

[To the Brink of War, With No Upside](#)



Left to right: Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley. Iranian general Qassem Soleimani (behind). Photo credit: [The White House / Flickr](#) and [Unknown / Wikimedia \(CC BY 4.0\)](#)

With all the talk about President Donald Trump's decision to assassinate Qassem Soleimani, Iran's response, and the risk of war, it's astonishing how little fresh insight is offered. That is definitely not the case in our podcast with Middle East scholar Stephen Zunes. Among his intriguing claims:

- Too little is said about the role of the Democrats in hostilities with Iran
- The exact same beefs the US has with Iran apply equally to American allies
- Evidence does not support Trump's key assertions about the Iranian general whose death he ordered.

Full Text Transcript:

As a service to our readers, we provide transcripts with our podcasts. We try to ensure that these transcripts do not include errors. However, due to time constraints, we are not always able to proofread them as closely as we would like. Should you spot any errors, we'd be grateful if you would [notify us](#).

Welcome to the *WhoWhatWhy* podcast. I'm your host, Jeff Schechtman.

Jeff Schechtman: Nothing, not even elections, captures the attention of the mainstream media like war. The portability of coverage today makes war a kind of made-for-cable-television event. The result is that in the fog of coverage we lose sight, as we did with the Iraq war, of the truth of why we got in, how it's going, and how we get out.

Jeff Schechtman: Now we find ourselves in a similar place with respect to Iran. It's true that without Trump we wouldn't be where we are today, and yet it is ironic that it is also because of Trump that the media is more skeptical of the facts. There is no question that Soleimani was a bad guy that supported extremist militia and Iran's geopolitical overreach in the region. However, the degree to which he was responsible for the death of Americans, as has been reported, is an open question.

Jeff Schechtman: To talk about it, I'm joined by Stephen Zunes. He's a Professor of Politics and a Coordinator of Middle East Studies at the University of San Francisco. He's the author of a recent story arguing that there is no evidence that Iran is responsible for the death of hundreds of Americans, and it is my pleasure to welcome Stephen Zunes here to Radio *WhoWhatWhy*. Stephen joins us today by cell phone from Sudan. Stephen, thanks so much for taking the time to join us.

Stephen Zunes: Great to be with you.

Jeff Schechtman: Stephen, I want to begin by talking first about a point that was raised in a *Washington Post* column recently by former Virginia Senator Jim Webb, and where he said, "When did it become okay for us to kill a general from another country in a third country with respect to a country we're not even at war with?"

Stephen Zunes: I think that's an excellent way of putting it, actually. The United States is not at war with Iran, as much as some people would like us to be so, and he was there at the invitation of the Iraqi government, an ostensible U.S. ally. He was on his way to meet with the prime minister to try to diffuse the crisis. There are all sorts of serious legal questions regarding this.

Stephen Zunes: Of course the fantasy that the Trump people have put out, about how there was about to be a series of attacks against Americans, they're going to blow up the U.S. embassy, all that kind of crazy stuff, again, there's absolutely no evidence to back that up despite requests, not just from Democrats but from Republicans in Congress, too, that they come forward with this information. What has been disturbing to me, actually, is that much of the mainstream media, including some Democrats who opposed the assassination, seem to be perpetuating what is apparently the inaccurate claim that Soleimani and Iran have been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Americans.

Jeff Schechtman: Talk a little bit about that, because you detailed in your article the fact that he is not. There's no evidence at all that he has been responsible for the death of hundreds or thousands of Americans.

Stephen Zunes: Yeah. He certainly is responsible for the death of thousands of Iraqis and maybe even thousands of Syrians. I mean, the militias that he's organized, supported, are indeed pretty nasty. Some Iranian allies like Houthis are incorrectly seen as proxies, but some of these groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq and Syria really are proxies, so that he does have a fair amount of operational control.

Stephen Zunes: And yeah, they're a nasty lot, no question about it, but they haven't been fighting Americans overall. There's only been a handful of deaths of Americans since the formal withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2011. None of them were attributed to these militias until the attack that killed a contract worker a couple of weeks ago.

**Stephen
Zunes:**

Again, what the Trump administration is trying to put forward, and they haven't really put in any evidence so it's hard to say what they're referring to, but presumably charges that were made back in 2007 by the Bush administration, where again they didn't have any proof, that Iran, through a certain Shia militia they were supporting, were killing Americans by these roadside bombs that would blow up when American convoys would come by. Close to 170 American soldiers were killed that way, and somehow Iran was responsible. They claimed that these roadside bombs, these IEDs, Improvised Explosive Devices, had been killing Americans since the occupation began.

**Stephen
Zunes:**

But most of those, including the vast majority, 90% or more of American casualties, were done by Baathist groups, Salafist groups, other secular and hardline Sunni groups that in fact were anti-Iranian. The Iranian-supported militia were fighting them. In fact, they were killing each other, killing each other's civilians by the thousands. The people who were killing Americans tended to be fanatically anti-Iranian. And yes, there were some Shia groups like Sadr's group, the Mahdi Army, but again they were not one of those that were tied to Iran. So even if you count the Americans killed by them, again that's not the Iranians.

**Stephen
Zunes:**

The U.S. line seems to be that these new IEDs are too sophisticated for the Iraqis to make, so they have to be Iranian. But you think, "Wait a minute, this is the same administration who just a few years earlier were saying the Iraqis were capable of building an atomic bomb, and long-range missiles, and that kind of thing." Suddenly they're saying that they're incapable of building a roadside bomb? It was rather ludicrous at the time. Again, this was 12 years ago. It was largely forgotten about. Again despite promises to do so, the Bush administration never came forward with the supposed intelligence that they supposedly had, that linked Iran to these attacks. Until Trump got started raising it as an excuse, and through his arsenal of reasons that the United States somehow needed to go to war with Iran.

**Jeff
Schechtman:**

It's interesting with respect to that, that Trump has made the statement as recently as last night at a rally about the evidence of imminent danger, and yet none of this was mentioned to members of Congress in the briefing that took place the other day.

**Stephen
Zunes:**

Exactly. It's interesting. This is a sheer fabrication. It's disappointing. It's very disappointing, in fact, that you have many Democrats, even those who opposed the assassination, that seem to accept this at face value. I think it also just raises an even bigger question about how Iraq under Saddam Hussein was fanatically anti-Iranian. They did not have these extremist Salafist groups like ISIS. The fact that ISIS exists is a direct outgrowth of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. The fact that you have pro-Iranian militias as a threat to American soldiers in Iraq that are there supposedly to fight a terrorist group that we helped create, threatened by a militia that we made possible to come into Iraq, again effectively creating, it shows in yet another sense that it's another example of the United States doing something, going to war for a really stupid reason that could then create reasons to continue making war.

**Stephen
Zunes:**

As much as I think we deserve to go after President Trump for his provocative actions, let's remember that it was the Bush administration that got us into this situation in the first place, and even that could have been stopped if the Democratic control of the Senate hadn't had some key defection such as Dianne Feinstein, Chuck Schumer, John Kerry, Hillary Clinton, and significantly Joe Biden. Senator Barbara Boxer, who was opposed to the war, put in a request to allow me, and Phyllis Bennis, and Scott Ritter, the former chief weapons inspector, and others to testify for Biden's committee. Biden was head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He blocked our testimony and instead, not only did he allow only a day and a half of hearings, but

he stacked the hearings with these pro-war voices, including these dubious Iraqi exiles that had been coached by Dick Cheney and Ahmed Chalabi to tell these fanciful stories of having seen stocks of nuclear weapons, and how the U.S. if it came in would be welcomed as liberators, and there would be peace and harmony in Iraq.

Stephen Zunes:

I think unfortunately, every prediction I made about the Iraq war in *The Nation* unfortunately became true. I wrote the cover story for *The Nation* magazine, the case against the war. I talked about sectarian conflict, the rise of Salafist extremism, etc., etc. But the one prediction I got wrong was that any Democrat who supported what was predictably a disastrous decision, not to mention illegal and unnecessary, would have his or her political career ended. Again, we have nominated pro-war John Kerry and pro-war Hillary Clinton as the nominees. Chuck Schumer is the head Democrat in the Senate, and Joe Biden not only got to become vice president, but he is still the leading candidate for the Democratic nomination this year.

Jeff Schechtman:

It seems there were two tracks with respect to these arguments, with respect to what went on in Iraq and where we seem to be headed with Iran. There is the case that can or can't be made for the assassination of Soleimani. What happens in these cases is like what happens in politics. The coverup becomes worse than the crime. By trying to justify the actions for dishonest reasons, it creates a scenario that has a life all of its own, that transcends the original action.

Stephen Zunes:

Exactly. The thing is that again, Soleimani's militias have been ruthless. They killed a lot of civilians, supporting Assad's war in Syria and fighting ISIS. They have gone after Sunnis and others, Sunnis in general. Indeed, they have been implicated in many of the 500 or more deaths of pro-democracy and anti-corruption demonstrators taking to the streets in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities in recent months. Indeed, you want to be very critical of Iran's actions throughout the region, but by making stuff up, by exaggerating things, it's difficult in terms of the credibility of legitimate concerns the international community may have. Furthermore, despite Trump's claim that taking a tough stance will empower Iranian dissidents, it's going to do the opposite.

Stephen Zunes:

I noticed this when I was in Iran this past spring. People were really disgusted with the government. The government is really unpopular. People were not afraid to talk to me as a visiting American about how much they hated the regime, but it was also clear that they were very much opposed to U.S. policy and the threats against them. Millions of people came out in the streets protesting Soleimani's assassination. It has really united Iranians in a way they haven't been able to do in years, and similarly it has crippled the pro-democracy movement in Iraq as people have rallied around the flag there against the United States and against assassinations taking place on their soil.

Stephen Zunes:

It underscores that the United States is really not interested in promoting democracy. In fact, we are entrenching some of the worst reactionary forces in that part of the world. If you think about the terrible things that Trump and others have accused Iran of doing, suppression of dissent, the lack of free elections, discrimination against women and religious minorities, supporting extremist groups, intervening in the internal affairs of other countries, all of those are true. But every one of those is also true of Saudi Arabia. In fact, I'd say on every one of those, Saudi Arabia is even worse than Iran. Yet we send billions of dollars of unconventional military aid, and illicit arms transfers, and security assistance to that regime, as we do to Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Egypt is taxpayer-funded, most of it, \$1.4 billion to prop up the Sisi dictatorship.

Stephen Zunes:

Meanwhile, here in Sudan, they are a regime that was even worse than Iran. They presently die of genocide in Darfur. They supported Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups for a while, and are

really a nasty, nasty, nasty government. Guess what? The people of Sudan rose up in a nonviolent pro-democracy civil insurrection and overthrew the regime. They now have a democratic government under civilian leadership, after 30 years of this far-right-wing Islamist and military dictatorship. It's a reminder. If we really want democracy in that part of the world, if we really want to fight extremism, let the people do it themselves. When the United States intervenes, we just make matters worse.

Stephen Zunes:

In fact, let me just throw in something. While we're supporting all these repressive regimes, the Trump administration still maintains sanctions on Sudan even though they are under a democratic civilian leadership. I mean strict sanctions that make it very difficult for them to get any loans or international financial support. As with Iran, that's not just involving the U.S., but in fact other nations and international financial institutions as well.

Jeff Schechtman:

Given where we are now, given the lies that have been told, the misinformation that's been put out there, and then the misinformation that's been layered on more misinformation already in the course of one week, how do you see this playing out?

Stephen Zunes:

I guess the good side is that despite too many people buying the Iran-has-killed-hundreds-of-Americans assertions, generally there has been a degree of skepticism, and the fact that Iran gave a very limited, very targeted response so that it could save face but not do it in such a way to give Trump an excuse for further escalation, and that Trump actually held back himself. We were really on the precipice there for a while. It's just a miracle that things at least for now seem to have calmed down. You have the tragedy of the Ukrainian airliner shot down by a nervous anti-aircraft operator thinking it was a U.S. attack.

Stephen Zunes:

We already have tragic losses, but at least it's not going to escalate for now. But it does remind you that we are on a hair-trigger. We are in a very difficult situation where something could get out of hand. Having American forces in a volatile place like Iraq, Americans could get killed. Not necessarily by a pro-Iranian militia, but by somebody. Trump could blame it on Iran, and lo and behold, things escalate again and we end up in a full-scale war. I think the real thing we need to do right now is to try to get Congress to force Trump to pull American troops out of Iraq. The Iraqis want them out. In fact, the Iraqi parliament has voted to get them out, though that decision is still in the hands of the prime minister. Again, Trump has threatened to put even bigger sanctions on Iraq than they have on Iran if they dare not let us keep troops in their country. This is an example of the arrogance that we have.

Stephen Zunes:

I think that the best thing we can do right now really to prevent things from getting worse is to really push the demand not just that we not have a war with Iran, but we get U.S. troops out of Iraq, because the Iraqis do not want American or Iranian troops there. They don't want these militias allied with one side or the other. They don't want to be the location of a proxy war between the U.S. and Iran. The big division in Iraq nowadays is not between Sunni and Shia, but between sectarian and nationalist elements within both communities. The largely youthful protests were in large part against this kind of sectarianism. The Iraqi people want both Iran and the United States out of their country, and I think we should honor that.

Jeff Schechtman:

Does the U.S. pulling out, though, create greater opportunity for the Iranians, create a vacuum which the Iranians, because of simple proximity, will fill much faster?

Stephen Zunes:

That's possible. Indeed, that was one of the warnings we had about the consequences of overthrowing Saddam Hussein and creating chaos within the country. At the same time, I think

that the U.S. has justified its presence in Iraq in large part to counter Iranian influence. The Iranians have done the same. The fact that the U.S. has these bases so close to the Iranian border is one thing that has emboldened Iran's more expansionist agenda and wanting to create, to maintain a strong presence there. Ideally, there would be some type of negotiated situation where both sides would pull out, but I can't imagine that taking place under Trump. He and his team are not known for their thoughtful skill in negotiations on sensitive issues.

**Stephen
Zunes:**

Frankly, I think the Iraqi people have shown that they are willing to fight against that. The United States put enormous pressure on Syria for their overbearing presence in Lebanon over the years. We supported Israel in engaging in these horrific bombing campaigns and an occupation of the southern part of the country, all in the name of trying to pressure the Syrians to leave. We imposed draconian sanctions on Syria, trying to pressure them to leave Lebanon. None of that worked. What worked was when hundreds of thousands of Lebanese took to the streets in 2005 demanding that they pull out. That's what worked. In other words, we need to leave it to the people of Iraq themselves to get rid of the Iranians, not provoke a war which is not going to do anybody any good.

**Jeff
Schechtman:**

Finally, let me ask you about Soleimani and whether or not he was sui generis to the situation, whether his control of the various insurgent and militia groups was unique, or will he simply be replaced by somebody else whose tentacles reach just as far?

**Stephen
Zunes:**

I think you have a very good point there. Soleimani was very intellectual and charismatic, and was particularly close to the Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini. I doubt there will be someone of his stature that in his place would reach, but nevertheless this is part of a much broader policy. Iran has been a major power in the region, and keep in mind that Iran is formerly known as Persia, has been a major power in the region on and off for close to 2,500 years. They like any major power in a region are going to try to assert themselves. As has been said, we have seen other major powers try to influence their regions as well. They don't always do it in a way that is a good thing for the people. Again, the people in the Middle East have every right to resist an overbearing Iranian influence, but it's inevitable in a lot of ways. I don't see that Soleimani's absence is going to mean a fundamental shift in Iranian policy. If anything, given the extent to which the United States has gone to try to fight Iran, I think it's only going to embolden them to strengthen their military presence.

**Jeff
Schechtman:**

Stephen Zunes, I thank you so much for spending time with us today.

**Stephen
Zunes:**

My pleasure.

**Jeff
Schechtman:**

Thank you. And thank you for listening and for joining us here on Radio *WhoWhatWhy*. I hope you join us next week for another Radio *WhoWhatWhy* podcast. I'm Jeff Schechtman. If you liked this podcast, please feel free to share and help others find it by rating and reviewing it on iTunes. You can also support this podcast and all the work we do by going to whowhatwhy.org/donate.

Related front page panorama photo credit: Adapted by WhoWhatWhy from [The White House / Flickr](#) and [Unknown / Wikimedia \(CC BY 4.0\)](#).