

LISA BHUNGALIA. *ELASTIC EMPIRE: REFASHIONING WAR THROUGH AID IN PALESTINE.* STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2024. 277 P. ISBN: 9781503637511

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Weaponization of humanitarian aid has featured as a growing arena of mainstream focus in the 18 months since Israel's latest war on and genocide in Gaza began in October 2023. Attention has largely centered on Israel's 'total blockade' (extending the existing blockade since 2007) of Gaza, limiting of aid entry far below ceasefire terms during temporary truces, and direct targeting of aid convoys, UN staffers, and emergency healthcare workers. Some critics also consider disproportionate focus on stymied humanitarian aid (as opposed to killing and occupation) as a form of weaponization which normalizes war.

Military and humanitarian enmeshments, including the 2024 Gaza floating pier, also caught headlines. Operational for only 20 days before it was permanently closed, the \$230 million floating 'humanitarian aid' dock (which incurred hundreds of millions more in damage), rapidly built by the US military between March and May 2024, was constructed to support humanitarian aid shipments. The effort was reported as first initiated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with President Biden in late October 2023 to open a maritime humanitarian assistance route. Enabling only a small number of trucks to come through, the floating pier was ultimately largely ineffective in supporting aid efforts. The project further failed to interfere with the Israeli blockades or to enable safer operating conditions of humanitarian organizations. In its short lifespan, it was leveraged in assisting an Israeli operation which killed nearly 300 Palestinian civilians and rescued four hostages.

In her timely ethnographic work, *Elastic empire: refashioning war through aid in Palestine*, political geographer Dr Lisa Bhungalia provides an important interrogation into the normalization of securitized aid in Palestine. Securitized aid manifested again in the Gaza floating pier, months after her work was originally published in November 2023 using research conducted from 2009-2021. While more 'spectacular' forms of violence have drawn recent global attention, Bhungalia's work reminds us of the protracted (US shadow) war of 'asphyxiation', which has long accompanied more blatant and visceral forms of violence. This 'quieter' war enacted through the 'interlacing of aid and law' contributed conditions and blueprints for current formations of Israeli violence against Palestinians, building upon even longer histories of imperial formations and their haunted sites.

Applying a topological approach to space and power, Bhungalia examines contemporary forms of sovereignty through the concept of elasticity. She explores the making and unmaking of Palestinian life by foreign aid amidst overlapping regimes. Bringing together varied ethnographic and primary sources from across Palestine, Amman, and Washington

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D.C., she reveals intimate interlinkages that collapse presumed temporal and spatial distinctions. She ultimately chronicles a US war over two decades which normalized securitized aid in Palestine (and beyond), transfigured Palestinian daily life, and blurred the lines between the global war on terror and humanitarianism.

Bhungalia begins by tracing the centrality of Palestine to contemporary consolidation of US terrorism financing law infrastructures in Chapter 1. She argues that these legal, material measures codified a ‘preemptive model of punitive governance’, legitimizing state violence against ‘threats-in-waiting’ and expanded the US security state’s reach. Chapter 2 explicates the ‘elastic empire’, wherein Palestine figures as an archetype of the American empire’s workings and Palestinians figure as objects of empire. Bhungalia then focuses in on the terrorism list as a technology of power. Chapter 3 traces how these lists work on and through Palestinians to achieve counterinsurgency measures via fragmentation, pacification, and long-term dispossession, ‘softening’ a population to become more governable. She remains ever attentive to individual/collective participations in the politics of refusal. Chapter 4 considers what remains post-USAID, tracing the afterlives and reverberations of Western-aligned donor intervention in Palestine. Finally, she concludes by examining Israel’s enactment of ‘asphyxiatory violence’, which she argues emerges as an increasingly preferred method of warfare, especially by liberal imperial and settler-colonial powers seeking to manage the visibility of their violence. In what she deems a culminating moment in the war of humanitarian aid and law, Bhungalia chronicles Israel’s termination of six Palestinian organizations after designating them as terrorist. She ultimately argues that this form of slow, debilitating violence evades certain visual and temporal registers, contributing to a redistribution in contemporary warfare and late modern empire, where “unknowability” is precisely the point’ (26).

Though the scale of rapid and spectacular violence has since reached unprecedented scales, Bhungalia’s attentiveness to preceding and ongoing ‘quieter’ wars are more essential than ever. In considering the asphyxiatory violence (Chapter 5) of the US security state’s legally codified ‘prosecutorial web’ (Chapter 1), we might see how Israel’s current war on Gaza became politically and materially possible to enact at its present scale, and better understand geopolitical formations of surveillance and pre-emptive persecution which reverberate forward from it. Revisiting the first Trump-Netanyahu term and the then end of USAID to Palestine (Chapter 4), present ambivalence towards illegal Israeli settler expansion into Palestine becomes contextualized as an extension of the same ongoing, already-endorsed violence. It further opens up questions about the fate of regions around the world which have seen USAID programs rapidly terminated with little warning since January 2025. Bhungalia demonstrated how this period of USAID retreat in Palestine saw an *escalation* to the counterterrorism paradigm across donor aid practices, despite the absence of aid avenues which originally introduced the US’s securitized practices, technologies, and norms. We might ask, as she does, ‘consider[ing] what remains living and breathing in its absence—what kind of violence is embedded in a world that cannot be returned’ (114)? Bhungalia’s observations regarding widespread implications of preemptive security (Chapter 1 and 2) might be particularly chilling in the current moment when revisiting the technology of the terrorism list (Chapter 3). Since March 2025, the US, and other countries such as Germany, have leveraged ‘the list’ in ever more extreme and expanding ways against its lawful, law-abiding residents, including those who are not Palestinian nor pro-Palestine activists.

Bhungalia centers ‘empire’, interrogating its presence and workings in Palestine, primarily engaging Ann Stoler’s orientation towards imperial formations (2006, 2013). Framings of the US in the terms of empire have become popular once more. Scholars from the early 2000s reconsidered the valence and possibilities of ‘empire’ as, at once, a problem in post-national times, generative analytical frame, and historical formation, resulting in interventions such as the search for new imperial histories (Gerasimov et al. 2005) and

proposals of new imperialism (Harvey 2003). Others since have theorized about the grounds for what, if anything, might lie beyond empire (Bonilla 2015, Burbank and Cooper 2023, Butler 2012, Coronil 2017). Departing from an analytical apparatus grounded in present and historical ethnographic evidence, she is able to account for contemporary forms of imperialism which diverge, contradict, and differentiate in degrees of sovereignty. We might ask what follows the visibility of 'empire' and its 'elastic' influences beyond borders? How do we conceptualize the US empire currently, as its preference for less visible asphyxiation takes a backseat to direct forms of military violence, accompanied more often by blatant celebration than liberal imperial justifications? What might it mean for Israel to figure as an imperial center alongside the US, when it's 'desires' contextualize imperial subjects who are variably (and often temporarily) made imperial agents in the collapse between imperial peripheries and center(s)? How might we consider Bhungalia's proposal of Palestinians as objects of US empire, when individuals increasingly inhabit blurred, non-citizen (or perhaps un-citizen), imperial subject/agent positions vis-à-vis US empire?

Bhungalia's intervention elucidates the conditions of possibility for the current brutality being enacted by the US and Israel in Palestine, through tracing prior decades of convergence between humanitarian and military efforts. It demonstrates the mechanisms that proliferate and repeat, metastasizing and accelerating, no longer requiring the same temporal lag for normalization. In times of visceral violence, Bhungalia reminds us of the long-enduring forms of 'softening' violence that emerge without an 'event' which we can point to, but that occur and dispossess nonetheless.

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