

[Under Trump, US Contempt for International Law Intensifies](#)

Reckless policies have increased the military's role.

What is Gaza's hope for the future after the fallout over the US embassy move and the Iran deal exit?

In this interview, University of San Francisco Professor Stephen Zunes — a widely recognized scholar of US and Middle East policies and the author of *Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism* — offers his take on the crisis in Gaza, how the national press has covered the issue in recent weeks and how the foreign policy has taken a turn for the worst under Trump.

Daniel Falcone: You have been very critical and have written about how establishment Democrats, such as former presidential hopefuls John Kerry and Hillary Clinton, defended Israeli human rights violations that contravened international law. Can you take a moment to comment on how Trump has taken United States foreign policy to dangerous and drastic new dimensions in the region?

Stephen Zunes: Trump has pursued reckless and militaristic policies in the Middle East, and has taken them to an unprecedented level, deepening US military involvement, [backing the Israeli colonization and annexation](#) of occupied Palestinian territories, deepening ties to Arab autocrats, and threatening war with Iran. His appointees have tended to be those who are guided more by ideological prejudices than knowledge of the Middle East, resulting in growing concerns not only by traditional progressive critics of US foreign policy, but by many in the security and intelligence establishment as well.

The Trump administration has appointed supporters of the illegal Israeli settlements and ongoing occupation into the top positions addressing Israel and Palestine; blocked the United Nations from criticizing or even investigating the Israeli massacre of demonstrators; and formally recognized the multi-faith and multi-ethnic city of Jerusalem as Israel's sole capital, moving the US embassy there, and has taken the largest Palestinian city — the center of Palestinian commercial, religious, cultural and educational life for centuries — “off the table” for negotiation. All this underscores how the United States has effectively abandoned even the pretense of supporting a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Yet the contempt for international law goes far beyond Israel. Under the Trump administration, the United States has dramatically increased its military operations in Syria and Iraq, not just to fight ISIS, but for broader strategic goals as well. While President Obama put limits on the use of US air power in order to minimize civilian casualties, Trump has given the military much wider latitude, resulting in a [dramatic increase in civilian deaths](#) from US air assaults on Mosul, Raqqa and other cities. In addition, US forces have carried out airstrikes against Syrian government targets and pro-government militia on several occasions.

There are at least [2,000 US forces in Syria](#) and [9,000 in Iraq](#), a dramatic increase in the numbers under Obama. This comes despite a series of major victories against ISIS forces, which have left [the group] holding on to only narrow strips of relatively under-populated territories. A major reason for the increased US military presence, despite fulfilling much of their initial strategic objectives, appears to be part of an effort to counter a pro-Iranian militia which, while playing a major role in fighting ISIS and other Salafist groups, is seen by the Trump administration as representing Iranian efforts to increase their political and military influence. There is no legal basis for US forces in Syria.

Trump's warm embrace of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's brutal military regime in Egypt, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian rule in Turkey and the repressive monarchies in the [Persian] Gulf have belied efforts by previous administrations of both parties to convince the people in the region of US concern for human rights and democratic governance. Support for the Saudi-led bombing campaign in Yemen — which has taken thousands of civilian lives in a country that saw a mass popular pro-democracy uprising earlier in the decade — has underscored how US support for such war crimes in the name of fighting “terrorism” is not reserved just for Israel.

Further, the [increased US support for Morocco's illegal takeover](#) of Western Sahara underscores that Israel is not the only occupying power backed by Washington in the face of ongoing violations of international law.

It seems that the marches in Gaza, as you point out, organized by Palestinian civil society activists, along with many who speak out against Hamas, have repeatedly called for nonviolent measures. The Israeli and US governments are both emphasizing the role of “Hamas terrorists” in regard to the recent uprisings. Have you noticed a similar trend in the US corporate media?

Much of the media coverage has used such terms as “clashes” to describe snipers shooting from behind heavily fortified emplacements to kill scores of protesters, none of whom apparently had any guns and most of whom were nonviolent, along with journalists and medical workers.

Tactically, it would have certainly been better if every Palestinian protester had been completely nonviolent and not thrown projectiles or rolled burning tires, since it gave the media an opening to focus on the minority who were doing these sorts of things, but it still doesn't justify the media's failure to emphasize that these have indeed been massacres.

Another problem was the emphasis on the role in Hamas facilitating the protests, ignoring how they were initially organized by [Palestinian civil society groups](#). Hamas, wanting to enhance its dwindling credibility among Gazans, also had a motivation to exaggerate their role, but the media's failure to ignore the grassroots movement that initiated the demonstrations was pretty disappointing.

Michelle Goldberg recently wrote an opinion piece in The New York Times entitled, [“A Grotesque Spectacle in Jerusalem.”](#) She mentioned that “by moving the embassy to Jerusalem in the first place, Trump sent the implicit message that the American government has given up any pretense of neutrality.” The op-ed also included grim facts that you considered extremely “hard-hitting.” Can you comment on the Goldberg piece? Is this a surprise coming from the paper of record?

It was surprisingly frank in terms of acknowledging the brutality of the massacre and the ongoing siege of Gaza, as well as the US isolation in the world regarding Israel/Palestine. She noted the unholy alliance between the Trump administration and right-wing evangelical leaders who combine pro-Likud politics with anti-Semitic theology. Also significant was her acknowledgement that it is probably too late for a viable two-state solution, which therefore necessitates consideration of a binational state that would erase the Gaza-Israel border.

While the Times has occasionally printed critical op-ed pieces by Palestinians, this is the most significant critique of US policy toward Israel and Palestine I've ever seen from a regular columnist.

In interviewing Noam Chomsky, David Barsamian once asked about [“the use of passive voice on reporting crimes of states,”](#) to which Chomsky replied it's a “standard device.” Nathan J. Robinson of [Current Affairs](#) just wrote on “Israel and the Passive Voice,” and points out how language impacts the story line. Recently, headlines for both The New York Times and The Washington Post started with the words, [“Israel kills.”](#) Have you noticed a shift in the language as well?

The combination of Israel's increasing extremism in its politics and policies, the ways in which support for Israel in the United States is increasingly identified with the Republican right, and the emergence of a new generation of journalists who carry less ideological baggage regarding making excuses for Israel has resulted in increasingly balanced coverage. There is still the usual bias in favor of allied governments and their narratives as seen elsewhere, but it's not as bad as it used to be.

Part of the reason may be that online media — which also provide access to British and other non-US newspapers — tend to provide more balanced coverage and [are] getting a larger share of the market, particularly among younger readers who tend to be less supportive of Israeli policies, so there may be growing concern about losing readership.

Lastly, I wanted to ask about your extensive and compelling coverage of Syria and how it's pertinent with the Palestinian discussion. I realize that Aleppo is comparable to Gaza in your estimation as Syria is to Israel. But separately, how do the latest Middle East uprisings relate to our involvement there and the conservative hawks banging the US war drums to invade Syria?

Despite horrific war crimes by the Bashar al-Assad regime, the wariness of further US military involvement in the Middle East following the Iraq debacle has led to enough caution to preclude extensive US military intervention in the name of regime change, though large-scale bombing and limited special forces operations to fight “terrorists” is still largely seen as acceptable.

There is a tendency by both the right and the left to exaggerate the power of the United States (either for good or for ill) to affect change in Syria, but most strategic planners in the Pentagon and elsewhere recognize US limitations. And, given that the language used by political leaders of both parties to defend Israeli and Saudi war crimes in the name of fighting terrorism is almost identical to the language used by the Syrian regime and its apologists, it has become more difficult to justify US intervention in the name of protecting the civilian population from Assad's onslaught.

Establishing a “no-fly zone” would have required a massive military operation involving tens of thousands of troops, billions of dollars, risked a direct confrontation with Russia and — according to a series of studies, including the [suppressed report](#) from the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide — it would likely have not saved lives overall and may have actually made things worse.

With the important exception of the emergence of ISIS — a direct result of the US invasion, occupation and counter-insurgency war in Iraq — the United States is not responsible for the anti-Assad uprising in Syria. The US role in supporting the armed and unarmed Syrian opposition has been relatively minor. Comparisons with Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya are completely off-base. However, the US refusal to support the broad-based pro-democracy struggle in Yemen and the insistence that the leadership of that country be handed over to Gen. Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi — instead of the broad-based coalition demanded by pro-democracy activists — was largely responsible for the Houthi takeover of much of the country and the resulting US-backed Saudi siege and bombing campaign, creating [one of] the world's worst humanitarian crises.

The grossly exaggerated claims about Iranian backing of the Houthis is reminiscent of similar alarmist reports about Soviet support of Central American revolution in the 1980s. And Washington's support for the suppression of resistance movements against US-backed autocrats is not restricted to armed Islamists. The US continues to back the repressive Bahraini monarchy in its brutal repression of nonviolent pro-democracy activists.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.