

TRANSCRIPT

JOSH RUEBNER - 4/14/13

Next up on our panel is Josh Ruebner. Josh is the National Advocacy Director for the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, a national coalition of nearly 400 organizations working to change U.S. policy toward Israel-Palestine to support human rights, international law and equality.

Mr. Ruebner holds degrees in political science, international affairs, and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Michigan and Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Mr. Ruebner is a former analyst for the congressional research service specializing in Middle East affairs, foreign affairs, defense and trade, and was also Executive Director of Jews for Peace in Palestine and Israel. Mr. Ruebner is a frequent speaker at conferences on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and is author of *U.S. Military Aid to Israel: Policy Implications & Options*, which presents the rationale for ending U.S. military aid to Israel and the shattered hopes for Obama in the quest for Israeli-Palestinian peace, forthcoming from Verso Books.

Josh, we're so glad you're here. Please join me in welcoming Josh.

(Applause)

Josh Ruebner:

Thank you, Mark. Is the volume good?

It's wonderful to be here with you today. It's such an honor and privilege for me to be here speaking in the Nelson Mandela Auditorium at the University of North Carolina.

(Applause)

Thank you. And when I got the invitation and saw the logistics and saw that this event here today was taking place at the Nelson Mandela Auditorium, I couldn't help but be reminded of that great person's quote when he was president of South Africa back in 1997. And he said on International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian people, quote, "We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians." And I would say not only was Nelson Mandela right, but moreover, as long as we continue to arm Israel to the teeth to oppress the Palestinians we will be complicit in denying Palestinians that very freedom.

I'd like to thank the Abrahamic Initiative on the Middle East, UNC Students for Justice in Palestine, The Salaam Shalom Committee [of] the Church of Reconciliation, and the Global Center of Education for sponsoring this important event today. As Mark mentions, I'm the National Advocacy Director of the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, a national coalition of more than 400 organizations working to change our country's policies toward Israel and the Palestinian people, to end our

support for Israeli military occupation, to end our country's support for Israel's apartheid policies toward the Palestinian people, and to change those policies to the one and the only basis on which there can be a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. And that is on the basis of human rights, international law, and equality for all.

As Mark mentions, we wrote a policy paper on this very issue, U.S. Military Aid to Israel. I have copies outside. It's a \$5 requested donation if you'd like a copy. It has a lot more details than I can get into in my allotted time, and I will try not to take more than my allotted time. And we also have these bumper stickers, which if you agree with me that you support Palestinian human rights, please get a bumper sticker. We have a \$1 suggested donation for those, and that will help support our work.

Now, in the few minutes that I have today I want to give you just five -- although I could give you many, many more -- but the top five reasons why I believe that we must end U.S. military aid to Israel, and I'm going to go in reverse order.

Number five, Israel does not need military aid from the United States. When we hear the word "aid," we think of associations of poverty. We think in terms of humanitarianism. We think in terms of lifting people up. And indeed, U.S. foreign policy is at its best when its U.S. foreign policy

dollars are going to that purpose of lifting up the very poor of the poor in our world. But Israel is not a poor country. In fact, according to the International Monetary Fund, in 2011 Israel is the 27th wealthiest country in the world based upon per capita gross domestic product. Israelis enjoy a higher standard of living than do people in Spain, than do people in Saudi Arabia, than do people in South Korea. We are not giving our military aid to a poor country. We are giving it to a wealthy one. Israel does not need our money.

But because we do give Israel so much money, Israel gets more than half of the entire U.S. military aid budget every year. Not that I agree that U.S. foreign policy should be arming foreign countries, oftentimes arming dictatorial regimes, arming regimes that undermine human rights and suppress the very freedoms that the Palestinians are denied as well. But that is the case, that the United States gives the lion's share of its military aid budget to Israel every single year. Or, to think of it in another way, our military aid, our taxpayer financed weapons to Israel underwrite 20 percent of Israel's entire military budget. One-fifth of everything that Israel spends on its military is paid for by us, as the U.S. taxpayer.

Reason number four to end U.S. military aid to Israel, military aid to Israel should be ended because Israel is misusing these weapons in violation of our own laws, as Ron

mentions. Let me mention two such laws to you. Number one, the Arms Export Control Act says that for any country either buying on the open market or receiving from U.S. taxpayers U.S. weapons must comply with certain conditions for how these weapons are used. They can be used for internal security, which means for legitimate policing purposes. And they can also be used for, quote, "legitimate self-defense."

Now, no one is denying that Israel has a right of self-defense. Having a right of self-defense is the cornerstone of our international relations and legal system. But to say that this weaponry has to be used for legitimate purposes is something much different. It's never legitimate in international law to deliberately attack civilians. It is never legitimate under international law to destroy a person's home for the sole purpose of punishing them. It is never legitimate to take your population and to settle it and to colonize it on territory that you occupy. No, Israel is not using the weapons for internal security. They're using these weapons to prosecute an illegal foreign military occupation that has now lasted for more than 45 years. And every single day Israel is misusing these weapons to commit gross human rights violations against the Palestinian people that have absolutely no correlation with legitimate self-defense.

The Foreign Assistance Act is very clear. The Foreign

Assistance Act regulates how we give our money to foreign countries, whether it's military aid, economic aid, multilateral aid. The Foreign Assistance Act is crystal clear. It says that no aid to a country can be given which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights. Does that sound like any country that we're here talking about this afternoon? Yes, it does. Because Israel commits systematic and gross human rights violations against the Palestinian people every single day. And according to U.S. law, when a country does that they are not eligible to receive any form of U.S. assistance. So to comply with our own laws we believe that we're a country of the rule of law. Well, if we are then let's apply those laws. Let's actually say and do what's in the Foreign Assistance Act, which is to prohibit aid from going to countries like Israel.

Number three, we simply can't afford it. We simply cannot afford it. We are \$16.8 trillion in debt as a country. Try to wrap your mind around what that number even means. I can't. We have 48 million of our citizens in this country on food stamps today, because they don't have the money to buy food. We have 15 million fellow citizens in this country who live below the poverty line. One in every four school children now lives below the poverty line. We have 21 million Americans who are, in effect, unemployed. We cannot afford military aid to Israel.

We just sequestered the federal budget. Do you know what that means? That for every single social program, domestic spending program, five percent was slashed across the board. Between 2009 and 2018 the United States is scheduled to give \$30 billion in weapons to Israel.

On our website, aidtoisrael.org, we broke down how that money is for each state, each congressional district, county and city in the country. And we found Chapel Hill's portion of this \$30 billion amounts to \$13.6 million. The residents of Chapel Hill will give Israel \$13.6 million in weapons between 2009 and 2018. Right here in Chapel Hill that could fund 165 low income families for affordable housing vouchers, or 226 unemployed people for green jobs training, or 403 at-risk students with early reading education programs. Or get this, 11,000 people who don't have healthcare insurance in Chapel Hill could receive primary healthcare with the same amount of money that you, the taxpayers of Chapel Hill, are giving in weapons to Israel every single year.

Now, to make matters worse, when Obama went to Jerusalem he pledged to extend this military aid between 2018. And instead of the \$30 billion that we're already on the hook for on top of \$100 billion that has already been given to Israel, President Obama wants to negotiate for \$40 billion more of our taxes to go on weapons to Israel. We can't afford it.

Number two, giving Israel these weapons defeats U.S. policy, defeats U.S. policy. So when you hear the president talking about the needs to freeze Israeli settlements, when you hear the president in Jerusalem talking about freedom and self-determination for the Palestinian people, all of these goals, all of these things are countermanded and denied and defeated by these weapons that we give to Israel. We have a policy of all carrots and no sticks. We have a policy whereby if Israel defies us than we get down on our knees and we say, "Please, what can we do to help us help you get our foreign policy goals achieved?"

Now, how many people here are parents? When your child defies you do you give that child a present for defying you? No. Why? That creates a spoiled child. That creates a child who is going to go to you and intentionally misbehave knowing that he or she can still get that gift from you. Well, why would that child behave in that case? And this is exactly the situation that you have today. When President Obama says, "Pretty please, Israel, just engage in this fake freeze of your illegal settlements, just for two or three months. I don't care if you colonize Palestinian land beyond that time. Pretty please, just fake like you're stopping these settlements for a couple of months, and if you do all of that then I'll give you billions of dollars worth of F-35s out of our pockets."

Well, what would you do if you were Israel in that case? Of course you would say, "No, thanks, President Obama. We're not even going to pretend like we're going to freeze these settlements because we know that we're just going to get the weapons anyway, no matter what we do."

Now, number one -- and since the first speaker took a couple of more minutes maybe I can ask for a couple of more as well? Number one -- and this was mentioned by Ron as well. The number one reason why we must end U.S. military aid to Israel is because we are complicit. We are responsible for Israel's human rights abuses of the Palestinian people. From 2000 to 2009 -- wrap your head around this figure. We gave Israel more than 670 million weapons, rounds of ammunition and related equipment, nearly 500 different types of weapons. Every single thing that the Israeli military does to the Palestinian people is accomplished with U.S. weapons. It is inconceivable for Israel to do even the simplest, most mundane, routine action like going out on a patrol without utilizing U.S. military equipment. In just three years, in just three years, the State Department paid for, licensed, and delivered more than 47 million rounds of ammunition to the Israeli military. Just three years. Just in those three years the United States gave more than enough bullets to Israel to kill every single Palestinian living under military occupation ten times over. That's the extent to which

we're arming Israel.

And this is not just a theoretical issue. This is not just a hypothetical issue, no. These bullets do kill people. One of these bullets killed ten-year old Abir Aramin, shot in the back of her head by Israeli border police as she was walking home from her East Jerusalem school in January of 2007. And yes, in that same amount of time that we gave Israel those 670 million weapons in the last decade Israel killed at least 2,969 Palestinians which have absolutely no part in hostilities, including 1,128 children. Those statistics courtesy of the Israeli human rights organization, B'Tselem.

And not only is it true that when Israel shoots to death a Palestinian child like Abir Aramin that its our bullets and our guns that are responsible for that killing, but other weapons as well. The five members of Abu Halima family in Gaza who were decapitated and burned to death by a white phosphorus artillery shell in January of 2009 were killed by a white phosphorus shell produced here in the United States and paid for by us as U.S. taxpayers. And I see we have a display outside of a teargas canister, and I'm glad that we do because Basem Abu Rahme was shot and killed with one of these high velocity teargas canisters in January of 2011 in his West Bank village of Bil'in when he was engaging in nonviolent protests. And his death is immortalized in the Academy Award nominated film *Five Broken*

Cameras.

We are complicit. We are responsible for all of these deaths. We are paying for the weapons that Israel could buy for itself and that we ourselves cannot afford, even though these U.S. weapons are being used in violation of U.S. law and to defeat U.S. policy, making us complicit in Israel's human rights abuses of the Palestinian people. If you agree with me that we must end this policy of providing Israel with these weapons please fill out a postcard to President Obama asking him to fund community needs and not Israel's human rights abuses of the Palestinian people.

Thank you very much.