



Is the American Empire Facing Decline?

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Sharon Nadeem (SN): Hello everyone, welcome to day three. We don't have a lot of time on this very small topic, so I'll get started pretty quickly. I'll start with setting up the stage a little bit. We currently live in a world where the rules-based order has collapsed since World War II that we set up then. First responders are getting killed. There's extrajudicial killings for fishermen in boats. You both have argued in your own ways how this international legal system has collapsed. But Chris, I'll start with you. You've reported in El Salvador, in Latin America, you were Balkan Bureau Chief, you've covered the Bosnian genocide, you've recorded in Gaza – so I kind of want to know from your perspective what makes now different from what you saw back then. You've seen firsthand violations of international law. And what does this say about these new rules of 21st century warfare?

Chris Hedges (CH): Well, the adherence to international law in particular by the United States was often more a utopian dream than a reality. But I think the genocide in Gaza has obliterated any pretense of international law because it's such an egregious violation. Genocide is the crime of crimes. It's not only that countries like the United State have blocked UN resolutions, centering Israel and calling for an end to the genocide, but they have pumped billions of dollars of weaponry, I think 21 billion, 21.7 or something, billion dollars of weapons to sustain the genocide because Israel's stockpiles, of course, ran out very early within the genocide. And that has kind of ripped the mask off of not just US imperialism, but the bankruptcy of the rule of international law, humanitarian law, and the global order. And that, I think, sent a very powerful message, in particular to the Global South. The genocide itself is a message with the breakdown of the climate, and that message is "we will stop at nothing". What we have telegraphed – and I speak as an American to the rest of the world, and of course Israel is part of this project – is that we have everything, and if you try and get away from us, we will kill you.

Aaron Maté (AM): If I could pick up on that, on the Gaza piece, and then you have, as this genocide is going on, the UN formalizes essentially handing control of Gaza to Donald Trump under the so-called Board of Peace, which is this new institution that came out of nowhere with Trump branding. And if you read the text of the UN resolution that was passed late last year, it basically says that Donald Trump now controls Gaza under his so-called

Board of Peace. And what is the Board of Peace? It's an obvious attempt by Trump and his billionaire friends to basically subvert the UN and make it even more irrelevant. You can join by paying a billion dollars, I guess to an account controlled by Trump. And decades of UN resolutions affirming the global consensus on the most damaging issue in the world arguably, which is the Israel-Palestine issue, was just thrown away.

For years – and Norman Finkelstein often makes this point – whenever there was a UN resolution on the issue of Palestine and Israel, you have a long preamble where they reaffirm all these UN resolutions, UN242, which says Israel has to withdraw from the occupied territories, affirming the rights of Palestinians to have a state of their own every year at the UN. There's a vote on that. The whole world votes in favor except for the US and Israel. All that is now forgotten. And now we have this thing called the Board of Peace, and we all just have to accept that. But amazingly, this is not done just with the US asserting unilateral control. The UN consented to this. Russia and China didn't veto this. The Gulf states were okay with this. So we have a certain willingness now to go along with an erosion of the international order and not just from the usual actor of the US, but also with other people at the center.

CH: That's a very important point, just as a caveat, what they want to create is a kind of Peter Thiel dystopian charter city – this is clearly what the Board of Peace is about – the Gaza Riviera. Those Palestinians who are willing to clean the rooms perhaps can stay in little bantu stands or shanty towns and the rest will be driven out. So yeah, but Aaron makes a very, very important point, because that was, for those of us who follow it, that UN embrace, which was a complete violation of international law, which negated Palestinian sovereignty and not to mention the right of return or anything, and gave Israel absolute veto power over whether anything would be implemented – yeah, it was really in that kind of trajectory downward, it was very important.

SN: I'm glad you brought that up because the Board of Peace – and we've talked about this – is a subversion of the international legal system, but Aaron, you've also done some reporting on OPCW, which is governing use of chemical weapons and its use in Syria. Tell us more about that. What do you do when mechanisms are weaponized? And what does accountability and justice look like when you subvert it through these mechanisms?

AM: It's a long story. I'll try to summarize it very quickly. The OPCW, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, established in the late 90s, it's designed to stop the use of chemical weapons and contain the legal use of chemicals everywhere. It's really a great institution, it's done some great work. But in recent years, it's been instrumentalized for, I think, very cynical purposes. In April 2018, Trump bombed Syria, claiming the Syrian government committed a chemical attack. And about a year later, the OPCW, the world's top chemical weapons watchdog, after sending in a team to investigate, they released a report that basically aligned with Trump's claims that Syria, then ruled by Bashar al-Assad, was guilty of a chemical attack. But then we got a series of leaks coming from inside the OPCW, which showed that the team that actually went to Syria for this investigation, did not reach the

conclusion that was publicly stated. And they came to a conclusion that actually pointed to a false flag by insurgents fighting to overthrow the Syrian government, which made sense because the US had laid down the so-called red line, which said that the only way we'll intervene in Syria militarily is if the government uses chemical weapons, which then incentivized those trying to overthrow their government to stage an incident. And that's what these findings that were leaked showed.

And there was an attempt for accountability. The founding director general of the OPCW, the first chief of the whole organization, a man named José Bustani – a wonderful Brazilian diplomat who actually stood up to the Iraq War when he was in office and for that he got thrown out by the Bush administration who also threatened his children – he came back and tried to speak out in defense of the dissenting inspectors on the Syria team. And he was even prevented from speaking at the United Nations. So there was a huge effort to silence this because, in my opinion, this is what I've tried to show in the articles I've done on this, the OPCW, a very noble institution, was compromised for a US-led regime change campaign. It's a long story. And recently, one of the dissenting inspectors, a guy named Brendan Whelan, who's from Ireland, won a case at an international tribunal being awarded damages and a sort of apology. But meanwhile, the problem I had as a reporter is that a lot of the media wouldn't report the story because it was just too touchy. And some pro-war narratives, you just can't challenge them. And this was one of those cases.

SN: Thanks for explaining that. We've talked a lot about violations of international law in the Global South, but you're from Vancouver, you live in the United States now. Chris, you also live in these States. When this happens in the Global South, how does this play back at home? How does it play out for the citizens here and when violations are done by their own countries in the Global South?

CH: How does it play out here?

SN: Yeah.

CH: Well, we've been deaf, dumb, and blind to the suffering of the Global South for generations. The Global South has suffered holocausts of their own, but these are minimized if even acknowledged, not even usually acknowledged by the cellar colonial regimes that carried them out. Whether that's in India, three million Indians died during the British engineered famine of 1943 when they took all the grain supplies for the British Army, Namibia, the genocide against the Herero and the Nama – all of that has been marginalized for the elevation of the Holocaust carried out by the Nazis and this kind of false notion, which is perpetuated by the Zionists, that unique suffering confers unique entitlement.

And I think that one of the things we've seen with the genocide is the implosion of that narrative, which within the Global South there's always been an understanding of that. Pankaj Mishra, a writer I like very much, wrote a very good book called *The World After Gaza*, and talks precisely about that shift within the Global South. I think that understanding within the

Global South has always been there. But I don't think in the Global North or in countries like the United States even yet that understanding of reality and of our complicity in carrying out our own genocides has been acknowledged. And part of that is, of course, the myth of American virtue and exceptionalism and all of which I think under Trump is being eviscerated, of course. But it was never there ultimately to begin with.

AM: And look what happens in the case of the Gaza genocide when there is some minimal awareness spreading around the general public about what's happening. We face unprecedented censorship. Look what happened to TikTok when young people were sharing and seeing images of all the civilians killed with US-made weapons and Western-made weapons in Gaza. They essentially, the US Congress, on a bipartisan basis, they got together, they all agreed this is unacceptable. And they openly admitted this. There's like a fireside chat between Tony Blinken and Mitt Romney, a Republican Senator, where they say "this was intolerable to have young people sharing and seeing images of the carnage in Gaza, because it creates a distorted picture", by which they mean people can see for themselves what their tax dollars are paying for. So they forced the sale of TikTok into new hands, Zionist billionaires, who now have changed the algorithm to make sure that Palestine voices are suppressed.

And there's so many examples of this. I mean, look at the UK, where even saying out loud, "I support Palestine Action", which is a pro-Palestine group, can land you in prison. People have been arrested for that. So when there is even some minimal awareness of what we're doing in the Global South, what happens in the Global North is that our means to see, to witness the horrors, are taken away from us.

SN: I'm glad you brought up TikTok. We're at a tech summit. So I kind of want both of you to address the role of tech that assists in governments violating international law.

CH: Well, tech is a full partner in the emerging dystopian, totalitarian surveillance state. AI algorithms choose the targets in places like Gaza. In fact, it pumps so many targets out that the Israeli military can hardly keep up. There's no human intervention. So, you know, we are rapidly replicating in our own way China's totalitarian capitalism. And within companies like Meta, they hire from the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, the NSA, and Israel. And people like Peter Thiel are quite open about this. These are tools that are being used to create a kind of Big Brother society that is unlike anything envisaged in the past. And I covered the Stasi state in East Germany. I mean, these are tools that the Stasis couldn't even dream of. And that's where we're headed. And the tech companies are not only fully on board, but fully integrated in this process of shutting down our open society.

AM: If AI didn't exist, it's quite possible that those 150 school children, teachers, parents in Minab, Iran would still be alive because from all the available evidence, it was AI that selected that target, a girls' school that was built outside of a former Iranian military base and the information hadn't been updated, so all these people were killed not just in a one strike, but a double tap strike where they were hit after sheltering inside the school after the first strike. And another reason for that was the Pentagon under Pete Hegseth essentially

disbanded a board or a greater oversight of targeting to protect civilians. So that was a combination of human malice and also AI. But I think it's worth asking, would these people still be alive if not for the technology that was used?

SN: So we've talked a lot at this conference about AI governance and regulatory framework. There's a lot of debate around that. But how do we have international law that accounts or can govern AI this way for these kinds of tools that you're talking about? And conversely, how can AI governance also take into account the values of international humanitarian law?

CH: Well, technology is neutral. It depends whose hands it's in. And if it's the hands of Peter Thiel, it doesn't really matter what international governance or international law stipulates. So it's who has control of the tools. And as long as the Silicon Valley billionaires, who are all about making money, of course, and their capacity to obliterate or ignore the suffering of others is well-documented, we're in really big trouble. So the question is, who holds the keys? Who has the tools? And right now, the people who have the tools are not in any way supportive of maintaining the United States, let's say, what's left of our very anemic democracy, in fact, would like to see it completely destroyed, which the Trump administration is completely on board with. I mean, Trump himself is an idiot and they give him a sharp A and he doesn't know what he's doing, but the people around him do know what they're doing, the Project 2025 people, and they come out of this really open disdain for democratic rights and for open society. They were quite frank about it, they want it destroyed and they control and have power over the tools that can see that goal met.

AM: It's just shocking how little democratic debate there's been over this issue of AI that will define everyone's life for the rest of it. It's just, we're all just supposed to just accept what our tech overlords tell us and we have no say in the matter. It's all these data centers that suck up water and energy and raise prices, okay, we're all supposed to accept that in the name of progress. And of course, yeah, as Chris said, I mean, technology is neutral. These could be used for good and to advance humanity rather than to subvert it or end it. It's just a question of political will.

SN: So in terms of the system, we have international law, but we don't have enough powerful state actors. We can't hold them to it. So when we're talking about what we do from here, is it about reforming the system? Or do we break down this entire system completely, set up a new one? Where do you guys see this going?

AM: I like to believe in the idea of the United Nations, even though it's been rendered completely obsolete. But if it was allowed to do its job, if the US didn't veto every single resolution that undermines Israeli aggression, for example, I think the UN could do a good job. I like to believe in the idea that we don't need to start from scratch. But as Chris said, the Gaza genocide has exposed the whole system to be a complete joke. And there are signs of hope. I take great hope in the fact that there was an arrest warrant issued for Benjamin Netanyahu. I never thought I would see that. That shows some pockets of integrity still exist.

Although of course, the indictment I think doesn't go far enough. But there is a possibility there. Again, it all comes down to political will.

CH: I think the system's not reformable. I think that we have – and this is a long, decades-long process, and a bipartisan process – where we have been, I speak as the demos, have been completely stripped of power. Parties like the Democratic Party do not function as real political parties. Remember, there was no challenge to Biden, you had, you know, severe cognitive decline in the primaries. And then they anointed without a vote from the Democratic party base, Kamala Harris, who spent I think a billion and a half dollars on this issue list, vapid celebrity filled genocide supporting campaign and lost, lost every battleground state. And so I think that we have to recover the power, the one power we have, which is popular militant organizations that have the capacity to shut the system down. You've seen examples of that with the protests in Minneapolis against ICE. You saw it with the student encampments. I think you can tell what's effective by seeing how the state responds. So now they are criminalizing anyone who uses a camera or phone to document abuses by ICE. They have turned universities in the United States into academic gulags and I teach at these places, where free speech does not exist, certainly on the issue of Palestine. They have consolidated even further the control of the media. We see it with CBS, but not just CBS. I mean Larry Ellison and others are gunning to take over CNN.

So we have to begin to push back. Politics is a game of fear. And the most important weapon we have is the strike. But you can't have flash mobs where you go down to the mall in Washington and wear pussy hats or whatever. They don't care about that. You can tell what they care about. We have to begin to disrupt the system. Maybe we won't win, but at least we might be able to slow the trajectory. But that comes from mass mobilization. Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States* is a very important book because it explains that America, in particular, was never created as a democratic open system. It was to protect the white male slave-holding class. Women didn't have the right to vote. Senators were appointed. People without property, even if they were white, were disenfranchised. And then not to mention the genocide against Native Americans and the slavery of African Americans.

So every opening we had came from those movements, whether that was the abolitionists, the labor movement, we had the bloodiest labor wars in the industrialized world, hundreds of American workers were killed, the civil rights movement, the socialists, the communists – all of which were crushed, Eugene V. Debs, and the Wobblies. So that's where we have to go back to our roots. We have to go back to that radicalism in the same way Canada has to go to Tommy Douglas and its own radicalism. That's the only thing that will protect us. And you can see by the reaction – I mean the capitalist class has not changed – that those organizing efforts will be met with the same kind of ferocity and the same kind of violence that they were met with in the past. But if we're going to save ourselves – as Emma Goldman said, if voting was that effective, it would be illegal. Without movements, it's useless.

SN: I'd like to turn to the question of journalism. All three of us are journalists, so I want to get thoughts from you on what do you see as the role of journalism, particularly independent

journalism, what three of have made our footing in, in the kind of the fight that you're talking about and these movements and this world that we see now.

AM: Well, independent media I think is the only space left in journalism where you can tell the truth and be uncompromising about it. In my limited experience with more established institutions, if I want to say something factual, I have to either not say it, because sometimes you just have to print certain things, or you have to water it down, qualify it, cater to counter narratives that are just false and basically justify the act of telling the truth. And so the good thing about independent media is that you can be uncompromising and people actually reward you for having integrity. The problem with independent media is it's become so siloed. Because people have lost trust in establishment institutions across the Global North, actually a lot more people are turning to independent media which is a good thing, but also it means everything is siloed. People have all different sorts of information. There's no more central place where everyone can go and can count on.

And on the one hand, I'm encouraged by that because it means that the institutions that I think have lied us into so many wars and manufactured consent for so many horrible things have lost their footing. But at the same time, there is something dangerous about everything being so siloed. And now, you know, in the independent media space, I find there's a certain level of cutthroat competition even between people who are supposed to be allies, which is what happens when you live under a capitalist system.

CH: Well, the deficit in the media is – I think Iran, this debacle that Trump has begun in Iran, that's a good example of the deficit. So as a journalist, our job is to make judgments – I mean, for instance, the war on Yugoslavia – to make judgments about what's happening around us and begin or use as the foundation of our reporting that our understanding. So, it was exceptional, I don't usually get this number of views, but last month we had 11 million views just on my YouTube channel, which everything's on Substack, whatever. And it was all because, like for instance, why are we losing the war with Iran? It was journalism 101. It was the most basic question.

But in order to ask that question, you have to make a judgment that we're losing the war. And that's something that the mainstream media was just not going to do. And that's why, as Aaron said, it's not because I'm particularly good on TV, I'm not, but it's because of the deficit. Because we've lost that ability of – and that's why we're paid as journalists. I covered the Middle East for seven years, I speak Arabic. I'm paid to make those kinds of judgments – not in the name of ideology, but in the name of truth. And that's gone. So that deficit has created a huge vacuum that alternative media is able to fill.

But Aaron is also right. There is a corruption within alternative media, which I really try not to do, in catering to sound bites. I mean, I did an interview, I won't say with who, and somebody asked me a question about The New York Times colonist Ezra Klein. And I said something, not particularly incendiary. And next thing you know, it's pumped out: "Chris Hedges destroys Ezra Klein". And I didn't, first of all. It was just clickbait. And so the

alternative media was in the search of views. I have just pounded shows on the genocide since October 7th, but I'm completely demonetized. I did an interview with Roger Waters, who founded Pink Floyd – the algorithm even before Roger could open his mouth, it was demonetized. And of course, they're trying to incentivize you. Yeah, you wanna make money on YouTube? It doesn't work because I'm not an entrepreneur, I'm a journalist. But I think Aaron's right, within the alternative media, there also can be the corruption of capitalism, of soundbites, of boosting your profile, not in the name of integrity or in the name of journalism, but in the name of money. And we're not immune to that.

SN: Well, that ends our time here. Thank you so much Chris and Aaron for speaking with us and your insights. Thank You, Sharon.

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