from a secretary of state. He didn't have it from his national security adviser.

I don't think he had it from his primary Middle East adviser on the NSC. So it's kind of he was acting out the position he'd always held that Israel, right or wrong, we're going to support them.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, give them a bear hug and they will do as we ask. Actually, that was also what some of the people in the Palestinian movement said, including Abu Mazen back when they went into the Oslo process. "We just have to hug, hug the Israelis so tight they have to give us what what we want."

And anyway, it didn't work for Abu Mazen, didn't work for Joe Biden.

So, OK, now let's look at the next six weeks and at the next two years. So many things, so many priorities. How do we decide between them? I mean, I guess. I'll put out a few a few ideas and then you tell me what you think.

So we've we've got a massive popular mandate to end the war in Iran. I think that was the strongest takeaway from what happened last Tuesday. And including even if the Israelis don't want us to end the war with Iran, Americans want to end the war with Iran.

So that's that's pretty important. What can be done for that in the next six weeks? We also have coming up the National Defense Authorization Act. It's a little bit technical, but Article 219, I think it is, of that NDAA would actually embed the Israeli military industrial complex in the United States military industrial complex. That's coming up in the next six weeks. What can the Democrats actually do, given that they don't have a majority in the Congress?

I mean, I think there are some potential allies in the Republican Party, crucially Thomas Massie, who is very ready to take strong action on ending the war in Iran and maybe others. How would you assess the probabilities for the coming six weeks, including the fact that, you know, we've got Stephen Miller? I mean, who knows what terrible, vindictive things he might be doing in the next six weeks?

[Bill Quandt]

Well, I think the next six weeks give Democrats an opportunity to set some priorities for what they want to do later, but they don't have to wait entirely. For example, they can read like anybody else that J.D. Vance, the vice president, has already said that ending the war in Iran was one of the top priorities and that he has already been in communication with the Iranian leadership and has obviously-- with the president's support, I guess-- has offered to go to Iran to negotiate an end to the war and to begin the process of talking about the future and denuclearization and so forth. And I think that's something that Democrats should not be afraid of supporting. That's where bipartisanship might be worth putting forward, not just saying anything that Trump tries to do on Iran is going to make things worse.

I think this is one where kind of enforcing the instinct to get this conflict over with and to be willing to support quite substantial positions that have traditionally been part of what the Democratic Party had supported. I mean, the best we can get is something like the old JCPOA, the agreement with Iran, which was not a bad one, except it's kind of run out of time. But we know what the parameters could be.

And I think getting that started on a bipartisan basis would be the one constructive thing that could be done by both parties.

The other thing I think one should follow up on is there is a considerable sense that the Secretary of Defense is out of control. And the Democrats can start to push, even without having the leverage to do anything yet, that they would be willing to consider bringing up bills of impeachment for the way in which he has conducted himself.

That's not a bad thing to put out there. Who should do it and how aggressively? Because they can't do anything about it for the next six weeks.

And they shouldn't make it the only thing that is on their agenda. But I think that would send a very strong signal, getting a new Secretary of Defense, that there could be a bipartisan approach to dealing with Iran and the Middle East in a way that would kind of end this endless conflict. It just bounces from Lebanon to Gaza to Iran and back and forth.

And I think that is something that Democrats could get ready to do. And then once they have real clout, they can condition cooperation on any number of issues that have to go through Congress on Trump's willingness to cooperate with them on a different Middle East strategy.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, those are some great ideas, but I want to push back a little bit on, first of all, you said denuclearization. I mean, you know--

[Bill Quandt]

OK, you know what I mean. I mean, Iran at least will not go nuclear.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, well, they've, you know, that is their position that has been their position all along. So it's just a question of finding a way for the United States to back off. I don't think for most people in this country, Iran's nuclear weapons program is front and center.

I mean, Trump has tried to say, you know, oh, they could they could hit us with a nuclear bomb next week or whatever. And that's why we have to carry on the war. I don't think most people here actually buy that.

But what they see from the war is the economic effects. And, you know, farmers in the Midwest who are having to sell their farms, people who own small trucking companies having to sell their trucking companies because they cannot afford to continue operating with these ridiculous prices. So I think there's there's a massive movement to end the war.

And it it gives the Iranians considerable leverage. I mean, I'm sure that they could sign something like the JCPOA on nuclear issues pretty speedily. But they have said and, you know, in the Memorandum of Understanding back in June that Trump signed in the Palace of Versailles.I don't think we should read too much into that [location.] But in that Memorandum of Understanding, the United States undertook to also end the Israeli war in Lebanon and in other areas undefined. So, you know, we could perhaps, what do you think, push the Democrats and the anti-war Republicans even now, even before January 3rd, to

actually urge a full implementation of the June MOA Memorandum of Understanding, including Gaza as being in there.

Because the people of Gaza are currently facing their fourth winter under genocidal conditions. And we've seen the, you know, the just heartbreaking videos and pictures of people, you know, huddling under tarps as the winter rains come in. What could the Democrats do and the anti-war Republicans do right now to help end that situation?

I mean, are there new ideas we should be looking at?

[Bill Quandt]

Well, I think one has to unravel some bad decisions that Trump has endorsed, which is the Board of Peace, which is just, it's a fraudulent operation. It's not doing anything.

[Helena Cobban]

It's coming up for its first birthday.

[Bill Quandt]

Well, nobody will even notice because they haven't done anything. So I think getting serious about some kind of an international presence that allows, you know, regular supplies of food, medications, clearing away the rubble, rebuilding hospitals, getting real aid in, is a priority. But we don't have this kind of, you know, the Board of Peace gave the impression that something was being done.

And it's not. They're not even on the ground there. So that's something that Democrats could push for if they chose to.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, I mean, it would be great if they could do something before the end of the year, but maybe more realistically, we should, you know, urge them and do everything we can to put together a plan for after January 3rd, when they will have both houses [of Congress], and hope that they can really push, push, push Trump to do a lot of things, including using the power of the purse, you know, which is their primary power, since he doesn't actually let them exercise their war powers under the Constitution.

I mean, my impression is that somewhere in Egypt, there are probably long convoys of aid trucks, including trucks that have, you know, prefabricated housing that is so desperately needed for the people huddling under the tarps in Gaza.

Surely the US government and the government of Egypt should be able to push that material and all the medical supplies and everything in, even if the Israeli government doesn't want it.

Which brings us to the Israeli government. Like, what effect does this political logjam in Israel have on the ability of Washington to push its agenda?

[Bill Quandt]

Well, I think it does raise questions about, you know, who are we trying to influence? We may still be dealing with Netanyahu six months from now. It's quite possible that despite the election outcome, that he will hang on.

But I think we should assume that he is not in a position to say no to us if we speak loudly enough and with enough international backing. So even if Netanyahu is around for the next couple of months or maybe even longer, I think one has to start on the assumption that he no longer has the same kind of veto power that he had previously. And the fact that Trump publicly has said, we're going to stop the $3.8 billion or so that we've been giving Israel on an annual basis, and I've already talked to Bibi about it and he agrees, I'm not sure any of that is entirely true. But the fact that he is saying it and got no pushback from the American side, I mean, nobody said, oh, that's a terrible thing. We should keep that going. I think that gives the possibility of having a kind of bipartisan view that the time for this kind of open handed giving Israel almost $4 billion a year that is taxpayer money is going to end soon.

That's worth putting on the table soon, I would say.

[Helena Cobban]

But I think that cutting back the $3.8 billion, which was, let us recall, put into place by Obama back in, I believe it was 2018, that was what he did to counter the Israelis' criticisms of the JCPOA. So, you know, he did the JCPOA with Iran on this side, and on the other side, he locked in $3.8 billion to Israel every year for 10 years... coming up, you know, there's another year or two to go.

But I think cutting back on that is, in Washington terms, closely allied to this provision inside the National Defense Authorization Act, whereby the Israelis essentially get either $3.8 billion or more in a different way, because it's embedded into the US military budget. It's not a separate line item. So I mean, I think the NDAA is something that is coming up within the next six weeks, and people need to pay a lot of attention to it, and make sure that that deep embedding of Israeli military spending into the US budget, I mean, the US defense budget, so called defense: $1.5 trillion. The whole thing needs to be reduced, or just axed for now.

[Bill Quandt]

I think getting a new Secretary of Defense would actually make things easier, because Hegseth is the one who's been driving for an enormous budget. I mean, you know, $1.5 trillion, that's a huge amount.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, yeah. So then let's look at the interaction among these different issues. I think, would you agree with me that in terms of American public opinion, ending the war with Iran is number one.

But there is also a steady drumbeat of support for ending the genocide in Gaza. And then of course, there's the whole question of corruption, which is linked to both of those issues, primarily through, you know, the Epstein files and Jared Kushner and all these horrendous things that Trump has been involved in. So Democrats coming into the House and the Senate next January, are going to have a lot of both domestic and foreign policy priorities or burning issues to address.

Those of us who want to end the genocide in Gaza, those of us who want to end the war on Iran, how do we put those front and center for all the incoming legislators?

[Bill Quandt]

Well, once you have Democratic majorities in the House and the Senate, there will be committees that specifically exist to hold hearings, to pass legislation. And we know there are some people in both the House, Democrats in both the House and the Senate who are pretty good on some of these issues. For example, the Senator from Maryland, Chris Van Hollen, who has been speaking out on many issues and has recently said that he's even entertaining the possibility of running for president, not very well known nationwide yet.

But he's a very serious person who I think could take the lead in the Senate to say we need to look at what we're spending on the Middle East and what we're doing with our diplomacy, what we're doing with our arms transfers, what we're doing with human rights, and build a constituency around that of people who will be in positions to exert more influence once the new Congress is elected. And he's not alone. I mean, there are plenty of others, including, thank goodness, a senator from Michigan who happens to have a very Middle East sounding name.

And, you know, those are going to be people who can take positions. They've demonstrated they can take positions on ending the genocide. You know, the fact that Abdul Saeed was able to say what he did about the Middle East and win quite substantially in Michigan shows that there is a lot of sentiment in not just that state, but throughout the country, that this war in Gaza has gone on too long.

The spillover effects elsewhere in the Middle East, Lebanon, Iran, all of this is part of the same kind of mess that started with the decision, I think, by the part of the Trump administration to go with Israel on the campaign against Iran and to put them kind of in the front seat to do the dirty work of it. Assassinating the leadership in Iran. And it was all supposed to be over within a few days, the way Venezuela went over in a few days, supposedly.

So I think there is a need for Democrats to find a group of the new congressmen and senators who, once they're in office, can see that this is something that their constituents really want them to focus on. And that means we as citizens need to be on their case. And it means that when they take positions that we approve of, we have to be out there supporting them and vice versa.

They're going to be putting their finger to the wind because they want to win two years from now when they have presidential opportunities to really take not just the House and the Senate, but also the presidency.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, this is a different world, obviously, than the one when you went into Jimmy Carter's White House in 1977. One of the big differences is obviously that then the AIPAC was quietly at the height of its powers. And I guess you experienced some attempts to interfere with your appointment from AIPAC-influenced people in the Senate.

And your boss, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, held the line and didn't give in to them. Is that right?

[Bill Quandt]

That's right.

[Helena Cobban]
So now I think AIPAC is a lot weaker. Do you think it's over? I mean, a lot of the candidates, first of all, said, we're not taking money from AIPAC and we're not going to take any money from AIPAC.

And AIPAC then said they're going to stop making direct donations to candidates. But presumably, it hasn't curled up and died yet.

[Bill Quandt]

No. I mean, I think AIPAC's influence is on the wane compared to the high watermarks of perhaps the Reagan period and even the Clinton period. They were pretty strong.

I think that's a trend line that will perhaps continue. But money in politics is another thing. Quite apart from AIPAC supporting people, there are multi-billionaires who can write a check and it goes into one of these, you know, it's not a direct contribution to a campaign.

It goes into other pockets. But Miriam Adelson is probably more important than AIPAC in many ways because she can give $60 million to, you know, a cause that then spreads the money around. Or, you know, think of Elon Musk spending on the Texas elections.

He spent $250 million at least and didn't succeed. I mean, you can't do everything with money in politics. And I think that's one of the lessons from this round.

But we ought to also be urging Congress to pass legislation. We used to have campaign limits, you know, and then they invented these super PACs that got around that. But I still think it's one of the great corruptions in American politics that super rich individuals can play an outsized role that really means, you know, that each of us has an equal vote that we can cast.

It really isn't going to work that way unless you stop making it possible for votes to be harvested the way they can be with some of the big money.

[Helena Cobban]

I think you're quite right to identify the blocking of Elon Musk, who had invested $250 million, which for him is chump change.

[Bill Quandt]

It's chump change.

[Helena Cobban]

But, you know, for regular people, that's an unbelievable amount. And it did not work. And I think what what stymied his attempt to buy the elections was very solid grassroots organizing, you know, through the unions, through neighborhoods, through churches, through mosques, you know, just organizing by the Democratic Party there in Texas, which did have a good history earlier, but people had thought that Texas had turned totally Republican.

So yeah, that was a great victory in the election.

I think we're going to have to wrap this up now, Bill. But it's been great to talk to you and to share some of these ideas for what we can do in the new chapter of Washington and the world.

This is just the beginning of a conversation that will continue, I hope, through Just World Educational. We obviously coming up for end of year fundraising. I know everybody's been doing fundraising.

But if we're going to make the kind of impact that I hope we can make, by the way, one of the things I really want us to consider working on is reviving our earlier project on understanding Hamas and why that matters, because if we're going to get a meaningful, not just a ceasefire and an end to the genocide in Gaza, but real steps toward restoring the rights of the Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere, we're going to have to talk to Hamas, which means understanding it, which is why I think that matters. So that's one of the projects that we're considering doing at Just World Ed alongside this Washington and the world series.

So thank you, Bill Quandt, for helping us kick it off and I hope people stay tuned for what we're going to be doing in the future. Bye then.

[Bill Quandt]

See you later.