

Lisa Bhungalia, *Elastic Empire: Refashioning War through Aid in Palestine*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9781503634527 (cloth); ISBN: 9781503637511 (paper); ISBN: 9781503637528 (ebook)

The last century has seen warfare take every imaginable shape in Palestine—from the archetypal sort of colonial violence that defined the British empire to the high-tech modalities of surveillance and drone war that embody the never-ending “War on Terror”. Lisa Bhungalia’s first book, *Elastic Empire: Refashioning War through Aid in Palestine*, brings to the fore a hidden and covert mechanism of settler-colonial warfare in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. Bhungalia, a political geographer at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, delivers a detailed analysis of how humanitarian aid has been entangled with counterterrorism law to fashion a new tactic of war that encapsulates the functioning of “late modern empire”. Proceeding over five chapters with an introduction and conclusion, Bhungalia’s study traces the development of counterterrorism law before the Global War on Terror, the way that law appears in Palestine through topological arrangements of empire, the work of global “terrorism lists” on racialized bodies and landscapes, the effects of the Trump presidency on aid in Palestine, and the “asphyxiatory violence” delivered in Palestine through the enmeshed nature of aid and counterterrorism law. Throughout the monograph, Bhungalia illustrates how Palestine became the laboratory in which war through aid has been developed between the contours of late modern empire.

Bhungalia arrived in Palestine not to study the entanglement of counterterrorism and aid, but rather was interested in humanitarianism and protracted human displacement (p.48). Upon arrival, though, Bhungalia found that everything for her interlocutors revolved around “the paper”—a US-issued anti-terrorism certification (ATC) that all aid recipients must sign. The ATC, an invention of the US that appears on the ground in Palestine, serves as a prime example of Bhungalia’s theorization of elasticity; the way that empire’s borders move, extend, and collapse outward while simultaneously moving inward domestically to target racialized bodies (p.14). Elasticity describes how techniques of empire, such as counterterrorism law, work both externally across the globe and inwardly domestically to shape intimate relations of power. The

theorization of elasticity is Bhungalia's key conceptual intervention, expanding (though not explicitly) Hardt and Negri's (2000) notion of deterritorialized empire and illustrating it with the concrete case of US counterterrorism law across space. That space, for Bhungalia, is best understood as a "topological formulation" where "sovereign power attaches to bodies differentially, blending insides and outsides" (p.15).

The methodology behind *Elastic Empire* is mixed and extensive. Over the course of more than a decade (2009-2021), Bhungalia conducted research in Palestine, Amman (UNRWA headquarters), and Washington, DC. Bhungalia completed over 150 semi-structured interviews within the "transnational aid network", comprised of USAID officials, UN officials, US and international NGOs, Palestinian Authority officials, Palestinian NGOs, community-based organizers, Palestinian scholars, and grassroots organizations. Further, Bhungalia analyzed primary source texts including legal and policy materials from the US state and treasury departments, texts from negotiations between Israel and Palestinian leadership, and statements in English and Arabic from Palestinian human rights groups (p.21-23). Bhungalia argues that *Elastic Empire*'s findings join a "growing body of critical work on the role of foreign aid within evolving techniques of late modern settler-colonial rule through fine-grained attention to how counterterrorism has come to govern humanitarianism" (p.24).

Chapter 1 deals with the development of warfare waged through legal techniques prior to the Global War on Terror. Palestinians, for Bhungalia, are central to these developments because it was the Palestinian body that emerged as the prototypical figure, what Edward Said called the "essential terrorist", in the emerging discourse on terrorism (p.32-33). The key legal technique highlighted in this chapter is the "material support ban", a US counterterrorism law that targeted individuals and organizations suspected of providing financial support to designated terrorist organizations, emboldening the US security state with the capabilities to police and criminalize bodies far beyond their formal jurisdiction (p.44). Chapter 2 picks up the ATC, the form in which the material support ban touched down in Palestine. The imperative that aid workers must sign the US-issued ATC embodies what Bhungalia calls "elastic sovereignty"—the way that US counterterrorism initiatives bind themselves to aid flows and non-state actors, creating a fluid and uneven sovereign imperial power (p.51-52). The third chapter takes a different legal

technique of empire as its focus—the designated terrorist lists. The lists, Bhungalia argues, “actively produce new kinds of epistemological orders and relationalities” (p.85). The lists infuse aid space in Palestine, interrupting the flow of aid and rupturing Palestinian civil society through forcing individuals to choose who to work with based on their status on the lists (p.87-89). In sum, the lists, the material support ban, and the ATC are instruments of counterinsurgency intended to fragment Palestinians and create a more docile, governable population over the “long arc of dispossession” (p.106).

Chapter 4 takes the Trump presidency as a point of departure from the prior liberal veneer that US aid policy took towards Palestine (p.109). Bhungalia’s interest in this chapter is to interrogate the afterlives of the long history of aid intervention—the way that it continues to live on, transforming social relations even when “the last bomb has dropped” and aid flows cease (p.113). War is instead waged in the aid space itself, shrinking the possibilities for development and humanitarian work not associated with the dictates of security and counterterrorism architecture of Israel and foreign states (p.121). The shrinking space in which Palestinians can act creates a certain strangulation on Palestinian life itself, what Bhungalia calls “asphyxiatory violence” in the fifth chapter. Asphyxiatory violence is “a modality of violence that realizes its destructive effects through less spectacular means than a bomb or tank, and instead through a quieter, temporally stretched process of constriction, one that progressively erodes conditions of livability” (p.136). Israel’s designation of six Palestinian NGOs as terrorist organizations in 2021 captures asphyxiatory violence, but simultaneously shows the limits of Israel’s credibility to the mainstream liberal and Western world (p.142). While Israel crushes Palestinian human rights efforts under the thumb of terrorism discourse, two counter-movements emerge: domestically, Palestinians find new modes of relation that move beyond their reliance on aid flows, while internationally, prominent and reputable international organizations increasingly criticize Israel as deploying totalitarian (or in Amnesty International’s case, apartheid) tactics (p.159). War in Palestine is waged in multiple and overlapping forms, and Bhungalia’s detailed study brings the typically invisible tactics of war-through-aid to the fore.

Aid has been critiqued in Palestine as a limited tool for development (Rad 2015), as part of dead-end “peace-building” process (Hanafi and Tabar 2003), and as circumscribed within

notions of humanitarianism that fail to account for the structural underpinnings of violence in the region (Perugini and Gordon 2015). Bhungalia's (2015) earlier work highlights aid as a "quick-fix" to humanitarian disasters that can mitigate some of the most brutal aspects of war and occupation, but ultimately fails to overturn the cycles of war. In *Elastic Empire*, Bhungalia delivers a critical expansion to the conversation, describing aid not as something that upholds the structural forces of war and violence in Palestine, but as a form of war itself on the Palestinian people. Further, Bhungalia understands the structures of war not as isolated to the geography of Palestine/Israel, but rather as intimately connected to the topological formulations of empire.

It is difficult to read an ethnography of Palestine and not wonder how the words of the interlocutors might be different in the context of an on-going genocide in Gaza. For instance, one of Bhungalia's interlocutors says, in a conversation on the marginal space in which Palestinians can act, that they take international aid money because, "Right now liberation has been put on hold" (p.106). As the world watches powerful states and transnational actors reify Israel's onslaught of Gaza, how do Palestinian aid recipients navigate the contradictions between international humanitarianism and international ambivalence towards their gravest crises since the Nakba? This is not a question that Bhungalia is responsible for answering, but *Elastic Empire* reveals critical forces, trends, and movements for thinking about aid and war in the present day. As aid takes the form of war itself, acting as a form of asphyxiatory violence in its own right, Bhungalia emphasizes the way that Palestinians continuously find new modes of relationality that allow them to survive in the face of over a century of settler-colonial dispossession.

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Charles Finn

Department of Global and International Studies

University of California, Irvine

cfinn1@uci.edu

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