Tikkun תיקון

Read Our Magazine | Donate | Our Podcast | Join our NSP Activist Community

The Prophetic Jewish, Interfaith & Secular Voice to Heal and Transform the World

Professor Stephen Zunes on Gaza, the U.S., and Israel

By Stephen Zunes
June 1, 2021

B'Tselem

An edited and updated transcript of a May 20, 2021 interview of University of San Francisco professor Stephen Zunes by J.G. Michael for the podcast Parallax Views. Professor Zunes is a member of Tikkun's editorial board.

J.G Michael

I wanted to have you on the program to discuss current issues involving the Israel-Palestine conflict and the US role, particularly in light of the recent fighting between Israel and Hamas. What's your view of the conflict?

Stephen Zunes

The world watched in horror as the forces of both Hamas and Israel violated basic norms of international humanitarian law by firing deadly projectiles into civilian populated areas. The Israelis, of course, with superior firepower, inflicted far greater damage. The extreme disproportionate firepower of the Israelis is really staggering. We're looking at a 20:1 ratio in terms of casualties and many times greater than even that in terms of physical destruction of civilian infrastructure. And, given that the United States is the provider of many of the weapons and delivery systems that were used in the Israeli offensive, the United States bears special responsibility for the carnage. The United Nations Security Council met on several occasions to try to at least issue a statement that would help lead to a ceasefire, but the United States has blocked all four initiatives. These were supported by all fourteen other members of the Security Council; it was literally 14-1, with the United States, as veto-wielding permanent member, prevented passage. Meanwhile, President Biden as well as leading members of Congress of both parties were quite correctly criticizing Hamas rocket attacks, but were largely defending what Israel was doing and even claiming that it's all in self-defense. Eventually, domestic and international pressure led Biden to eventually pressure the Israelis to accept a ceasefire after eleven days of fighting

J.G Michael 05:12

I wanted to ask about the matter of the UN a bit more, because I've seen people try to attack the UN is being anti-Israel. And I really think that couldn't be farther from the truth. I they seem very balanced in what they've said so far,

Stephen Zunes 05:29

The Security Council statements blocked by the United States seem to have been quite balanced and reasonable. This has not been the case for every resolution passed by the General Assembly and some other UN agencies over the past 70 years, but the Security Council consists of a number of countries which are broadly supportive of Israel. France and

Britain were among Israel's strongest supporters in its early days. And similarly, if you look down the list of current members of the Security Council currently, only a handful have been historically hostile to Israel and most of them have moderated their views in more recent decades. They're not saying Israel doesn't have a right to exist, they're not saying Zionism is evil, they're not saying Israel doesn't have a right to self-defense or anything like that. The drafts the United States blocked explicitly condemned what Hamas was doing, but they happen to criticize Israel as well. And that's the part that the Biden administration objected to.

Tikkun *needs your support to bring the kind of analyses and information we provide.*
Click Here to make a tax-deductible contribution.

J.G Michael 06:28

With regards to the Biden administration's initial response, the responses more or less been, "Israel has a right to defend itself." And I think we've heard that in the past before, and there's not really a mention of the Palestinians. Why do you think that is? What's the reason for this being the sort of go to response?

Stephen Zunes 06:51

It was kind of odd for the United States to use that line repeatedly, because of course Israel has a right to self-defense. Every country has a right to defend itself. That's not a question. Few were questioning that. But I think the reason they keep saying that is they want to try to make the case that bombing residential areas with high concentrations of civilian population in which there may or may not be a number of alleged terrorists within their midst somehow constitutes legitimate self-defense. And that's a very, very dangerous position. By contrast, even when pressed, the State Department spokesperson declined to say that the Palestinians also have a right to self- defense. Now, lobbing rockets randomly in Israel is not legitimate self-defense, either. But the fact that the Biden administration can be so clear in defending Israelis' right to self-defense while being ambivalent about Palestinians' right to self-defense is not just being one sided, it could arguably be considered racist. What you're saying here is that one people have less right to defend themselves than the other based on their ethnicity.

J.G Michael 08:15

But why would the US want to be framing it that way? As you said, this seems to be a pretty dangerous game. What's at play here?

Stephen Zunes 08:24

I'd say a number of things. On one hand, we've seen this kind of one sidedness before. Anybody who knows the history of US foreign policy can certainly look at all the times past and present where the United States has spoken out against or even exaggerated human rights abuses and the problematic use of force by governments we don't like and then minimize or ignore or cover them up if committed by governments that we support. Those of us who were around in 1980s, remember how in Central America, the United States would cover up for the right-wing death squads in El Salvador while obsessing about the far less egregious human rights abuses in leftist Nicaragua. Or more recently, the different reactions to Saudi Arabia versus Iran, or Colombia versus Venezuela. What's disturbing is that when it comes to Israel and Palestine, there are even liberal members of Congress who will fall into this kind of double standard. And part of it is that if the United States was frank about Israeli violations of international humanitarian law, which in a number of cases do constitute war crimes, it would increase pressure to have to cut back on $3.8 billion in annual military aid to Israel and the additional arms sales. Let's remember that "U.S. aid to Israel" doesn't go to ordinary Israeli–80% of that goes to U.S. arms manufacturers. And if everything Israel does with it is by definition self-defense, we can't apply the Leahy law and other restrictions that would limit arms transfers.

And you also have those who believe in unconditional support for Israel for ideological reasons. You have Zionist Jews and their organizations who see threats to cutting military aid, sincerely if wrongly, as a threat to Israel's survival. You have tens of millions of rightwing evangelical Christians who see the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians as continuation of the struggles between Israelites and Philistines, and they're very clear on whose side God is supposedly

on. You have an older generation of liberals who have a kind of sentimental attachment to Israel from back in its early days when it was more progressive politically and more vulnerable strategically than it is now. Many liberals are understandably concerned about the Jewish people, a historically oppressed minority. If there was only one black state in the world, even if they were engaged in serious human rights abuses, there would be plenty of African Americans along with progressives who might be a little defensive that people criticize them because they would question the motivations of those who are criticizing it.

I think it's important to acknowledge there is an influential rightwing Zionist lobby, but not to exaggerate it. Their role is not insignificant, but it's certainly not the only reason or even the main reason the United States is backing Israel. The United States has certainly supported and defended regimes that commit even worse atrocities than the Israelis, including providing unconditional military aid. And the U.S. bombing of Raqaa and West Mosul in 2017 each resulted in far more civilian deaths than the Israeli wars on Gaza. There wasn't an ethnic lobby responsible for any of these policies. And unfortunately, there has not been much resistance to U.S. support for Israel as opposed to El Salvador or Saudi Arabia or other recipients of U.S. weaponry. Groups like Progressive Democrats of America, Move On, or even explicit peace groups like Peace Action, even when they may take good positions on Israel/Palestine, don't generally make a politician's positions on this issue a criterion for endorsements. They have endorsed members of Congress who may be fairly progressive in some foreign policy and domestic issues, but are going whole hog in support of Netanyahu. My view is that if peace and human rights and international law is a concern of yours, it should be across the board and you shouldn't make exceptions for Israel. Just as Israel shouldn't be unfairly singled out for criticism, it shouldn't be allowed to get away with stuff that other governments wouldn't. So, I think one factor getting in the way of a more just policy is that the mainstream peace and human rights community haven't made this as big a priority as it should. It shouldn't be just up to the more hardcore Palestine solidarity groups and a few left leaning Jewish groups to carry the weight, I think it really needs to be more of a mainstream peace issue, so at least the politicians will get pressure from two directions instead of just one.

J.G Michael 14:09

Speaking of the mainstream, I'm sure you saw the john Oliver episode where he addressed the conflit and was frank about Israeli war crimes. What do you make of that? Do you think things like that are showing that there may be a changing of the tide in terms of how we talk about these issues?,

Stephen Zunes 14:27

There's definitely a real shift. And a lot of this shift actually is generational. Speaking as a political scientist, I've rarely seen an issue where age and political attitude parallel so closely, With the possible exception of LGBTQ issues, I don't know any current political issue where one's age is as clear an indicator of one's views. This is particularly striking among American Jews, who are taking a more balanced or even pro-Palestinian position relative to their elders who were prone to take a more hardline, pro-Israel perspective. Back when people got their news from major newspapers and only three TV networks, diverse views on the conflict were rare. Now people can get news from a lot of places and that includes alternative perspectives from people like John Oliver and Trevor Noah. There are all sorts of sources for the news including from bloggers on the ground in Gaza and the West Bank. Younger people who are less prone to rely exclusively on the more traditional news sources are able to develop somewhat more independent thinking on this issue.

And, speaking of polling, I've also haven't seen any issue where there's such a huge gap between the -rank-and file and the politicians. A clear majority of Americans, including 80%, of Democrats, believe that US military aid to Israel should be conditional on Israel upholding basic principles of human rights and international law. Not only does the administration reject this idea. Biden went as far as saying that idea was "bizarre" when Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Pete Buttigieg raised it during the primaries. In April, in response to a bill by Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN) to ban the use of U.S. military aid to Israel for use in some specific violations of international humanitarian law, 125 democratic House members, a solid majority of the Democratic Caucus, joined their Republican colleagues in signing a letter insisting that US military aid to Israel remain unconditional. So, there's this huge gap between the politicians and the people who elected them.

J.G Michael 17:07

Since I mentioned the John Oliver segment, there was a point where they referenced a figure in the IDF who said that the Palestinians had their own Iron Dome, it's called don't shoot missiles at us. I was wondering how you respond to that?

Stephen Zunes 17:47

Obviously, lobbing these rockets into Israel is not only a war crime and obviously immoral, it's politically counterproductive. But it's not the people of Gaza who are firing these rockets, it's these militiamen with Hamas and Islamic Jihad who do not have the support of the majority of Gazans. And it is the people of Gaza who are the ones who are suffering disproportionately; the vast majority of casualties have been civilians, not Hamas fighters or Hamas officials. Israel, like Hamas, was committing war crimes. But I think one of the real important things that John Oliver emphasized and Trevor Noah emphasized is the gross asymmetry in power between Hamas and the Israeli Defense Forces. And that's one of the big problems of US foreign policy. In general, we blocked the United Nations from doing anything, not just in terms of the recent fighting, but in terms of the peace process as well by insisting that the only way to peace is through direct talks between the Israelis and Palestinians. But that ignores the gross asymmetry in power between the occupier and those under occupation. I mean, that's like saying, "Oh, there shouldn't be any pressure or sanctions against Russia for occupying Crimea. This is up to the Crimeans and the Russians to decide between themselves whether Russia should withdraw or not."

Or looking back to when Iraq occupied Kuwait in the early 1990s saying that it should simply be worked out in negotiations between Kuwait and Iraq. Even if one takes the position that both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs both have equal rights to statehood, both have the right to self-determination, both have the right to security, etc. as I do, the fact remains that Israel has by far the most powerful armed force in the Middle East and are by far the biggest economic and technological power in the region while Palestinians under Hamas and the Palestinian Authority are incredibly weak, suffering under siege and occupation. It's not a fair fight by any means. Yes, both sides are wrong in the sense of attacking each other's territory without regard to civilian lives. But we need to also keep into account not only the enormously more destructive firepower of the Israelis but that the conflict itself is grossly asymmetrical. And its exacerbated by the fact that the United States has this contradictory role of being both the primary military financial and diplomatic supporter of one of the two parties–the more powerful the two parties by far–while at the same time, insisting that it is we alone, not the United Nations, not the European Union, and not the broader international community that should be the sole mediator of the conflict. Anybody who has studied conflict resolution knows that you cannot be a fair mediator and be so strongly supportive of just one side, particularly the more powerful of the two sides.

J.G Michael 21:31

So that brings me to the claim that some are hearing in Washington that Hamas is using human shields, as defined by international humanitarian law, and I think you actually talked about this on your own social media page. Why did you want to address that on your social media? And what was your basic point about that claim?

Stephen Zunes 21:51

Human shields, as defined by international law, is when a party to an armed conflict deliberately places civilians, against their will, between them and the opposing forces in order to deter military operations by the other side. This is a charge that was also used against Hamas repeatedly in both the wars in 2009 and 2014. Investigations by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the United Nations and others looked into those charges and they did not find a single case, not one, of Hamas using human shields as defined by the Fourth Geneva Convention. Now they certainly found cases where Hamas committed other war crimes, such as lobbing rockets into Israel. They were also criticized for having some of their military forces, operations, and weapons storage closer than they should have to concentrations of civilians which, while not surprising in a such a crowded enclave as the Gaza Strip, is also a violation of international humanitarian law, but it is not as serious a crime as human shields, which is actually considered a crime against humanity. In any case, if you read the Fourth Geneva Convention, even if Hamas did use human shields by the legal definition, that still does not give Israel the right to attack civilians. To use a domestic example: If there's a botched bank robbery and the robbers are holding

customers and tellers hostage and they're shooting at police and others from behind them, it would certainly not be considered appropriate for the police to then gun down everybody, including the hostages, and then say, "Oh, it's not our fault. The bad guys were using human shields." This "human shields" line is basically an attempt, given the undeniably large death toll from the Israeli attacks, of absolving the perpetrator and blaming the victim.

J.G Michael 24:40

And I wanted to come back if I could, just briefly to the, what you mentioned earlier about sort of redefining self-defense to include the wholesale bombing of civilian population centers. That seems like a very dangerous precedent. even beyond the Israel Palestine conflict.

Stephen Zunes 25:00

One of the least reported major crimes committed by U.S. forces in recent years was the heavy U.S. bombing in 2017 of Raqqa in Syria, and west Mosul in Iraq, both of which were controlled by ISIS. (In these cases, Amnesty International and others confirmed ISIS really did use human shields.) Many thousands of civilians died. A number of us predicted something like this would happen since the passage of a 2009 Congressional resolution, supported by an overwhelming bipartisan majority, giving unconditional support for Israel's offensive in Gaza which included a clause in which Congress effectively redefined the term human shields by saying it including having fighters and officials in civilian neighborhoods, civilian hospitals and civilian mosques, implying therefore that these locations were therefore legitimate Israeli targets. The fact is, however, that Hamas, like any other governing body, has its officials living in civilian neighborhoods, going to civilian hospitals, and attending civilian houses of worship. And, as a militia, their fighters don't live in military bases but live at home in the same neighborhoods, go to the same hospitals and same mosques like everybody else. So, in a sense, what this resolution was essentially saying that if any organization the U.S. identifies as "terrorist" has fighters or government officials anywhere within a population center, these areas essentially become free fire zones. This radical reinterpretation of the rules of engagement make it possible for countries like Israel and the United States, with their vastly superior firepower, by land, sea, and air to kill as many people as they want to, but they can say, "It's not our fault, because the other side was using human shields."

J.G Michael 27:05

I wanted to discuss what happened with the Associated Press building. But the larger point I also want to get at is it seems like in some ways, there's been a blaming collateral damage for being collateral damage at this point, well, you're responsible for being collateral damage, you shouldn't have been at the wrong place at the wrong time. It seems like that's going on in some ways.

Stephen Zunes 27:28

In blowing up the building that housed the Associated Press, Al-Jazeera, and other media, the Israelis insisted that it was a legitimate target because they claimed there was some Hamas military intelligence unit in the building, but that charge is extremely dubious on a number of levels. First of all, no one who lived in the residential units in the building or worked in any of the offices in that building were aware of any kind of Hamas activity. The State Department has confirmed that they have seen no such evidence. Meanwhile, the AP and Al-Jazeera reporters, who would be particularly adept at noticing things like that, saw no signs of a Hamas presence in the building either. They certainly wouldn't have maintained their press offices if they did, because they know it would likely become target. Hamas wouldn't want to house sensitive intelligence operations in a building with a bunch of reporters anyway. I think it's pretty much an open secret that the Israelis targeted this building because these media outlets were sending out information about what was happening on the ground, namely the large scale targeting of civilians, which countered the US and Israeli narrative that Israeli military operations were all legitimate self-defense. The Israelis wanted to try to silence or at least limit the media as much as possible from reporting this kind of thing.

J.G Michael 29:12

That actually brings me to the issue of how the media has been covering this issue recently in light of the reignited conflict. There seems to be someone more balanced coverage in some ways, but then I've also seen things that I find a little bit off-putting, such as claiming it was all and Iranian plot and others saying it was a plot by Netanyahu to stay in power.

Stephen Zunes 29:59

The alleged Iranian connection is pretty silly. The Iranians do have some influence over Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militia, which they have provided sophisticated missiles that can hit anywhere in Israel. These are far more lethal or accurate than the Hamas rockets, which are mostly made in machine shops in Gaza itself. If Iran was really supporting Hamas, at least in any big way, they would have far more sophisticated and deadlier projectiles to fire in Israel's direction. In reality, relations between Iran and Hamas have been rather poor since they began supporting opposite sides in the Syrian civil war starting almost a decade ago and Hamas has always been closer to Qatar and some of the more conservative Gulf monarchies.

There has been some speculation, primarily among Israelis, that it was Netanyahu who helped encourage the far right Israeli settler groups that were attacking Palestinians in East Jerusalem and attempting to seize their homes, which provoked the Palestinian protests, which then led to some really brutal repression by Israeli occupation forces, which then led Hamas to fire his initial rockets, which then led Israel to start the airstrikes, which led Hamas to having more rockets, which led Israel to have even more intensive airstrikes, etc. Remember that Netanyahu and his rivals are each trying to cobble together some kind of working coalition government after inconclusive Israeli elections and some Israelis are speculating that this was all a sinister effort by Netanyahu to enhance his support.

It's important to remember that the latest round of violence is a lot like we've seen before in 2009 and 2014, as well as two or three less severe flare ups, which underscore how Gaza Strip has essentially been under siege for fourteen years. And when you have a territory where people cannot come and go freely and where they cannot engage in any normal kind of commerce, that is, legally speaking, an occupied territory, even though Hamas has been the administrative power in since they forcibly seized the territory from the Palestine Authority back in 2007. Amidst these horrific conditions, Hamas–which is a pretty reactionary, authoritarian organization–has been willing to impose its will on the Palestinian people there. They've crushed independent trade unions, they've shut down human rights activists, imposed misogynist rules against women, and more. We should remember, however, that Hamas's takeover pf Gaza goes back to an effort by the Bush administration to push Fatah to stage a coup to oust Hamas from the democratically elected Palestinian parliament, in which Hamas had a small majority (albeit with only a plurality of the popular vote), which led to the Hamas attempt at a counter-coup and eventual takeover of Gaza. Overall, it comes down to the U.S. failure to enable the more moderate Palestine authority to be able to show success in creating a viable independent Palestinian state established in the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas was able to say to the Palestinians, "Fatah, the PLO, the Palestine Authority leadership promised that, in giving up the armed struggle and giving up our dream for liberating all of Palestine, we could have the 22% of Palestine that Israel conquered and 1967 as a Palestinian mini-state, but instead it's led to massive Israeli colonization of much of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, leaving Palestinian self-governance to these small largely-urban enclaves surrounded by these illegal settlements, draining the aquifers, forcing people to go through humiliating checkpoints, limiting access the Jerusalem holy places, etc. We told you that you couldn't trust the Israelis or trust the United States to be the honest broker. So, we need to go for broke and we need to liberate all of Palestine."

Well, of course, Hamas is not going to liberate Palestine. Not only would the Israelis make it impossible, but most Palestinians don't want to live under the kind of Islamic state that Hamas wants to install. But one can understand what led to Hamas's initial support. At the time of the signing of the Oslo Accords, Hamas had barely 10-15% support among the Palestinians. As the peace process dragged on, and things got worse and worse, their support went up to almost 50% by 2005. Their level of popular support certainly declined as a result of their misrule in Gaza, but every time there's a war like this, their approval rating goes up again. Indeed, one of the many tragedies of this most recent explosion of violence is that it has strengthened the hardliners in both Israel and Palestine.

J.G Michael 35:05

I want to talk a little bit about, for lack of a better term, the alternative media and its coverage of the Israel Palestine conflict. Sometimes I feel that people really grossly misuse and exaggerate AIPAC and the Israel lobby in a way similar to far right anti-Semitic elements, using terms like the ”Zionist- occupied government.”

Stephen Zunes 35:45

This is a serious concern. What this line of argument ignores is not only that the United States has over the years supported even worse governments that have engaged in even worse atrocities, Israel is not the only occupying power backed by Washington. The United States has not only long supported Morocco’s occupation Western Sahara, the Trump administration officially recognized Morocco’s illegal annexation of that country—something which Biden has thus far upheld–despite the fact that Western Sahara is a full member state of the African Union and has been recognized by over 80 governments around the world. While in regard to Palestine the U.S. at least gives lip service to a two-state solution, Washington is essentially saying Western Sahara has no right to exist. State Department maps show Western Sahara as part of Morocco, unlike the distinctions made between Israel, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. And the Polisario Front, the Western Sahara liberation movement, has never engaged in terrorism or questioned Morocco’s right to exist, so Washington doesn’t have that excuse.

If you go back to the 1990s, the United States was supporting Indonesia’s occupation of East Timor, in which they wiped out one-third of that island nation’s population–over 200,000 people. There wasn’t an Indonesian-American lobby and there isn’t a Moroccan-American lobby that has been forcing us to do these kinds of things. The unfortunate reality is the United States is perfectly capable of supporting allies invading, occupying, colonizing and oppressing weaker nations without some kind of ethnic lobby forcing our hands to do so. It’s not that AIPAC doesn’t have some clout in Washington, but it is disturbing how often the conversation falls into these anti-Semitic stereotypes of rich and powerful Jews behind the scenes controlling the policies of the U.S. government. I really, really think we need to challenge this idea of exceptionalism regarding U.S. policy towards Israel/Palestine when it in fact follows a pattern of US foreign policy that goes back many, many decades of supporting oppressive rightwing governments that that are seen as strategic allies. And that’s what “supporting Israel” is ultimately about. Yes, there is AIPAC, there is the Christian Right, and there is the sentimental attachment many older liberals have for Israel, etc. But the main reason the U.S. supports Israel is the same reason we support any government– we see it as advancing US interests.

Israel is, in the words of one former Secretary of State, our “unsinkable aircraft carrier”, Israel, unlike some of our Arab allies, is not going to fall to a revolution or coup. They’re going to still be on our side. Israel is technologically advanced and the military industrial complexes of the U.S. and Israel are very closely intertwined. They can pass on US arms to pro-Western governments and pro-Western insurgencies, including those which for political reasons we cant send arms to directly–this goes back to apartheid South Africa, the Guatemalan junta, the Nicaraguan contras, and more recently various Kurdish militia and Colombian paramilitaries> The Mossad and CIA collaborate and intelligence gathering covert operations. I mean, there are all sorts of reasons that the US supports Israel that have nothing to do with AIPAC.

I would say that, were it not for AIPAC and allied groups, there would be more room for dissent regarding U.S. support of Netanyahu. For example, I think that some of the Congressional resolutions defending Israeli policies would not be quite as one sided as they are and there wouldn’t be as many successful efforts to cancel pro-Palestinian speakers or suppress campus organizing on the issue. There is a big difference, however, between limiting debate on a policy and the policy itself, which I believe would be more or less the same, even if it were not for the so-called Zionist lobby. The idea that the United States would suddenly have a policy towards Israel/Palestine that supports human rights, supports international law, supports the United Nations, and supports arms control without it is rather naive. I mean, come on, when has the United States had that kind of policy of benign foreign policy consistently anywhere?

J.G Michael 40:17

And I just wanted to add two small points that I think you know. AIPAC may have a role in certain things, as you pointed out. But the thing is, it’s also not the only lobby in Washington. I mean, there’s the Turkish lobby, which for years pushed back against any recognition of the Armenian genocide. And, and not only that, but I think I look at some of the talk about

the Israeli Israel lobby on elements of the left where it's seen as this omnipotent force. And to me, I it just seems like a mirror image of how the Glenn Beck's of the world talk about the Council on American Islamic Relations as being a Muslim mafia plot, and it's not good.

Stephen Zunes 40:56

It's not good at all. And also, what's interesting is that there are now two major Zionist lobby groups in Washington—you have AIPAC on the right, but there's also J Street, which is a more left leaning pro- Israel lobby. And it's been interesting to see how during much of recent war J Street was really pushing for a ceasefire, while AIPAC and the Biden administration were opposing it. So, which Zionist lobby are you talking about? Even though most of Congress and the Biden administration are closer to AIPAC, polls show most American Jews are politically closer to J Street.

I don't consider myself a Zionist, but I do recognize that Zionism is diverse. You have Zionists who support Netanyahu and his war on Gaza, but you also have Zionists in opposition. There are self-proclaimed Zionists who are in Israeli prisons for refusing to serve in the occupied territories. So, we should not look at Zionism as a monolith. Certainly, the more left leaning Zionists are a shrinking minority in Israel. Overall, Israel has been moving more and more to the right in recent years. The Zionist movement as a whole is getting increasingly chauvinistic, militaristic, and racist. Many left Zionists now consider themselves post-Zionists. But we shouldn't define Zionism solely as its worst historical and contemporary manifestations. To use "Zionism" as a catch-all phrase for everything evil that the Israeli government is doing is really an unfair representation and often parallels anti-Semitic tropes.

J.G Michael 43:03

How do you think we can get a more productive conversation about Israel and Palestine?

Stephen Zunes 43:09

I think it's really important to make it a more mainstream peace and human rights issue. I don't think it helps to argue about the nature of Zionism., I believe we need to treat Israel like any other state. And that includes the fact that no state has a right to invade, occupy, and colonize its neighbors; no state has a right to engage in indiscriminate bombing onto crowded civilian neighborhoods. I would say, try to avoid making this an ideological battle and make it much more about human rights, about international law, about the right of self-determination, about peace and conflict resolution. And also to focus on the fact that the United States is making Israel's oppression possible thought the constant threat of a veto. The UN Security Council could have otherwise resolved the situation a long time ago. If it weren't for the military and technological aid the U.S. provides Israel they would not be able to do the kind of damage that they are doing. When the US was supporting the slaughter in El Salvador during the 1980s, demonstrations weren't usually in front of the Salvadoran embassy or Salvadoran consulates, they were at US federal buildings, because we knew who was it was ultimately responsible for the violence, I say that it's less important to highlight atrocities by the Israeli government than it is to focus on how US policy makes them possible.

I realize that many of us who have worked for a two-state solution for decades are beginning to think that maybe it's too late and maybe we need to focus instead on making possible one binational where Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs have guaranteed equal rights; that is, shifting the focus from an anti-occupation struggle to an anti-apartheid struggle. I still believe, however, that given the important legal distinctions between Israel and the occupied territories and to avoid the pushback from those insisting that we want to "destroy Israel," that it would still be better to focus our opposition to U.S. support for the occupation and colonization in the West Bank, the siege of Gaza, and other Israeli violations of international humanitarian law, including the bombing of civilian targets. Make clear that what Israel is doing is totally unacceptable and that the United States should not be a party to it, just as we should in regard to the Moroccan occupation and colonization of Western Sahara and the Saudi bombing of civilian targets in Yemen. We need to challenge the lie that the United States is being an honest broker in the peace process. We also need to challenge this bipartisan effort to keep the United Nations out of its customary role as arbiter in international conflict. The United Nations was formed to address international conflicts like this, the United Nations created Israel in the first place, and for the United States is wrong to

say the UN should keep out of it. So, let's avoid the ideological battles, and focus on the injustices going on right now and the US culpability in the tragedy.

J.G Michael 46:05

It's interesting, because I think that one can making an argument against Zionism or believing in a one state solution, isn't inherently anti-Semitic, but Iy very much agree with you that the focus needs to be on the people and the civilians and the people who are suffering, not necessarily all these ideological battles, first and foremost.

Stephen Zunes 46:32

I think it's also important to speak in terms that people can understand. As we all know, there are a lot of people who do get sensitive about criticism of Israel. Even me. I have been active in solidarity struggles in support of the Palestinians since my early teens, which is fifty years now. And yet, if I walk into a room, and I hear somebody I don't know going on and on and on about all the terrible things Israel's doing, even if I agree with every single thing they're saying, there's a part of me that thinks, "Why is this person saying that—really? Is it because they're concerned about human rights abuses, violations of international law, and war crimes anywhere and everywhere?" So, we need to be aware of that. This doesn't mean we should shy away from our condemnation of what Israel is doing and the US role in making possible. But one area where I would say that Israel/Palestine is different than other international issues is that we need to be aware of this and be careful not to unfairly single out Israel. We need to emphasize that Israel, no more or less than any other country, needs to uphold the kind of moral and legal standards every nation should. Israel must end its occupation for the same reason Morocco and Russia should end their occupations, Israel has no right to bomb crowded urban areas in the name of fighting terrorism, the same reason that Syria and Saudi Arabia shouldn't be bombing crowded urban areas in the name of fighting terrorism. At the same time, given the extent to which the United States is making Israel's crimes possible–even more so than Saudi Arabia and Morocco—we do have a special responsibility for making this issue a priority.

J.G Michael 48:40

And I was just going to add to that, too. I don't want listeners to get the impression that there's not another side to this issue in which false charges of anti-Semitism is used towards opponents of Israeli policies.

Stephen Zunes 48:59

The charge of anti-Semitism has indeed been used in almost a McCarthyistic way to try to limit dissent. In most of the cases in which I have had scheduled talks cancelled or a "pro-Israel" (meaning pro-occupation) speaker was added at the last minute to follow me, the decision wasn't generally made by a strong ideological supporter of Netanyahu, but a naïve liberal who believed charges that I was an anti-Semite. That's understandable on some level. If I hear I hear a woman say somebody is sexist or a person of color say somebody is racist and I don't know the person being accused, my default assumption is that the person in the target group is the best judge on the matter. Similarly, there are a lot of people who similarly assume that if a Jewish person or a Jewish organization says someone is anti-Semitic, there is sense of "Who am I, as a non-Jewish person, to question the validity of such a charge? I should honor the perspectives of those in the targeted group." Of course, we need to challenge that whenever that happens.

Ironically, one of the problems is that such efforts to silence even thoughtful critics of Israeli policies is that it creates a kind of crying wolf phenomenon, where it makes it harder to challenge the very real anti-Semitism that sometimes emerges from within the pro-Palestinian movement. We need to be vigilant in recognizing and calling out anti-Semitism whenever and wherever it raises its ugly head regardless of how some other people have weaponized anti-Semitism to suppress dissent. We need to be really, really clear as to where criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic and really, really clear where criticism of Israel is not anti-Semitic.

J.G Michael 51:23

It seems like the US response when questioned about whether Palestinians have a right to self-defense is ambivalent. And then I think Netanyahu actually said recently, that there may be a lot of pressure on us, but we still have the support of the

United States. What do you think this all says about the US complicity in what is happening in that area of the world, a the inability to call out one side but not the other.?

Stephen Zunes 52:02

This often goes beyond usual double standards and hypocrisy we see in U.S. foreign policy regarding how one treats an allied government versus how one treats an adversarial government that may be engaged in very similar practices. In Israel, we are talking about a country whose leadership is overwhelmingly white. And we are talking about the Palestinians, who are a people of color. While we shouldn't throw around the accusation of racism too,loosely, it is certainly a factor here. I think one reason that many Americans identify so closely with Israel, is that they are in many ways very similar to us in its contradictions. Israel was founded on some very progressive democratic principles in terms of being an electoral democracy, in terms of its social democratic economic policies, in establishing progressive social institutions like the kibbutzim, and its establishment of a homeland for a persecuted people, Similarly, the United States was settled in part by those fleeing religious persecution and founded on the ideals of the Enlightenment; we were one of the first democratic republics in the world, our Constitution and Declaration of Independence were very progressive for their time. However, the establishment of both nations involved the ethnic cleansing and oppression of much of the indigenous population. And a number of our founding fathers with these wonderful idealistic democratic views also owned slaves. Both nations have struggled with these contradictions. It is hard for many to reconcile Zionism as both a national liberation struggle of an oppressed people and a colonial settler enterprise, so there is a tendency to emphasize only one or the other.

As Americans, while it's fine to be proud of our democratic institutions and individual liberties, it must not be used to ignore racism at home and imperialism abroad. Similarly, Israel's political pluralism and relatively progressive treatment of women and the LGBTQ community must not be used as a cover for occupation and war crimes. So, I think it's important that we recognize these contradictions and call them out, not just in the case of Israel, but in our own society as well.

J.G Michael 55:07

Do you think that the sort of ice is breaking on all this in terms of debate in the U.S. towards the conflict? Do you think that's going to change in the future, because I feel like we may be hitting some type of critical mass, it seems like.

Stephen Zunes 55:38

There are some noticeable differences in how Americans perceived this latest round of fighting as compared with 2009 and 2014. While the mainstream media coverage left much to be desired, it was far more balanced than it has been previously.

Though still a minority, a lot more members of Congress spoke out against the excesses of Israel's military campaign and the refusal of the U.S. government to push earlier and stronger for a cease fire. Editorial opinion and punditry were on average more critical. There was no Congressional resolution with 90% support offering unconditional support for the Israeli offensive as there was in the other two conflicts. AIPAC didn't even try this time. J Street, which was largely silent during the previous conflicts, helped lead the way in pressuring the Biden administration to push for a cease fire and Jewish opposition to the war overall was far more prominent. I see this as largely a result of shifts in public attitudes, led by younger people, particularly younger Jews. The Black Lives Matter movement has mobilized people of color and their allies who see parallels between systemic racism in Israel and systemic racism in the United States.

Unfortunately, these shifts have not been reflected in the policies of the Biden administration and the majority of Congress, including a majority Congressional Democrat. However, let's remember how Congress and the White House were behind public opinion regarding Vietnam, Central America, the nuclear arms race, South Africa, Iraq, and Afghanistan, not to mention quite a number of domestic issues as well over the decades. So, yes, I do think we will, in the coming years, finally see some real change in US policy. The question is, how many people are going to suffer and die in the meantime? How long will the United States continue to be a party to the bloodshed and oppression?

Yes, the Biden administration finally came through in pushing for a cease fire midway through the second week of violence, and a number of Congressional Democrats, even among those who signed the letter calling for unconditional aid to Israel, made some forthright statements critical of certain Israeli policies. Frankly, though, this is almost comparable to those who offer thoughts and prayers to victims of gun violence while blocking the inaction of sensible gun laws. We're starting to see a little more finger wagging directed at Netanyahu than we have previously, but it really is not going to make a difference until there's actually action to back it up.

J.G Michael 57:59

Do you think there needs to be some type of international action taken or intervention? I don't mean like military intervention, but some kind of role of the international community can play in all of this? Or is it just that Israel has to make changes from within?

Stephen Zunes 58:20

Given the rightward drift in Israel, in large part due to demographics from the rightwing Orthodox having much larger families than secular progressives, I don't think Israel will change its policies on its own. Regarding international intervention, there have been proposals going back nearly 20 years to have unarmed UN Human Rights monitors in the Israeli-occupied territories, but the United States has vetoed and otherwise prevented this kind of thing from happening. And a large bipartisan majority of Congress in January 2017 actually passed a resolution in which they criticized Obama for not vetoing a very mild nonbinding resolution criticizing Israeli settlement expansion. (Kamala Harris was one of the co-sponsors of the resolution.) Among the things mentioned in the resolution was that the United Nations should have nothing to do with any effort to resolve the conflict despite being very much within the UN's purview. With such a broad consensus in Washington that the UN should butt out, there's not much the international community can do.

However, let's remember that for many years the United States, along with Britain and France, blocked the United Nations Security Council from imposing sanctions or taking any concrete action against South Africa's occupation of Namibia or its apartheid system, thereby giving the white minority regime little incentive to compromise. What happened, though, was that global civil society mobilized an international campaign of boycotts, divestment and sanctions targeting the South African regime and the governments and corporations that supported it. And eventually this did play an important role in forcing the Western nations which had opposed such efforts to finally impose targeted sanctions that forced the white minority regime to withdraw from Namibia, release Nelson Mandela, legalize the African National Congress, and engage in negotiations that led to majority rule. Though I have some reservations about certain aspects of the BDS movement targeting Israel (I haven't formally endorsed the call myself), I believe on balance that the campaign is good and important and underscores the role global civil society can play. If you looked at East Timor 25 years ago, it was seen as the ultimate lost cause—Indonesia was 200 times bigger in terms of population, they occupied the island, the rebels were down to a few hundred people with light weapons, any nonviolent civil resistance was brutally crushed, it seemed to be a classic triumph of realpolitik. Yet global civil society, particularly activists in the United States, Australia, Canada, and Britain–the main foreign backers of Indonesia– ended up effectively shaming their governments into ending their support for Indonesia and the occupation. When these countries finally began pressuring Jakarta to allow for an act of self-determination, the Indonesian government finally agreed to allow for a referendum on the fate of the territory, which led to an overwhelming majority voting for independence. So when you ask about the role of the international community, yes, they are real limits to what governments can do because of the United States' abuse of the veto power, as with Russian abuses of its veto power in regard to Syria. But I do believe there's a role for the international community in terms of global civil society. And I think that's really where the best hope lies for a just and peaceful resolution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict.###