



What international law says about Trump's threats to bomb Iran's bridges and power plants

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For perspective on President Trump's talk about bombing Iran's bridges and power plants and whether that's legal under international law, Amna Nawaz spoke with retired Lieutenant Colonel Rachel VanLandingham. She spent 20 years in the Air Force and is now a professor at Southwestern Law School.

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Amna Nawaz:

For perspective now on President Trump's talk about bombing all of Iran's bridges and power plants and whether that's legal under international law, we turn to retired Lieutenant Colonel Rachel VanLandingham. She spent 20 years in the Air Force and is now a professor at Southwestern Law School.

Welcome back to the show.

You heard in our reporting there the repeated threats by President Trump to bomb Iranian infrastructure. He said specifically there's a plan to decimate every bridge in Iran, to destroy every power plant. You have heard the concerns, Colonel, about this potentially being a war crime.

Based on your expertise, is it?

Lt. Col. Rachel VanLandingham (ret.):

He's both threatening a war crime and he's engaging in a war crime through that rhetoric itself. And I will explain that.

First of all, the law of war, that's not just international law. It's U.S. law. And our military members are deeply trained and steeped in this law. The law of war prohibits measures of intimidation against a civilian population, including threats of violence whose primary purpose is to sow terror amongst that civilian population.

Those civilians whose electricity ensures that there's refrigeration for their medicine for those that are dependent on refrigerated medicine, that provides electricity to hospitals, where there are lifesaving operations ongoing, where babies are being born, whose electricity is helping ensure that the water is purified and clean, they are terrified.

It's reasonably foreseeable to believe that such rhetoric will sow terror amongst the civilian population, and, therefore, one can infer that that's what President Trump intends. So he's committing a war crime just through that language.

Second of all, he's threatening to make our military engage in war crimes and therefore stain their honor and their soul and come back with moral injury. Why? Because threatening to destroy every bridge and every single power plant in the entire state of Iran is called an indiscriminate attack. That is a war crime.

Why? Because the law of war says we don't engage in total war for anymore. We don't believe that children are the enemy and that civilians are the enemy. The law of war says, look, we're going to divide the battlefield, which in modern days is often a city like Tehran, into civilian objects, and they're protected, and civilian people, they're protected.

And then there's military targets, lawful military objectives that make an effective contribution to military action and whose destruction provides a definite military advantage. We divide the world into those two camps. By saying we're just going to bomb everything, bomb every single bridge, every single power plant that serves civilians, that is threatening indiscriminate attack.

And it is one of the most horrible war crimes there are because it brings us back, straight back down the slippery slope to total warfare.

Amna Nawaz:

Well, Colonel, let me ask you, if I may, if the military and their lawyers can argue that, yes, the power plants provide electricity to civilians and they use these bridges, but that the regime also gets electricity from these power plants, that these same bridges are used by members of the Iranian military forces, does that justify making them targets?

Lt. Col. Rachel VanLandingham (ret.):

You have to make an individual case-by-case analysis of each bridge and every power plant that is being considered to be a lawful military objective, because, first of all, just saying, by its use or intended use, has to make an effective contribution to military action, not the regime in general, but to military action.

Second -- and so a bridge, therefore, like the bridge that was destroyed last week, a bridge could make an effective contribution to military action because of the fact that they are used to provide electricity to civilians.

Their destruction would be a war crime. Further to say, OK, and this destruction would be a war crime.

And, of course, by threatening to destroy these power plants, we are threatening to cut off electricity to civilians.

This is why the United States is committed to preventing war crimes of indiscriminate attacks. In Ukraine, Ukrainians were plunged into life-threatening cold without the definite military advantage.

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Amna Nawaz:

So, Colonel...

(crosstalk)

Lt. Col. Rachel VanLandingham (ret.):

So, the next step that you -- go ahead.

Amna Nawaz:

If I may, let me just ask you this then. At this point in time -- we have a minute or so left -- what would your advice be to U.S. military commanders if they receive these kinds of orders? What's your message to them?

Lt. Col. Rachel VanLandingham (ret.):

Follow your oath to the Constitution and to the law. Follow, trust your training. Ensure that there's discrete analysis done on every single power plant that's on a targeting list, on every single bridge to ensure that, not only it's a lawful military objective, but that proportionality, that the harm to civilians, right, is not excessive compared to the direct and concrete military advantage to be gained.

And that means that most of these indeed will not pass that test. And that's what our military professionals are trained on. And I really hope they go back to that training and that they're taking these threats of war crimes given by the commander in chief and filtering them through their own training and their own conscience and their own legal obligation to follow the law of war.

Because these are war crimes that they don't follow those steps. And those war crimes do not have a statute of limitations. And many of our -- and it has universal jurisdiction. And so many of our allies could -- if you want to travel to Europe, ensure you don't get engaged in a war crime.

Amna Nawaz:

That is retired Lieut

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Lt. Col. Rachel Van

Thank you.

By — Amna Nawaz

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As the deputy senior producer for foreign affairs and defense at the PBS NewsHour, Dan plays a key role in helping oversee and produce the program's foreign affairs and defense stories. His pieces have broken new ground on an array of military issues, exposing debates simmering outside the public eye.

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