“From the American People’: Sketches of the US National Security State in Palestine”

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Contemporary developments in the American way of war have played a significant role in the increased militarization of the globe (Gregory 2011). The projection of U.S. power globally, and in the Middle East specifically, whether CIA drone strikes in Pakistan, ‘boot-heavy’ counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq, or the fortification of border walls at the edges of US sovereign territory, has given rise to what Saskia Sassen calls a ‘new kind of multi-sited war’ or what Derek Gregory suggests is an ‘everywhere war’. In light of these developments, increasing attention has been paid to the changing forms and geographies of U.S. overreach. Most studies have focused on the military dimensions of these wars, with attention in particular to the operation of kinetic or lethal forms of violence. This paper explores a relatively understudied dimension of America’s transnational wars – that is their civilian and seemingly humanitarian components. Drawing upon Foucault’s prescient observation that the institutions of liberal modernity are themselves invested with the force of war, this paper explores the ways in which U.S. war and counterinsurgency practice are being articulated through the seemingly benign institutions and mechanisms of aid governance. Drawing on research conducted in Palestine, this paper explores the relationship between U.S. aid and counterinsurgency, tracing in particular how the logic of counterinsurgency has become intimately linked to both development and humanitarian engagement in Palestine. Beginning historically, this paper situates American aid within a brief genealogy of U.S. counterinsurgency theory and maps linkages between USAID and the ‘population-centric’ approach in counterinsurgency thinking. Then drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the region, it examines how those living in the West Bank and Gaza are negotiating American power and the attendant forms of ‘risk-based’ and disciplinary management to which aid is giving rise. Lastly, this paper engages broader questions concerning the ways in which U.S. aid intervention in particular, and foreign aid more broadly, relates to larger questions of sovereignty, national struggle and ever-more sophisticated modes of colonial management. In attending to such questions, this paper suggests that the case of Palestine offers important insights into the ways in which liberal warfare is being reconfigured, perhaps most disconcertingly, through realms we otherwise consider to be humanitarian, developmental and benign (Weizman 2011). It is moreover illustrative of the ways in which American power remains a significant force in the making and unmaking of political geographies at the global scale and in the Middle East specifically.