



Rachel Corrie stands in front of an Israeli bulldozer to protest the destruction of Palestinian homes along the Rafah-Egypt border on March 16, 2003. Corrie was killed later the same day. Photo: Courtesy of the Corrie family

No Path to Justice

Israeli Forces Keep Killing Americans While U.S. Officials Give Them a Pass



[Alice Speri](#) July 13 2022, 10:40 a.m.

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Nearly two decades before Israeli forces killed Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, shooting a single bullet into her head while she was reporting from the occupied West Bank city of Jenin, an Israeli soldier drove a bulldozer over American peace activist Rachel Corrie, crushing her to death.

Both killings left little real doubt about the dynamics at play. Abu Akleh was standing with a group of colleagues, wearing a vest clearly marked “PRESS,” [nowhere near](#) the fighting that had taken

place earlier that morning. Corrie was nonviolently protesting the demolition of a Palestinian family's home in Gaza. She was wearing a fluorescent orange jacket with reflective stripes and had been on the scene for several hours, at times speaking into a megaphone.

In the moments before her death, Corrie was standing in the path of the bulldozer as other activists had been doing throughout the day. As the driver pushed the machine forward, she climbed onto a mound of dirt so she would be clearly visible, according to witness testimony reviewed by *The Intercept*. The driver kept advancing. When she fell to the ground, the dirt engulfed her, but the driver moved several feet forward before backing off, effectively crushing her twice. The possibility that he did not see her, as he later claimed, defies all credibility. Still, the Israeli government never took responsibility for her death, and while the U.S. government rejected the results of the Israeli investigation, it did nothing to ensure that such a killing would not happen again. So it did.



Rachel Corrie lies in the dirt, waiting for medical help with three other International Solidarity Movement activists, after she was crushed under an Israeli bulldozer in Rafah, Gaza, on March 16, 2003. *Photo: International Solidarity Movement/Getty Images*

Corrie was killed on March 16, 2003, when she was 23. Twelve years later, on the anniversary of her death, her parents and sister met with Antony Blinken for the last time. The deputy secretary of state spoke to them in the sincere way they had come to know well. “Come back anytime,” he told them as the meeting came to a close.

The Corries didn't want to come back. They had been meeting with Blinken for years, and they were tired. When he asked, earnestly, “What can I do for you?” they felt frustrated. “I appreciate your

kindness,” Craig Corrie told Blinken. “I’m glad you are personally engaged. But unless you engage your institution, it doesn’t do me any good.”

“He’s asking, what can I do for you,” Cindy Corrie, Rachel’s mother, told *The Intercept*. “But there’s a point at which it’s like, what are *you guys* going to do?”

“I can’t tell you what tools you have to use,” echoed Sarah, Rachel’s sister. “You need to be telling us.”

Rachel’s killing had brought the Corries to hundreds of offices like Blinken’s over the years but nowhere closer to the accountability they were seeking. Blinken, today the secretary of state, was one of several senior U.S. officials who worked closely with the family during their yearslong crusade for justice and one of a number who now occupy top positions in the Biden administration. The Corries liked him, and they appreciated his efforts and warmth. In emails, he signed himself “[Tony](#).” He always responded to their letters and regularly met with them for longer than scheduled.

Ultimately, however, Blinken failed them.

As they prepared to leave his office for the last time, Sarah told him: “There was a promise made to the president of the United States from Prime Minister [Ariel] Sharon of a thorough, credible, and transparent investigation. Your government said that that never happened; that promise was never fulfilled,” she recalled. “You’ve still got a problem here.”

Blinken nodded. “I know.”

“I think in some way I needed them to say no. If they weren’t going to do anything, that’s what I needed to hear out of that meeting.”

Walking away, Sarah knew she was done. Blinken had asked her to follow up with an email; she wondered why she should be the one to do that, why one of the staffers in the room couldn’t take notes. “I felt like we could go on like this for the rest of our lives,” she said. “I think in some way I needed them to say no. If they weren’t going to do anything, that’s what I needed to hear out of that meeting.”

Sarah was 29 when her sister was killed, and since then she had devoted herself completely to lobbying the U.S. government for action. “You think about what your life is in your 30s, developing your career, raising your family,” she said in an interview last month. “Mine was this process.”

She had been diagnosed with Crohn’s disease before Rachel was killed, but the stress of the last 12 years had taken a toll on Sarah’s health. The day of that meeting with Blinken, she felt too sick to get out of bed but powered through it. She had two more meetings at the Senate that day. In the hallway outside Blinken’s office, she remembered the words of another senior official, Lawrence Wilkerson, Colin Powell’s chief of staff at the State Department at the time of Rachel’s death: “You’re doing the right thing,” Wilkerson had warned the family. “But you may never see results, so don’t lose your health.”

Those words haunted Sarah now. “I’m not going to lose my health over banging my head against the wall,” she finally decided. “I knew at that point I couldn’t keep doing this. I had reached my limit.”



Cindy, Sarah, and Craig Corrie at Sarah's home in Olympia, Wash., on July 10, 2022.
Photo: Kholood Eid for The Intercept

That was in 2015. Since then, Cindy and Craig Corrie have continued to honor Rachel's memory through the [Rachel Corrie Foundation for Peace and Justice](#). They launched a sister city partnership between Olympia, Washington, where she grew up, and Rafah, the city on the Egypt-Gaza border where she was killed. They speak in support of Palestinians at events around the world. In meetings with activists, Cindy sometimes found herself defending Blinken to critics of U.S. foreign policy. "I told them I did feel this was a good person, who cared and did try to help," she said. "And I believe Tony Blinken wants the best for Palestinian people too."

Blinken did not respond to The Intercept's request for comment, but a State Department spokesperson wrote that the administration stood by the statements of previous administrations. "Rachel Corrie's death was tragic and this administration reiterates our condolences to her family," the spokesperson wrote. "The U.S. consistently called for a thorough, credible, and transparent investigation into Rachel Corrie's killing."

Sarah was not much of an activist herself, but she had seen it as her civic duty to ensure that her government worked as it was supposed to. The endeavor of lobbying U.S. officials to do something about Rachel's killing had become all-consuming, barely leaving time to grieve. After the last

meeting with Blinken, she stored the piles of documents she had accumulated over the years and tried to focus on her life. She took up dance classes and flight lessons.

When the Corries gave up, the U.S. government's effort to get accountability for Rachel also came to an end. "When we stopped, they stopped," said Craig. "That wagon was in a bunch of mud. If you weren't pushing on it, you didn't go anywhere."

Then in May, Abu Akleh was killed. [Several independent investigations](#), including one by the United Nations, concluded that she was shot by Israeli forces, describing the shooting as "[targeted](#)" and the bullet that killed her as "[well-aimed](#)." Her death was [referred](#) to the International Criminal Court. But following a tested playbook in such situations, the Israeli government refused to take responsibility.



Children take part in a candlelight vigil to denounce the killing of journalist Shireen Abu Akleh on May 11, 2022, in Gaza City.

Photo: Mohammed Talatene/Picture Alliance via Getty Images

Another American Killed

For weeks after Abu Akleh's death, her family and a [growing number](#) of people, including [members of Congress](#), called on the U.S. government to conduct its own independent investigation.

U.S. officials eventually responded to those demands by reviewing and “summarizing” the investigations conducted by Israeli and Palestinian officials. In a [statement](#) issued on the Fourth of July holiday, the State Department said that investigators “could not reach a definitive conclusion regarding the origin of the bullet” that killed Abu Akleh. While they noted that “gunfire from [Israel Defense Forces] positions was likely responsible” for her death, they found “no reason to believe that this was intentional but rather the result of tragic circumstances.”

It was a deeply disappointing conclusion for those who had hoped that the probe would yield stronger condemnation or a path toward accountability.

The Abu Akleh family rejected the findings, denouncing their lack of transparency and questioning their political nature. “The notion that the American investigators, whose identity is not disclosed in the statement, believe the bullet ‘likely came from Israeli positions’ is cold comfort,” they wrote in a blistering [statement](#). “We continue to call on the American government to conduct an open, transparent, and thorough investigation of all the facts by independent agencies free from any political consideration or influence.” They [demanded](#) a meeting with President Joe Biden during his trip to Israel and the West Bank this week. The White House did not answer a question from The Intercept about Biden’s plans to meet with them.

“In the days and weeks since an Israeli soldier killed Shireen, not only have we not been adequately consulted, informed, and supported by U.S. government officials,” they wrote to the president, “but your administration’s actions exhibit an apparent intent to undermine our efforts toward justice and accountability for Shireen’s death.”

B’tselem, an Israeli human rights group, called the outcome of the U.S. review a “[whitewash](#).” A colleague of Abu Akleh’s at Al Jazeera wrote that the State Department’s statement felt like the journalist “[was shot again today](#).”

In the U.S., progressive legislators introduced [an amendment](#) to the defense budget to force the State Department and the FBI — which regularly investigates serious crimes committed against U.S. citizens overseas — to investigate Abu Akleh’s killing, though the amendment [failed](#) to pass. Rep. Rashida Tlaib, D-Mich., a co-sponsor of the bill and the first Palestinian American in Congress, [also called for an ombudsman investigation](#) of the State Department’s response.

Jamil Dakwar, a Palestinian American human rights lawyer who has advised the Corries since 2003, told The Intercept that the U.S. government was “effectively an accomplice” in Israeli crimes.

“Had it been any other foreign government, there would already be a Shireen Abu Akleh and Rachel Corrie Accountability Act and sanctions leveled against that country and its highest officials for killing an American human rights activist and journalist with impunity,” Dakwar said. “Frankly, I would not trust the United States with conducting a credible and independent investigation into serious abuses by close U.S. allies such as Israel. The price tag for real accountability is too high.”

The State Department did not address The Intercept’s questions about how U.S. officials conducted their review, and a department spokesperson [struggled](#) to answer reporters’ questions about it at a briefing last week. Still, the fact that such a probe even happened, however cursory and flawed, was a sign of the increasing pressure the Biden administration has come under following Abu Akleh’s killing.



A man walks past a mural of slain Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in the occupied West Bank on July 6, 2022.

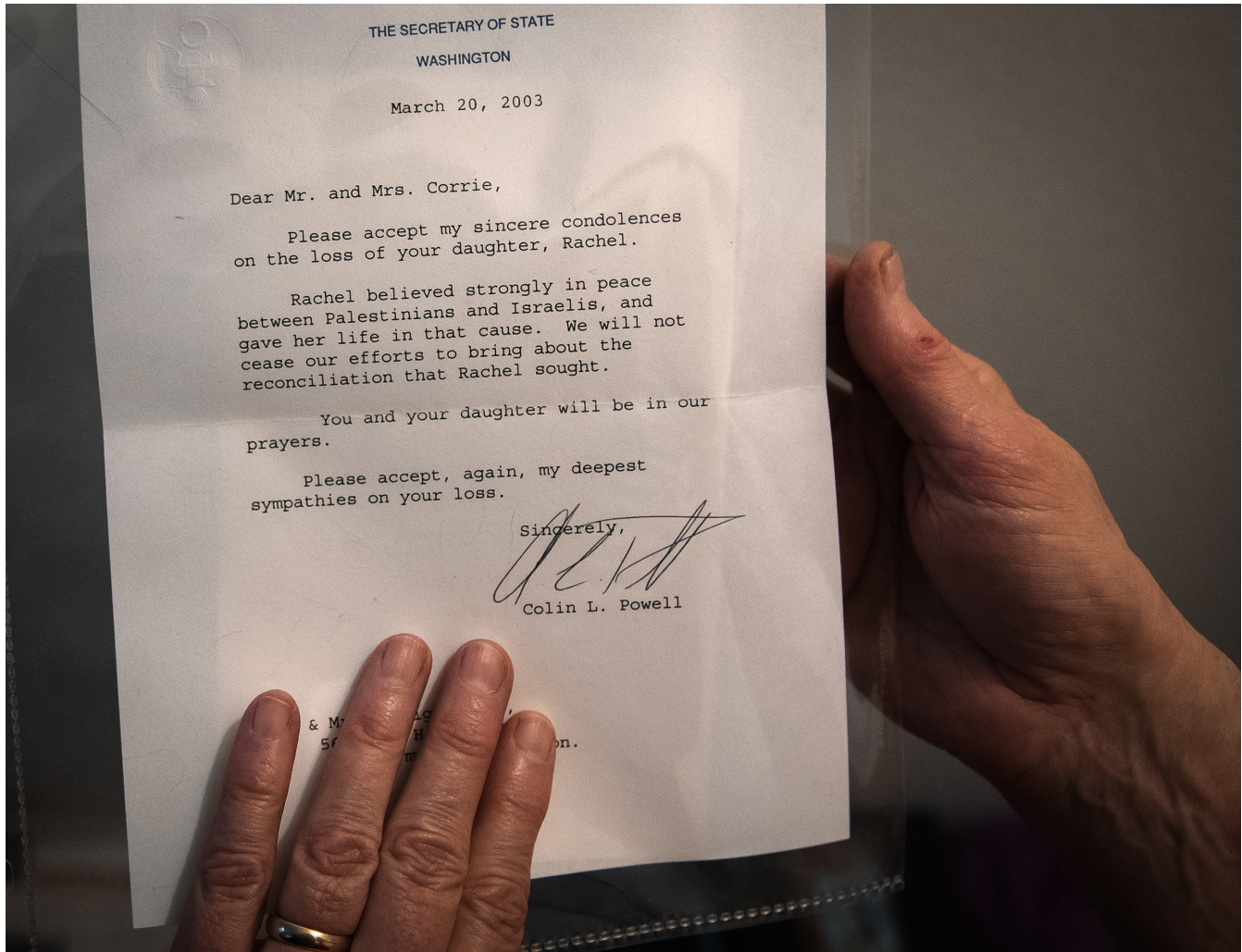
Photo: Ahmad Gharabli/AFP via Getty Images

The U.S. government never investigated the killing of Rachel Corrie, despite dozens of members of Congress [calling for such an investigation](#) at the time. Nor has it investigated [the deaths](#) of other U.S. citizens at the hands of Israeli forces, including 18-year-old Turkish American Furkan Dogan, one of nine peace activists killed by Israeli soldiers in 2010 aboard the Mavi Marmara, a flotilla headed for Gaza to deliver humanitarian supplies; 16-year-old [Mahmoud Shaalan](#), an unarmed Palestinian American boy killed in 2016 while crossing a checkpoint in the West Bank; and 78-year-old [Omar Assad](#), a former Milwaukee grocery store owner who died of an apparent heart attack earlier this year after Israeli soldiers dragged him from his car, then blindfolded and handcuffed him.

The U.S. government also failed to investigate severe injuries inflicted on several American citizens by Israeli forces, including the 2014 beating of 15-year-old Tariq Abu Khdeir, who was visiting family in Jerusalem from Florida. A day earlier, Abu Khdeir's 16-year-old cousin Mohammed Abu Khdeir, who was not a U.S. citizen, had been kidnapped by Israeli settlers and burned alive.

On each occasion, and as they did for weeks after Abu Akleh's killing, U.S. officials — some of them the same individuals the Corries met with over the years — called on Israel to carry out a "credible" investigation. It was hearing those words again that drove the Corries to reluctantly end their silence about the conversations they had with members of the U.S. government and how fruitless the years of behind-the-scenes efforts in Washington had been.

“They shouldn’t have to be asking the exact same questions we were asking in 2003,” said Sarah, speaking of Abu Akleh’s family. “My question to the Biden administration is, what are you doing differently for Shireen’s family that you didn’t do in our case, so that they will get accountability? What’s your real expectation here? There has to be a little bit more honesty about that, and if they’re not going to be honest, then I have to speak up again.”



Cindy Corrie holds a letter from Secretary of State Colin Powell, dated March 20, 2003, expressing condolences for her daughter Rachel’s death.

Photo: Kholood Eid for The Intercept

Breaking the Silence

As public as they had been in their efforts to get answers about Rachel’s killing, and as outspoken as they remain about the Palestinian cause, the Corries never talked in detail about their private discussions with U.S. officials, at first because they trusted that the process would yield the results they were seeking and later because revisiting the odyssey felt too overwhelming. The experience of seeking justice for Rachel, they say, at times felt just as traumatizing as her death itself.

“Emotionally, it’s damaging to keep having to go back and revisit it over and over,” said Sarah, who stopped counting the family’s meetings with U.S. officials when they reached 200, years ago.

“We deal with Rachel not being here, and in a lot of ways that’s just a part of our lives,” her mother said. “But the process of seeking the accountability that she deserved, that all these people deserve, the intensity of that ... it was such a long struggle.”

Over two days last month at Sarah’s home in a suburb of Olympia, the Corries spoke at length about their conversations with senior officials, including Blinken, CIA Director William Burns, and staffers working closely with Biden during his time in the Senate and as vice president. Sarah dug out the old boxes of documents and shared dozens of files detailing the efforts of U.S. officials to pressure Israel into an investigation and their unequivocal rejection of its conclusions. The documents, [a selection](#) of which The Intercept is publishing, include [communications](#) with current and former senior officials, notes from meetings, and hundreds of pages the Corries obtained through [public records requests](#), such as diplomatic cables, internal State Department memorandums, and letters between the Bush and Obama administrations and members of Congress.

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Together, the files and the Corries’ testimony paint a damning picture of the futility of U.S. efforts to seek accountability. The documents show that several senior officials attempted for months to extract answers from their Israeli counterparts. But the lack of political will on the part of the U.S. executive branch and Congress to impose consequences for Israeli human rights abuses reduced those efforts to meaningless gestures, with all players involved fully aware that they would lead to no real change.

When they embarked on that process, however, the Corries knew none of this. So when they learned that Anton Abu Akleh, Shireen’s brother, had expressed the desire to meet with them, they readily agreed. “There is no manual,” Craig said of the battle for justice. “We wanted to warn them.”

On a Zoom call last month, the Corries spoke to members of the Abu Akleh family, who called in from Jerusalem and elsewhere in the U.S. Even over video, they felt immediately connected.

It was a heartbreaking meeting. “It is really hard to see the situation continue the way that it is ... knowing that it might be decades before they find any satisfactory — or maybe unsatisfactory — answer, until the point that they just get tired,” Cindy said. “They’re going through the exact same thing,” echoed Craig, “trying to keep control as best as they can over this process.”

There had been early signs that the U.S. response to Abu Akleh’s killing might be different, like the fact that Blinken personally called her family to offer the administration’s support. Colin Powell never called the Corries, they noted, though he wrote them a [letter of condolence](#). But those hopes quickly faded, and the results of the U.S. probe earlier this month all but put an end to them.



The Olympia-Rafah solidarity mural project in downtown Olympia, Wash.
Photo: Kholood Eid for The Intercept

“The U.S. can do whatever they want; at the end of the day, they are a superpower,” Lina Abu Akleh, Shireen’s niece, said in an interview in June, before U.S. investigators reached their conclusions. “But they haven’t been doing what they’re supposed to do, which is protect their citizens outside of the U.S.”

Of course, it shouldn’t matter that Shireen and Rachel were American citizens — something the Corries have long stressed throughout their advocacy on Rachel’s behalf. Israeli forces have [killed more than 10,000](#) Palestinians since the end of the Second Intifada in 2005, [at least 50](#) this year alone, virtually all without accountability.

“The Corries have painfully learned firsthand that while they were welcomed to bring Rachel’s case to America’s halls of power and even extract expression of sympathy from U.S. officials, Rachel’s case is no different from thousands of Palestinians who were victims of Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity over the last seven decades,” Dakwar, who co-represented the family in a civil suit against the Israeli government, told The Intercept.

Still, the U.S. is Israel’s closest ally, and Israel is the [largest cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign assistance](#) since World War II — to the tune of \$146 billion in military assistance and missile defense funding. The U.S.-made bulldozer that killed Rachel Corrie was sold to Israel through a Defense Department program, and the Abu Akleh family has asked U.S. officials to “clarify the extent to which American funds were involved” in her killing.

While the Corries also fought a decadelong legal battle against the Israeli government, they placed greater expectations in their own government’s ability to deliver justice. The U.S. government’s

failure, in the end, was more devastating. “I have very little say over what the Israeli government does, but I have a much greater responsibility for what my own government does,” Sarah said.

As they sat in Sarah’s dining room, surrounded by artwork she had collected over months spent in Haifa when the lawsuit against the Israeli government went to trial, the Corries sometimes quibbled over details of their recollections. They had also come to process their experiences in different ways. Sarah was more outspoken about her deep frustration with U.S. officials. Cindy stressed how grateful and indebted the family felt toward the individual officials who showed them so much kindness. She remembered meeting former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Daniel Kurtzer in his home, for instance, after he left the diplomatic corps, and talking to him for hours. “He never acted like we should leave,” she said. “I’m pretty sure that with everything else that was going on, I never wrote him a thank-you note.”

Cindy sometimes feels that the family gave up fighting too soon — that if they had kept traveling to Washington and kept pushing for more meetings, then maybe Abu Akleh’s family wouldn’t be in the same position today.

“There’s a burden on our shoulders every time somebody is seriously injured or killed, particularly when it’s a U.S. citizen; you always feel like if we could have just done something more, that maybe we could have helped,” Sarah said. “But it’s not really a burden any family should carry. It really is a burden that the United States government should carry.”



Sarah Corrie sifts through old photos of her sister, Rachel, at home in Olympia, Wash., on July 10, 2022.

Photo: Kholood Eid for The Intercept

The Only People on the Hill

The United States invaded Iraq three days after Rachel was killed, but for weeks leading up to the attack, the prospect of war dominated public discourse. In [emails](#) to her parents, Rachel often wrote about the impending war alongside accounts of Israeli violence. In her last email, she thanked them for their anti-war work.

With the invasion around the corner and their daughter in Gaza, Cindy and Craig Corrie had begun to follow in her footsteps. In North Carolina, where they lived for a short time, Cindy joined a peace group, and days before Rachel's death she traveled to Washington, D.C., for an anti-war rally. She had never been on the Hill before, but she and Craig had campaigned for Washington Rep. Brian Baird, so she decided to go to his office to [relay](#) the injustices her daughter had been writing home about. She called Rachel from Union Station that day to make sure the details were accurate. It was the last time they spoke.

Baird, who served in Congress until 2011, recalled meeting Cindy in an interview with The Intercept. "I told her, 'We're about to launch an invasion of Iraq. ... You've got to tell your daughter to be super careful right now, because with the war about to happen, all eyes will be away.'"

Less than a week later, Sarah learned of her sister's killing when the news broke on television. She was at home in Olympia when a friend left a voicemail telling her how sorry she was. Sarah didn't know what she was talking about. She turned on the news and read, "Olympia woman killed in Rafah, Gaza." Moments later, her sister's name was flashing across the ticker.

Sarah called everyone she knew who might know somebody in government. The family didn't know what they were supposed to do, whether they should be traveling to Israel, or how to bring Rachel's body home. When Sarah reached Baird on the phone, he immediately asked, "Was your mother in my office last week?"

Baird told Sarah he would be on the Hill the next morning to meet her parents, who had gotten on a flight back to D.C. "I will help them," he promised. He spent the rest of his time in Congress making good on that pledge.

"I felt a moral obligation," he told The Intercept, "to ensure that our country investigated fully how one of our citizens was killed by a country that receives billions of dollars of U.S. foreign aid, that we consider an ally."

Baird's congressional office became the Corries' headquarters for those first, frantic days, and Cindy and Craig recall that time of anguish as one interspersed with countless gestures of humanity. On the Tuesday after Rachel was killed, a staffer brought them sandwiches when he realized they had not eaten since Saturday. In the rush of leaving home, Craig had packed pillowcases instead of shirts; Baird offered him one of his own. Craig remembers laughing at that: "You're a U.S. congressman, and you just offered me the shirt off your back," to which Baird replied that he had "a clean one." At one point, Craig lay down on the floor, overwhelmed. He remembers the congressman gently draping a blanket over him.



The Corrie family calls for a U.S. investigation into Rachel's death during a press conference hosted by Rep. Brian Baird, D.-Wash., in Washington, D.C., on March 19, 2003.

Photo: Stefan Zaklin/Getty Images

The Corries spent the next weeks, months, and years on an exhausting tour of Washington offices. Baird introduced a [resolution](#) calling for a U.S. investigation of Rachel's death, and members of her family, including uncles and aunts, hand-delivered personal requests for signatures to every single office in Congress. Seventy-seven representatives signed on, but the bill was never moved to a vote.

Sarah and Rachel had grown up in a state capital, with politically engaged parents who would rush the kids home when there were important hearings on TV. Despite her experience, Sarah still fundamentally believes in the promise of the U.S. government to do the right thing and of its citizens' responsibility to help it get there. "I'm very realistic, I think anybody that has walked down the halls of Congress is very realistic," she said. "But what do you do if you give up on that hope?"

So the family traveled across the country every three months to meet with anyone who would meet with them. They scheduled as many as 10 appointments a day. They would catch overnight flights from Seattle, quickly change, and be on the Hill by 9 a.m. Often, Rachel's aunts would join them from Iowa, riding Greyhound buses to the capital because they didn't like to fly. In Iowa, where Craig and Cindy had grown up, relatives pounded the campaign trail, asking candidates to address Rachel's killing.

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The family prepared packets for everyone they met, with photos of Rachel, background information, and clips about the latest news from Palestine. Sarah carried around two large folders labeled

“Corrie Case files for Washington DC” and “Rachel Files DC Work.” After their meetings, they would sit down in a café, without talking to one another, to write down everything they remembered and compile a meticulous record. It was full-time, often discouraging work.

Someone had advised them early on to focus only on Rachel’s death, that speaking out in support of Palestinians wouldn’t get them far in Washington. “You can talk about the cause of Rachel, but you can’t talk about Rachel’s cause,” that person told them. They did the opposite. All along, they were fully aware that few Palestinians would get the same access to U.S. officials — which made their sense of responsibility even heavier.

Most of the work involved teaching U.S. officials about a place and context they knew almost nothing about. They had to “explain Rafah to people,” said Sarah, pulling out maps and showing where Gaza was, where Israel planned to build a wall. “So many offices really didn’t have a clue,” she added. “We recognized very quickly that it was not just about educating about what happened to Rachel and trying to get accountability, but it was also trying to get some information back to them.”

Most officials and staffers listened intently and compassionately; a few went out of their way to help. At one point, Sarah got Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., to hand-deliver a [letter](#) she had written to Israeli [Prime Minister Ariel Sharon](#). William Burns, who at the time was assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs, called Craig to encourage him and Cindy to travel to Gaza after Rachel’s death. “You need to go,” Craig remembers him saying. “He wanted us to see it firsthand.” The State Department had an advisory in place warning Americans against traveling to Gaza — something the Israelis later used to suggest that Rachel was responsible for her own death. But Burns didn’t seem concerned about that. “Stay with the Palestinians,” he told the Corries. “They will keep you safe.”



Craig and Cindy Corrie pose for a photo with the Nasrallah family, whose house Rachel was defending in Rafah, Gaza, in 2003.

Photo: Courtesy of the Corrie family

The Corries traveled to Gaza several times and met with the Nasrallah family, whose home Rachel was protecting the day she was killed. A spokesperson for the CIA wrote in a statement to *The Intercept* that when Burns was a State Department official, “he had the opportunity to meet with the Corries and express his heartfelt condolences as they worked with U.S. officials to pursue a full and transparent investigation of their daughter Rachel’s tragic death — an investigation for which he strongly advocated.”

Some officials were dismissive or unresponsive. Others simply never found time for them. Once, after a rare, unpleasant meeting during which a congressional staffer had berated them, a receptionist asked to meet the family in a discreet corner of Congress’s cafeteria, where, watching his back, he apologized for the way they had been treated.

At times, the Corries felt like they were barely being tolerated. They laughed when public records they obtained included a comment from a Justice Department staffer to an official in Congress, saying, “The family is not going to go away, so slow walking a decision is just going to make the committee’s life more difficult and subsequently yours as well.” In executive offices in particular, the Corries sometimes felt like they were being given the runaround. They began to jokingly refer to it as being “woozled,” after the wozzles haunting Winnie the Pooh’s nightmares. “We’ve been wozzled by the best,” Sarah told her father when they left Blinken’s office for the last time.



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, left, shakes hands with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem on May 25, 2021.

Photo: Alex Brandon/AFP via Getty Images

Some officials told the Corries privately what they would never say publicly. A longtime congressman warned them, “Nobody will ever tell you no. And nobody will ever do anything.” A senior staff member in Biden’s office encouraged them to keep up their advocacy for Rachel as well as the Palestinian people: “You have to keep doing this because you are the only people on the Hill talking about this.”

There were uplifting moments, sometimes funny ones. Once, Sarah spilled her latte over the papers of Rep. Nancy Pelosi's chief of staff — she immediately went to the gift shop and bought a mug with a lid, which she nicknamed “the Nancy Pelosi.” The family became friendly with security guards on the Hill and the shuttle driver who ferried them to the city from their cheap hotel on the outskirts of D.C. After a few trips, the driver asked why they kept coming back, and they told him Rachel's story. From then on, he dropped them off at the Capitol with a “You go get them!”

For Baird, the family's champion in Washington, the experience was a disillusioning one.

Some people went to bat for them, he stressed, aware that it could be career-ending. “There are members of the State Department who know full well the imbalance of our relationship with Israel, they know full well the damage that does to our integrity and our standing, and they know full well that their hands are tied by the American political system,” Baird said. “And it breaks their heart.” “Nobody will ever tell you no. And nobody will ever do anything.”

The best-intentioned efforts were ultimately undermined by foreign policy priorities that were at odds with the quest for justice, Baird realized. The same dynamic is now playing out in the aftermath of Abu Akleh's killing — and the killing of U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi, the journalist assassinated at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul at the behest of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In the absence of U.S. action, those responsible for such abuses know that “as time passes, we will forget about it,” said Baird. “And that encourages them to act with impunity.”

Baird's greatest frustration was with his fellow members of Congress. After speaking up on behalf of the Corries, he faced a barrage of accusations that he was antisemitic. Criticizing Israel, he quickly learned, inevitably led to lost funding and votes. “For having the audacity, the hubris, the courage maybe, to investigate the death of one your own constituents, you get essentially branded as a nonsupporter of Israel,” he said. “There is a reinforced lack of objectivity and curiosity, and there is a reinforced, reflexive obedience and repetition of the Israeli line.”

That level of conformity to the Israeli position has been challenged in recent years, as a number of legislators have questioned U.S. support for Israel in light of ongoing abuses and growing solidarity with Palestinians among the American public. But those voices remain a small minority in Congress. While some legislators have issued a flurry of statements in recent months — about Abu Akleh's killing but also other Israeli abuses — their concerns are a long way from shaping U.S. foreign policy.



Children burn toy bulldozers in a Rafah refugee camp on April 13, 2005, during a rally to protest the killing of Rachel Corrie.

Photo: Abid Katib/Getty Images

“Are We Going to Do Nothing?”

Lawrence Wilkerson learned early in his time as chief of staff to the secretary of state that the United States was simply “in a different relationship with Israel than any other of its allies.”

He remembers sitting in a meeting with top Bush administration officials at the height of Israel’s targeted assassination campaign, during the Second Intifada. More than once, Israeli forces firing Hellfire missiles from Apache helicopters had targeted militant leaders but killed children and other civilians in the process. This was a war crime, Wilkerson said, and it was a violation of U.S. law, which prohibited the use of U.S. military sales for the kinds of activities the Israelis were engaging in. He recommended a strongly worded rebuke but was overruled.

“We had photographs of the women and children who had died,” Wilkerson recalled. “And I said, ‘This is going to happen again, and again, and again. Are we going to do nothing each time?’”

He looked around the room. “There was no answer to my question.”

Wilkerson has since come to [regret](#) his role in the Bush administration and doesn’t mince words, particularly about the [Iraq War](#). In an interview last month, he spoke for the first time about the key role he played in seeking accountability on behalf of the Corrie family — and how his efforts ultimately fell short.

Powell, the secretary of state, had been locked in a power struggle with other members of Bush's Cabinet over foreign policy issues, Wilkerson said, and when Rachel was killed, he instructed Wilkerson to make her case a priority, even though it was not for the administration. "He said, 'I want you to take this on, and I want you to do the best you can, and I want you to be speaking for me.'"

With that mandate, Wilkerson became a staunch advocate for the Corries, who remember him, along with Baird, as one of the officials who worked the hardest to get the U.S. government to do something about Rachel's killing. For his part, Wilkerson came to see parallels between Rachel, as her family described her, and his own daughter.

"We had photographs of the women and children who had died. And I said, 'This is going to happen again, and again, and again.'"

In the aftermath of Rachel's killing, Sharon had personally promised Bush that the Israeli government would undertake a "thorough, credible, and transparent" investigation. Documents the family shared with The Intercept show that several State Department officials, including Wilkerson, repeatedly [took up](#) the case with their Israeli counterparts, receiving similar commitments.

U.S. officials also made commitments. "When we have the death of an American citizen, we want to see it fully investigated," Richard Boucher, a State Department spokesperson, said at a public briefing three days after Rachel's killing. "That is one of our key responsibilities overseas, to look after the welfare of American citizens and to find out what happened in situations like these."

The Israeli government conducted two investigations. The first, by the Israel Defense Forces, was an inquiry normally carried out by the military unit involved in an incident and intended to identify operational issues. The second, by the military police, was supposedly more thorough. But both investigative processes are regularly mired in flaws, as human rights observers [have](#) repeatedly [detailed](#). "At the heart of the problem is a system that relies on soldiers' own accounts as the threshold for determining whether serious investigation is warranted," Human Rights Watch concluded in a 2010 report. "Exculpatory claims of soldiers are taken at face value, at best delaying and at worst foreclosing a prompt and impartial investigation worthy of the name."

U.S. officials soon came to similar conclusions in Rachel's case. When he first saw a copy of one of the two investigations — he couldn't remember which — Wilkerson told Kurtzer, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, "This stinks." He instructed Kurtzer to relay to the Israelis that they needed to do "a better investigation." And he pressed his own contacts within the Israeli military about the inconsistencies in the report but "never got really good, satisfactory answers."

Other State Department officials also raised objections. "Many questions remain unanswered," Kurtzer wrote in a [letter](#) to the Israeli minister of defense. "I must inform you that my government does not consider this matter closed."

The full military police report was never released to the U.S. government, and only after [considerable pressure](#) were its conclusions made available to U.S. officials. Later, after yet more pressure, some U.S. officials were allowed to see a copy of the report. One of them was Richard LeBaron, deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv. LeBaron flagged "several inconsistencies worthy of note" in a [memo](#) to the State Department.

The Corries were also eventually allowed to review the report at the Israeli Consulate in San Francisco. The consul there had offered his condolences after Rachel's killing, and when Cindy thanked him for that, he stressed awkwardly that it had been "a personal call," not on behalf of his government. He then led the Corries into a room where he handed them a single paper copy of the report and told them he would be gone but that they could stay as long as they needed. The Corries took that as tacit permission to copy the report word for word. Like the operational investigation that preceded it, the military report cleared the IDF of any wrongdoing. The Intercept reviewed copies of both.

Perhaps the strongest condemnation came from Wilkerson, in a [letter](#) to the Corries about a year after Rachel's death. "Your ultimate question," he wrote, "is a valid one, i.e., whether or not we view that report to have reflected an investigation that was 'thorough, credible and transparent.' I can answer your question without equivocation. No, we do not consider it so."

That statement, which the Corries quoted for years as they sought further U.S. action on the case, had come with Powell's signoff, Wilkerson told The Intercept. While his letter to the Corries was private, it was intended to be a record of the U.S. government's rejection of the Israeli investigation. Wilkerson also encouraged the Corries to file records requests for official deliberations about the case and [fast-tracked](#) those they sent to the State Department.

"I was aware of the fact that I was speaking to the Corries as the United States government," Wilkerson told The Intercept. "That doesn't mean that the president agreed with me or the vice president agreed with me. They probably couldn't have cared less."





Left/Top: Cindy and Craig Corrie pose for a photo at their daughter Sarah's home. Right/Bottom: A framed photo of Rachel Corrie at her sister Sarah's house. Photos: Kholood Eid for The Intercept

Rewriting History

There are a number of laws the U.S. government could wield to hold Israel accountable for human rights abuses, including provisions under the Foreign Assistance Act, the Arms Export Control Act, and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, which was signed into law in 2017 and

allows for sanctions against individuals “responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.”

There are also the “Leahy laws,” named after [Sen. Patrick Leahy](#), which limit the ability of the State and Defense departments to provide military assistance to foreign units that have a record of human rights violations.

As they searched for avenues to accountability, the Corries met with Leahy’s office several times, and through public records requests, they learned that U.S. diplomats had flagged Rachel’s killing early on as a potential “[Leahy case](#).” But there was no impact on U.S. security assistance to Israel, and while Caterpillar Inc. temporarily suspended delivery of some bulldozers to the IDF, the sales soon resumed. A civil suit the Corries brought against the bulldozer manufacturer in the U.S. was dismissed on the grounds that, because the vehicles were sold to Israel as part of a U.S. military program, a ruling would intrude upon the foreign policy authority of the government.

With Wilkerson’s help, the Corries also pushed for a U.S. probe of Rachel’s death. Like the Abu Akleh family today, they couldn’t understand why the FBI never investigated her killing. So far, the Justice Department, which would need to authorize such an inquiry, has given no indication that it plans to do so in Abu Akleh’s case.

The Corries met with several Justice Department officials and filed records requests to understand why an [investigation](#) was [never authorized](#). In the process, they were told that no attorney general “past, present, or future” would certify such an investigation against Israel. “My guess is that either [the attorney general] made the decision on his own with a telephone call to [Vice President Dick] Cheney, or Cheney made the telephone call himself to the AG and made sure that he was not going to do something in this case,” said Wilkerson. A spokesperson for the Justice Department declined to comment.



Lawrence Wilkerson, former chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell, stands for a portrait on Aug. 29, 2014.

Photo: Brooks Kraft LLC/Corbis via Getty Images

By 2005, with the Israeli investigations concluded and little prospect of further U.S. action, the Corries decided to sue the Israeli government. Once again, it was Wilkerson who suggested it. During a late 2004 [meeting](#) with several senior officials held in Burns's office — though Burns was not in attendance — Wilkerson raised a few eyebrows when he unexpectedly quipped, “If it were my daughter, I’d sue.” The family hadn’t considered the prospect until that point. Craig remembers asking those in the room whether the U.S. government would do anything to stop the family if they did sue. He already knew it wouldn’t help.

Wilkerson told The Intercept that he had hoped a lawsuit could offer the Corries the satisfaction of a legal authority ordering the Israeli government to at least reopen the investigation into Rachel’s killing. “When we struck out completely with the AG, with the IDF, with the ambassador, and with the Israeli government, I said to them, “There is one element of Israel’s power that’s still legit: It’s the court system,” he recalled. “Of course, by the time they got into the court system — it’s my view anyway — it had been corrupted too.”

It took five more years for the trial to begin. The Corries relocated to Haifa for months on end. They described the proceedings as a “kangaroo trial,” a “farce.” The hearings, held in Hebrew, were riddled with delays and errors, with translators sometimes relaying to the judge the very opposite of what someone had testified. Sarah knew on day one that they were never going to win.



The Corrie family sits in the Haifa District Court on Aug. 28, 2012, in Haifa, Israel.
Photo: Avishag Shaar-Yashuv/Getty Images

Still, the family showed up for every hearing. They obtained the court transcripts, paid for them to be translated, and sent them to several offices at the State Department so there would be a record somewhere in the U.S. government, Sarah said. She wanted the U.S. government to bear witness to

the trial, and every time a hearing was scheduled, she notified the embassy in advance, asking the office to send a representative to the courtroom.

On the day of the bulldozer driver's testimony — behind a screen protecting his identity — the Israelis had packed the small courtroom so that journalists and human rights observers couldn't get in. Sarah had to argue with court officials to make sure the U.S. consul general would be allowed into the room. Still, U.S. representatives were not there in an official capacity and made no comments. On only one occasion, outside Israel's Supreme Court, the consul hugged Craig before the cameras — as close to a statement of support as the U.S. government would give.

"You have to document everything. Because down the road, in history, it will all be rewritten to the way that somebody else wants it to be, and that won't be the truth."

The yearslong trial was harrowing for the family, but it was also an opportunity to finally get some answers. In court, the Corries learned that the coroner in the case was still in possession of parts of Rachel's body, a decade after her death. Sarah screamed when she found out. The family had agreed to the autopsy on the condition that a representative from the U.S. Embassy be in the room. But [nobody from the embassy](#) was there — the office later said it was not aware that had been the family's wish. The Corries ultimately received Rachel's last remains in 2016, after yet another lawsuit.

In 2012, an Israeli district court judge ruled that the IDF was not to blame for Rachel's death and that she alone was responsible. The family appealed, and in 2015, 10 years after they first sued, the Supreme Court of Israel upheld the ruling.

By that point, the Corries' battle had moved on to ensuring that the U.S. government did not backtrack on its earlier condemnation of the Israeli investigation. The "whitewash" had already begun, said Sarah, whose lobbying in later years became about challenging the "rewriting of history." That's in part why she kept such a thorough record. "You have to document everything," she said. "Because down the road, in history, it will all be rewritten to the way that somebody else wants it to be, and that won't be the truth."



Binders of documents regarding Rachel's killing are stacked at Sarah's home in Olympia, Wash., on July 10, 2022.

Photo: Kholood Eid for The Intercept

As the years passed, U.S. statements about the killing in press briefings and State Department reports grew weaker. In frustrated emails to [Blinken](#), [Burns](#), and others, Sarah reminded them that the U.S. government itself had found the Israeli investigation to lack credibility. "There is no walking back," she wrote. "It is unacceptable for the Administration to repeatedly reiterate these positions in correspondence, conversations, etc. with our family, in unequivocally strong terms, but then fail to address them as forcefully when asked for public comment."

At the last public mention of the case from a U.S. official, in 2015, then-State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki said that officials didn't have "anything new" to say about it.

"The reality of it is, there will never be the truth," Wilkerson now says. He also offered a word of caution about the U.S. government's repeated failure to hold Israel accountable for its crimes. "This was my point the whole time I was in government, and it's my point now to whomever will listen: We're not being a good ally. We are setting Israel up to one, apartheid, two, pariah status in the international community, and three, an untenable future. ... This is not good for Israel."



Sarah sifts through old photos of her sister, Rachel.

Photo: Kholood Eid for The Intercept

Most Powerful People in the World

The Corries first met Blinken in Jerusalem in March 2010. Biden had sent Blinken, then national security adviser to the vice president, in his place after the family requested a meeting. Just before the meeting, Israeli officials seized on Biden's trip to the region to [announce](#) the construction of 1,600 new illegal settlements in East Jerusalem. Blinken was furious and made no secret of it.

The episode was emblematic of the ways in which U.S. officials would express anger and indignation about Israel privately, issue careful, critical statements, and then ultimately do nothing to ensure consequences.

In May, Sarah watched the video of a Palestinian American student [snubbing Blinken's handshake](#) at a graduation ceremony, in protest of the administration's response to Abu Akleh's killing. When he later met with that student, Blinken reportedly told her, "[I see you, and I hear you.](#)"

Sarah thought he was sincere. She and her parents had been there before, experiencing both the genuine compassion of U.S. officials and its pointlessness in the absence of meaningful action. It was a failure larger than the secretary of state or any other individual official, they came to understand. But these were the most powerful people in the world, and they had achieved nothing. The United States government had been impotent.

“These are good people. They are good people who still, as far as our foreign policy is concerned, can’t get accountability and can’t get the job done,” Sarah said. “I know they want accountability for Shireen. But they’ve got to be willing to spend the political energy to go out and get accountability.”

The Biden administration’s willingness to spend political capital for the sake of accountability remains very much in doubt.

On Wednesday, hours before the president arrived in Israel, Blinken called Shireen Abu Akleh’s family to invite them to visit the White House, though he offered no timeline, her niece told The Intercept. The family still doesn’t know whether the president will meet them during his trip.

<https://theintercept.com/2022/07/13/israel-rachel-corrie-shireen-abu-akleh-killings/>