Interview – Stephen Zunes

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Dr. Stephen Zunes is a Professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of San Francisco, where he served as founding director of the program in Middle Eastern Studies. Recognized as one the country's leading scholars of U.S. Middle East policy and of strategic nonviolent action, Professor Zunes has served as a senior policy analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus project of the Institute for Policy Studies, an associate editor of Peace Review, and a contributing editor of Tikkun. He is the author of hundreds of articles for scholarly and general readership on Middle Eastern politics, U.S. foreign policy, international terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, strategic nonviolent action, and human rights. He is the principal editor of *Nonviolent Social Movements* (Blackwell Publishers, 1999), the author of the highly acclaimed *Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism* (Common Courage Press, 2003) and co-author (with Jacob Mundy) of *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism and Conflict Irresolution* (Syracuse University Press, second revised expanded edition, 2022).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

There is an increasing awareness that the study of international relations must include much more than simply the nation-state and military power. For example, recent decades have witnessed unarmed civil resistance movements ousting a number of what had appeared to be firmly entrenched repressive autocratic regimes. We have also seen how global civil society movements have overcome realpolitik to force Western governments to put aside certain strategic and economic interests by pushing for the independence of Namibia and East Timor, helping to end apartheid in South Africa, addressing environmental issues, and encouraging democratization, even in the case of allied dictatorships. Meanwhile, both progressive movements and reactionary movements have become increasingly transnational. Both neoliberal globalization and what has been termed as "globalization from below" have also made state sovereignty less absolute. There is also much greater diversity in the International Relations field itself, both methodologically and in the gender, race, and ethnicity of scholars. There is a real paradigm shift going on. It's an exciting time to be in the field International Relations.

How has the way you understand the world shifted over time, and what (or who) prompted the most important shifts in your thinking?

Like most people, I have become more nuanced and less rigid ideologically as I have gotten older and learned more. As someone who came of age in the 1970s, I was very much swept up in the anti-imperialist movements of the day. Unlike many of my left-leaning colleagues, I never romanticized armed struggles or acted as an apologist for autocratic Marxist movements and regimes, but I did naively believe a progressive socialist global transformation would come sooner and easier than it has. Though still a socialist, I am more sceptical of an overbearing state role in the economy, and I am more open to market mechanisms as long as they encourage entrepreneurship and sustainable development from below, as opposed to exploitative corporate domination. I also realize that such changes take time.

My commitment to freedom, democracy, and the rule of law—always a foundational belief for me—has only strengthened. Whether capitalist or socialist, no system is going to work or meet a country's needs if the government is not accountable to its people. And I am also increasingly recognizing the centrality of addressing environmental issues, particularly climate change, in international relations which, among other things, requires demilitarization on a

global scale.

Earlier this year, you and Jacob Mundy published the second edition of *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism and Conflict Irresolution*. What is the current situation on the ground in Western Sahara, and how has it changed since publishing the first edition in 2010?

Morocco has consolidated its control through continuing to encourage Moroccans to settle in the occupied territories, which—like the Israeli settlements—is contrary to international law. Using the threat of allowing large numbers of African migrants to cross into the Spanish presidios or the narrow strait into Europe, Spain and other European countries have expressed growing support for Morocco's dubious "autonomy" plan, which would deny the Sahrawis the right to self-determination as mandated by the United Nations and International Court of Justice. The Moroccans continue to reject calls by the World Court and the United Nations for a referendum on the fate of the territory. The United States and France have blocked the UN from enforcing its mandate. This resulted in the Polisario Front, the nationalist movement for Western Sahara, to resume the armed struggle in 2020 after a 29-year cease fire, but it is doubtful this will change the situation much. Nonviolent resistance in the occupied territory has grown, but it has been brutally suppressed.

The Moroccans have been emboldened by the U.S. decision in late 2020 to formally recognize Western Sahara as part of Morocco, the only major country to do so. U.S. government maps, unlike other world maps, show no delineation between Morocco and the occupied Western Sahara. U.S. documents treat Western Sahara as just another region in Morocco. Having the support of the world's most powerful nation has made Morocco even less willing to compromise.

The human rights situation in the occupied Western Sahara is still terrible. Reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other groups have documented the horrific level of repression. Freedom House has listed Western Sahara, out of all 210 countries surveyed, as having the worst record regarding political rights of any country in the world save for Syria. Meanwhile, over 170,000 Sahrawi refugees remain in camps just over the Algerian border and a small number in the liberated areas of the country under the administration of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, the Polisario-led government of Western Sahara.

On the positive side, there is a growing civil society movement internationally in support of Sahrawi self-determination and, while still a largely forgotten conflict, it has been getting more attention in recent years, particularly in light of the double-standards in the West of opposing Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory while supporting or ignoring Morocco's illegal annexation. There is a burgeoning campaign for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) targeting Morocco, particularly their illegal exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources.

Why do you think the plight of the Saharawi people has failed to capture the attention of mainstream audiences?

Historically, mainstream media in the United States tends to highlight violations of human rights and international law when committed by governments Washington opposes while downplaying and ignoring those by governments Washington supports. There are many cases of this, such as East Timor during the first twenty years of the Indonesian occupation, which involved quite a number of parallels with Western Sahara and was even more repressive.

If more Americans knew about the U.S. support for Morocco's illegal annexation of Western Sahara, for example, the Biden administration's denunciation of Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory as illegal and contravening international law would look incredibly hypocritical and weaken the Western case against Russian aggression. It would feed the Russian narrative that U.S. opposition to their illegal irredentism was based on geopolitics, not principle, and the mainstream media certainly would not want that.

Another factor is that the Sahrawi movement has been largely nonviolent, is secular, has women in leadership, and has a relatively democratic structure, which does not fit into the dominant paradigm of how Americans see popular

struggles by Arab Muslim peoples. The United States has justified its support for Arab dictatorships and the occupation of Arab lands on the grounds that either Arab peoples didn't really want democracy or that the failure to support repressive governments would lead to a takeover by Islamist extremists. The Western Sahara struggle counters that rationalization.

How has Morocco's internal political situation influenced the occupation?

Though Western Sahara has some of the world's richest phosphate deposits and fishing grounds, the primary motivation for the 1975 conquest was political, not economic. There had been two nearly successful coup attempts against King Hassan in the early 1970s and there was fear he would suffer the same fate as the kings of Egypt, Iraq, and Libya in being ousted by left-leaning nationalist military officers. The king was seen by many Moroccans as something of a neo-colonial Francophile and he needed something to shore up his nationalist credentials. Invading Western Sahara enabled the nation to focus on a national cause, as well as keep the army as far away from Rabat as possible. It largely worked. Every major Moroccan political party from the conservative nationalist Istiqlal to the Socialists and Communists supported the invasion. Despite growing dissatisfaction with the government and chronic corruption, economic injustice, and political repression, there remains a fairly high level of consensus in support of the occupation to this day. There is some small but growing dissent from the student left, from certain moderate Islamist tendencies, and other dissident groups who are challenging the official narrative, but it has been suppressed. Indeed, questioning the "national unity" of the country can get you thrown in jail or worse.

Today, top military officers and other powerful interests are enriching themselves from Western Sahara's natural resources, making them even more reluctant to give up the occupied territory. For decades, the Moroccan government has pushed the line that the vast majority of Sahrawis welcomed their "liberation" by Morocco and that those who want independence are a tiny group of paid Algerian agents, so it was worth spending billions of dollars for development projects and repression and sacrificing thousands of Moroccan lives in the conquest and occupation. Given that a free and fair referendum in Western Sahara would almost certainly result in support of independence, the popular backlash at having been deceived all these years would be very serious, making the idea of allowing for an act of self-determination all the more untenable for the Moroccan regime.

In 2021, Donald Trump shattered legal precedent by formally recognising Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara; the Biden administration is yet to reverse that decision. What is the rationale here? Does it provide evidence of *realpolitik* driving American foreign policy?

Morocco's claim on Western Sahara is rejected by the United Nations, the World Court, the African Union and a broad consensus of international legal scholars that recognize the region as a non-self-governing territory that must be allowed an act of self-determination. This is why there was such a negative reaction at Trump's December 2020 announcement making the United States the first major country to formally recognize Morocco's illegal takeover. It was apparently a quid pro quo for Morocco formally recognizing Israel. Perhaps Biden's refusal to reverse this policy is in part related to the fear that Morocco would then renounce its recognition and thereby cause him to be attacked for undermining the so-called Abraham Accords and hurting Israel.

As president, Trump showed little regard for international law overall. He had previously recognized Israel's illegal annexation of Syria's Golan Heights and recognized Israel's illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank as part of Israel, also unprecedented in the international community. Of course, Biden's failure to rescind those recognition either and his support as a senator for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq underscores how he has not been a consistent supporter of international law either, even as he has taken leadership in challenging Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Is the recognition of Morocco's occupation damaging to the rules-based international order that has emerged during the post-Cold War era?

The Biden administration's policies go well beyond the fate of the half million Sahrawis living in exile or under repressive military rule. Biden's failure to rescind Trump's recognition of the Moroccan conquest will not only prolong the bitter conflict in Western Sahara but will also contribute to undermining the liberal international order in place

since the end of World War II.

The United States, France, Spain, and some other countries have endorsed Morocco's so-called "autonomy" plan for Western Sahara which is quite limited in scope and fails to meet the international standard for autonomy. It does not allow the Sahrawis the option of independence, to which—according to international law, a series of UN resolutions, and a landmark World Court ruling—they are entitled as an UN-recognized non-self-governing territory. If the Sahrawis, in a free and fair internationally supervised referendum, opted for this autonomy proposal over independence, that would be legitimate, but they have to have independence as a choice, which Morocco refuses to consider. If the Moroccan plan is imposed upon the people of Western Sahara by the UN Security Council, as some Western nations are advocating, it would constitute the first time since the signing of the UN Charter that the international community recognized an incomplete decolonization and the expansion of a country's territory by force. As a result, the stakes are not simply about the future of one small country, but the question as to which principle will prevail in the 21st century: the right of self-determination, or the right of conquest?

Can you see a path to self-determination for Western Sahara, and if so, what does it involve?

The chances of such a mutually satisfying diplomatic settlement are slim. For years, French and U.S. veto threats in the UN Security Council have stymied efforts to place the issue of Western Sahara under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, which would thereby give the international community the power to impose sanctions or other appropriate leverage on Morocco to force the country to abide by the U.N. mandates it has to date disregarded. Instead, Western nations are pushing a "peace process" where the occupying power has categorically ruled out an act of self-determination while these same governments refuse to support any means of pressuring the Moroccans to do so.

Nor is there much hope that the armed struggle, which the Polisario resumed in 2020, will make much of a difference. With the separation wall cutting them off from 80% of the territory and new drone technology making desert warfare even more challenging, Morocco—which has nearly eighty times the population of Western Sahara—has an insurmountable advantage. For years, Sahrawis have engaged in an impressive nonviolent resistance campaign against occupation authorities, even in the face of brutal repression. While civil resistance movements in a number of countries have proved remarkably effective in ousting even the most autocratic of regimes, Moroccan settlers now outnumber indigenous Sahrawis in Western Sahara by a more than 3:1 margin, thereby making this scenario extremely unlikely as well.

As with Western support for Morocco, it was similar Western support for Indonesia that for many years blocked independence for East Timor. Indonesia's 1975 invasion of the former Portuguese colony took place only six weeks after Morocco's seizure of the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara. Like Western Sahara, the takeover was seen as particular egregious since it involved the invasion and brutal annexation of an entire country—the kind of aggression that prompted the 1991 UN-sanctioned Gulf War in response to Iraq's seizure of Kuwait. However, the UN resolution condemning Indonesia's aggression, like those opposing Morocco's takeover, did not include any enforcement mechanisms. As a result, human rights organizations, church groups, and a wide array of activists in the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Australia mobilized to pressure their governments to end their support for the occupation. This transnational campaign was eventually successful, and the Indonesian government was finally forced to offer a referendum on independence. In 2000, the East Timorese voted for self-determination and the country is now free. It may take similar grassroots campaigns in Europe and North America to ensure that Western powers live up to their international legal obligations and pressure Morocco to allow the people of Western Sahara the right to determine their own destiny.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

The first thing would be to recognize that, despite its obvious limitations, international law still matters. It must be defended. Just as democratic governance in itself cannot guarantee justice yet makes possible the political space through which people can struggle for a more just system, international law provides a framework to advance peace and justice. If the international community cannot enforce such bedrock principles as the inadmissibility of a country

expanding its territory by force or the right of colonized peoples for self-determination, how can we tackle more complex issues?

Secondly, while it is important to refrain from embracing rigid ideological positions, it is still critical to defend basic values, including political freedom and the rule of law, as well as social, racial, economic, and environmental justice. Scholars of International Relations have much to contribute to this understanding. Thirdly, encourage the growing diversity within our scholarly community, not just because it is an important principle, but because it allows for the inclusion of important perspectives we would otherwise miss out on.

Finally, recognize that while the state is obviously still an important actor, the driving force for change has increasingly become global civil society. New communications technologies, the increasing awareness of the power of civil resistance, and the growing urgency of addressing climate change and countering the authoritarian resurgence underscores the importance of developing a greater understanding of how such transformations are possible.