

# **Trump will no longer let international law get in his way**

written by Prof. Zaki Shalom | 09.09.2025

On September 2, the US Navy carried out an airstrike on a motorboat sailing from Venezuela, claiming that it was carrying drugs. Eleven people were killed in the strike. According to reports, the strike was conducted in international waters. As far as is known, such an attack by US forces on a maritime vessel and the killing of its crew without trial is unprecedented.

President Donald Trump clarified that the strike was carried out on his order and that it was a “kinetic strike” against a drug boat that was intended to deliver drugs to the United States. This, he stressed, is a warning against those who seek to smuggle drugs into the US. He ended his statement with a clear warning: “BEWARE!”

Secretary of State Marco Rubio made it clear that Washington intends to act offensively against drug cartels seeking to smuggle drugs into the United States, wherever they may be found. They will no longer have the immunity they enjoyed in the past. America will no longer stand idly by and watch them sail in the Caribbean as if on a pleasure cruise.

In the past, Rubio said, the US followed a more restrained policy of tracking drug boats and arresting traffickers. It turns out that this did not solve the problem. It simply did not deter them.

## **The use of American military power**

The harshest response to the event came from Vice President JD Vance. Facing an interviewer who suggested that striking civilians on a boat in international waters might be considered a “war crime,” Vance, a graduate of Yale Law School, made clear that he “doesn’t give a s\*\*\* what you call it.” Killing cartel members who are poisoning our citizens, he said, “is the most important use of our military power.”

White House spokesperson Anna Kelly claimed that the attack was directed against a “terrorist organization” and was intended to defend the vital interests of the United States. The operation, she said, complies with all standards of international law.

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro condemned the attack, calling it “criminal and immoral.” If Venezuela were attacked, he said, “it would declare a state of armed confrontation.” He did not explain the meaning of the threat.

In practice, however, the American strike did not provoke significant criticism on

the international stage. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said that this was a typical American response toward countries that seek to pursue an independent policy.

Two senators, Democrats Mark Kelly and Chris Coons, expressed reservations about the decision-making process on such a sensitive issue. In their view, there should have been consultation with Congress before the strike. Republican Sen. Rand Paul said the strike constitutes a dangerous precedent of killing without trial. Such actions must not be normalized, he argued.

## **Tension with international law**

Legal experts specializing in international law, including Prof. Ryan Goodman, argued that attacking civilians sailing on a boat in the high seas cannot make them a legitimate target for extrajudicial killing. Defining the target as a “terrorist organization” allows the president to impose sanctions on it, but it does not turn its members into “combatants” who may be “lawfully” killed without trial.

There is no doubt that the US strike went far beyond the war on drugs. It was intended to undermine the regime of President Maduro in Venezuela, which demonstrates a strongly hostile attitude toward the United States and maintains close ties with Russia, China, and Iran.

The strike also sends a message to President Lula da Silva in Brazil, who shows an unfriendly stance toward Trump’s administration. It advises him to restrain his positions against it. The Trump administration is not stopping there. It is bolstering the American naval presence in the Caribbean and South America to demonstrate that its intentions are serious.

In pursuing its strategic goals, the Trump administration is making it clear to the international system that the principles of international law will no longer constitute an obstacle on the path to achieving its objectives. It is prepared to grind them down to the bone. For the State of Israel, which is repeatedly accused of violating international law, Trump’s policy constitutes a strategic asset of inestimable value.

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