

Churches for Middle East Peace

101: Grassroots Activism Guide

Advocating for a peaceful end to the conflict in Israel/Palestine and the broader Middle East can seem like a daunting task, but you do have the power to enact change. From meeting with your congressional representatives to writing a letter to the editor in your local newspaper, there are many steps you can take to be an advocate. But where do you start...

** During the COVID-19 pandemic, Congressional offices—both in DC and in state are mostly closed to visitors. However, we have found Congressional offices very open to meeting with constituents via Zoom or other platforms. While the steps below are intended for in person meetings, they can also be used for setting up virtual meetings. As is the case with in person meeting requests, it is possible that the call will be taken by a staff member instead of the member of Congress.

Meet With Your Representatives

Step One: Research Your Representative

- Look up your [representative](#) and [senators](#). *Be aware: websites such as [WhosMyRepresentative.com](#) do not always have the most up-to-date information.*
- Before meeting with your representative, it is good to know more about them and their career: how long they have served, whether they have announced plans for retirement, committee and caucus membership(s), voting records, leadership within their political party, religious affiliation, issue positions, and campaign finance records are all helpful information. [This website](#) allows you to see the voting records of all roll call votes (Select House or Senate > Session > “Roll” number next to the bill). [Political Galaxy](#) allows you to search by representative and view their biographies, voting records, issue positions, and campaign finance records. You can also consult the official website of your member to see which committees and caucuses they sit on, as well as their policy positions.

Step Two: Schedule a Meeting

Whether you want to schedule a meeting at your representative’s D.C. or local office, keep in mind:

Be politely persistent! Congressional offices receive countless calls and emails every day, so remember to follow up with your point of contact throughout the process of scheduling your meeting. Even if you are making an appointment in the D.C. office, your representative or senator is unlikely to attend. You will usually be meeting with a legislative staff member. Do not discount the importance of meeting with staffers;

legislative staff have a good deal of influence and oftentimes more expertise on specific issues than your representative. Members of Congress rely on their staff to advise them on legislative issues, so staff-level meetings are always worthwhile. For more advice on how to arrange [D.C.](#) and [in-district](#) meetings, you can consult the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) [website](#).

Washington, D.C. Office

- Congress is intermittently in session between September-July, so Members of Congress will be in their D.C. offices during those months. [This website](#) shows which days the House and the Senate are in session (Select the current Congress and click the “Days in Session” link). Before scheduling a meeting, confirm that your representative will be in D.C. by checking if Congress is in session. Consult your representative’s website to see how far in advance you should schedule your meeting.
- Your representative’s website will typically indicate the best ways to make an appointment with them. Oftentimes you can submit a meeting request form through their website. When submitting a form, make sure you are very clear about why you are meeting and who will be at the meeting.
- If the office does not use an online request form, you should call the office and ask for the contact information of either the scheduler or the foreign policy staffer. Contact information for D.C. offices can be found on the [Senate Directory](#) website and the [House Directory](#) website. Your email to the scheduler or staffer should include your name, town, the reason for the meeting, the date(s) and time(s) you are available, and the names of people attending the meeting with you. The subject line of the email should read, “Constituent Meeting Request for [Date]” or “Constituent Meeting Request on [Reason for Meeting]”.
- If you don’t hear back within a week, you can try calling the office directly.
- If you happen to be in DC and couldn’t schedule a meeting in advance, you can always drop into an office and ask to meet with a foreign policy staffer.

District Office

- District or state offices can sometimes respond more promptly to mail and emails than their counterparts in DC. Typically, district or state offices can process written mail much quicker than DC offices.
- Members of Congress are typically in-district during the month of August and around the holidays. Check their status with your district office if you want to schedule a meeting while they are near your local office. Consult the member’s website to see how far in advance you should schedule your meeting.
- Your representative’s website will typically indicate the best ways to make an appointment with them. Oftentimes you can submit a meeting request form through their website. When submitting a form, make sure you are very clear about why you are meeting and who will be at the meeting.
- If the office does not use an online request form, you should call the office and ask for the contact information of either the scheduler or a staffer. Your email to the scheduler or staffer should include your name, town, the reason for the meeting, the date(s) and time(s) you are available, and the names of people attending the meeting with you. The subject line of the email should read, “Constituent Meeting Request for [Date]” or “Constituent Meeting Request on [Reason for Meeting]”.

- If you don't hear back within a week, you can try calling the office directly.
- District offices focus on different services than D.C. offices, and are typically designed to deal with constituent services. Because of this, many in-district offices don't have a legislative portfolio. However, cultivating relationships with members of your district office is an effective way to advocate your policy positions.

Step Three: Prepare for Meeting

- Research your cause, and be prepared with facts and statistics. Be aware of how your representative has voted on this issue in the past.
- Come with a concrete ask. Members and their staff are busy, so it is always best when you have a very clear ask for your member. It can be related to an upcoming vote or a request to reach out to the State Department or the White House on a specific issue.
- Confirm your meeting with the office a couple of days in advance.
- If you are going with a group, assign roles: one person to introduce the group and the purpose for meeting, one person to take notes, one person to follow-up with a thank you and responses to questions.

Step Four: Attend Meeting

- Make sure your group is gathered and ready 20 minutes before the meeting. Confirm with the office how early before a meeting the group can check in. Dress business casual/professional.
- Thank the office for meeting with you.
- Introduce yourself, explaining any relevant faith/professional affiliations.
- Be clear about why you are meeting (your ask). Do you want your representative to co-sponsor a bill or sign a letter, or do you simply want to raise awareness on an issue?
- Explain why you care about the issue and tell your story. While it is important to have facts and statistics, nothing is more powerful than a personal story. If possible, try to connect these stories to something relevant to your particular state/district or the work of the member. For example, if you know the member is passionate about the environment or religious freedom, think of stories that might intersect with the member and their work.
- Make sure to repeat the ask at least three times—there is power in repetition! You will want to mention the ask early on in the meeting, return to it during the middle, and then be sure to reiterate it once more before leaving.
- Respond to any questions that the office has. Leave behind any brochures or reading materials that may be relevant.
- Exchange business cards, and let them know you will follow up.

Step Five: Follow-up

- Make sure to write a thank you card or send a thank you email to the person you met with during the meeting. When you build a relationship with staffers, they are more likely to prioritize your issues. Be

aware: due to security precautions, there is a lengthy process to ensure all mail sent to government buildings does not carry any contamination. Email is always best, especially if the issue is time sensitive (for example, an upcoming vote).

- Respond via email to any questions that you were unable to answer at the meeting. Alternatively, schedule a follow-up meeting if the questions were extensive and you would like to speak more about them in person.
- Suggest that the staffer/member attend upcoming briefings/hearings related to your cause (do research and provide dates/times of suggested briefings/hearings).

Step Six: Maintain the Relationship

It's important to understand developing relationships with your members of Congress is a long term commitment. Your advocacy will be more effective if you maintain a relationship with your member over time.

- Be sure to monitor your member of Congress' website to see if they are hosting events when they are back in state or district. Make a point of trying to attend an event.
- If you get a Letter to the Editor published relating to Israel/Palestine or the Middle East, be sure to send a copy to the relevant staff member you met with.
- Consider inviting staff from the district or state office to an event with speakers from Israel/Palestine or the region.
- When you are in DC be sure to reach out to the office to let them know you are in town. Try to schedule a meeting during your stay. If Congress is in session, inquire with the office to see if the member is hosting any events for constituents. Many offices will have a weekly or monthly coffee/meet and greet with the member while Congress is in session. These events provide a great opportunity to stay in touch with members.

Letters to the Editor

If you are interested in writing a Letter to the Editor and would like guidance, [please reach out to us.](#)

General Guidelines

- Letters should be short, 250 words or less.
- Letters should focus on one issue or topic and use facts to back up any arguments.
- Letters should reference a specific article in the publication to which they are addressed.
- Letters should include a full name and contact information (so that the editor can follow up, not for publication purposes).
- Letters are best if they are personalized and should conclude with a call to action. Members of Congress pay close attention to when their name is mentioned in publications, especially ones that are local to their state/district. It is important that you mention your member by name—either to thank them for taking a position or encouraging them to take one you would like for them to take.

- Do not send the same letter to competing publications. Again, they should be publication-specific by addressing a particular author or article.
- Check publication-specific guidelines before submitting letters to the editor.

Sample Letter & More Tips

- See an example of a letter to the editor, on the topic of H.R. 4391, [here](#).
- Tips and guidelines from the [American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\)](#), [Berkeley Media Studies Group \(BMSG\)](#), and the [National Education Association \(NEA\)](#). BMSG also provides a [template](#) for writing letters to the editor.

Letter to the Editor vs. Op-Ed

While letters to the editor are typically short (<250 words) responses to specific articles within the publication they are sent to, op-eds can be slightly longer (<750 words) and do not need to respond to a particular article. However, like letters to the editor, op-eds should be relevant, to-the-point, and in plain language. *The Washington Post* provides [FAQs](#) (specific to their publication) on both letters to the editor and op-eds.

Social Media

Engage Legislators Online

- *Study their online engagement style:* Familiarize yourself with your Congressperson’s social media [activity](#). This is helpful in determining what kinds of posts are most effective for catching your legislator’s attention. Is your member more active on Facebook, or Twitter? What hashtags do they frequently use? Have they responded to posts where they were tagged or retweeted?
- *Determine your Ask:* Directly communicate your ask in your post. Do you want your member to co-sponsor a bill, or simply raise awareness about an issue? Directly communicate your ask in your post.
- *Tag your Congress Member:* Tag your legislator’s official Facebook or Twitter handles in any content you want them to see. Including photos or graphics will help your post stand out and catch the office’s attention.
- *Include Location to verify Constituency:* Legislators prefer to engage with the people they represent. To increase the likelihood of having your member engage with your post, find a way to show that you are a constituent. One way you can do this on Facebook is by opting in to have a “constituent badge” next to your name, which signals that you are a resident of a particular state and district. Add your location to your profile on Twitter, or include your state and town in the tweet itself.
- *Engage with Questions:* Asking questions in your own post or responding to a legislator’s posts with follow-up questions can increase your chances of garnering engagement. Questions give members a clear way to engage and ensure that your topic of interest is brought to their attention.
- *Be Persistent:* Legislators are very busy and often tagged in hundreds of social media posts. Don’t be discouraged if your first attempt at engagement does not get a response. Instead, use it as an

opportunity to re-strategize your online engagement. Don't give up!

- *Success:* Don't let the conversation die online after your member responds to your post! Use their online engagement as an easy follow-up for in-person engagement. Reach out to their office and request a meeting or phone call.

Tips for Engagement as an Organization

Hold an Online Advocacy Campaign: Social media campaigns can be a great way to catch legislators' *attention and garner support for a cause.*

- *Be Clear about your Mission:* Determine what your ask is, and directly communicate this to members of your organization. Consider the interests of your members: (For example, are they more likely to advocate against annexation or child detention?) Considering your audience when determining your ask will likely increase participation and potential for success
- *Educate your Members/Employees on the Issue:* People are more likely to join a campaign for a cause they are familiar with. Consider holding an awareness event or distributing educational resources to members before launching your campaign.
- *Give Participants a Story to Tell:* Provide a specific post or tweet to share, and a specific hashtag to use. Make sure that the message includes a specific ask! This will encourage uniformity and easy participation.
- *Track Your Success:* Decide what metrics will be used to determine campaign success. Examples include number of participants, number of Members engaged with, or number of posts shared. [Log any responses](#) from legislators, and take note of which members respond.
- *Follow-Up with Members:* Reach out to any members who engaged with the campaign and request an in-person meeting on behalf of the organization. [Take note](#) of any meetings so that your organization can refer back to those in later advocacy meetings and campaigns.
- *Thank Participants:* Send a thank you email, letter, or gift to campaign participants to [show appreciation](#) for their support.
- *Craft Messages for Legislators to Share:* Two ways legislators commonly use social media platforms are to share constituent stories and to present economic impact data specific to legislation or the lawmaker's district. You can contribute to both of these conversations by sharing success stories that your association helped to foster. Maybe you share a [data point about how legislation affects a city](#) in the lawmaker's district, or maybe it's a positive message from the industry you represent or a constituent partner. Rather than asking the lawmaker for something, you can be seen as contributing to the policy conversation. Consider two recent major legislative debates: tax reform in 2017 and the January 2019 government shutdown. In both cases, personal stories and economic impact data were critical for legislators who messaged a policy stance using social media. In pushing for the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, Republicans consistently cited examples of organizations and individuals who stood to benefit from the new tax plan and in many cases the specific dollar amount they estimated would be saved under the new law. During the shutdown, Democrats shared the experiences of federal workers in their local districts who were furloughed, as well as the financial impact on hundreds of thousands of federal employees going without paychecks. Messages on social media will never replace face-to-face

interactions between legislators and constituents, but you can stay a step ahead of national conversation by monitoring and participating in substantive policy debates already happening online. Make sure your association is using social media to engage actively with your legislative champions, and craft messages that are helpful to lawmakers who can spotlight your issue or campaign.

Town Hall Meetings

If you are attending a Town Hall meeting and would like assistance developing questions, [please reach out to us](#).

Participating in a Town Hall

Attending town hall meetings or events sponsored by your member of Congress when they are at home for recess is an effective way of interacting with your representatives. [The Town Hall Project](#) is an online tool that tracks upcoming town halls throughout the country.

A [guide](#) on how to ask questions at Town Hall meetings from the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL). You should also sign up to receive updates from your Representative and Senators. They will often send emails with information about upcoming Town Halls. You can also call their local state or district office and inquire directly with their staff. Ask whether there will be a time for questions and if you need to submit questions ahead of time.

If possible, try to get a group of interested friends or family to attend the Town Hall with you. Plan ahead of time a question to ask and make sure you follow any guidelines provided by the office regarding how to submit the question. Also plan who will videotape your question should you be called on. It is best if your question connects directly to current legislation before Congress. If that is not possible, you will still need to have a clear “ask” for the Member of Congress. If you are not able to ask a question, look for an opportunity to connect with the member of Congress as they are entering or exiting. Be respectful of their space, but do your best to get your issue raised.
