

13 April 2015

**African Migrants, Security Measures and a New Fence:  
Soldiers' experiences on the Egyptian-Israeli border**

Name of reporter: Efrat Ben-Ze'ev

This paper was written in collaboration with Nir Gazit, who cannot attend the JAMPS conference

Affiliation in Israel of Ben-Ze'ev and Gazit: The Ruppin Academic Center, Emek Hefer, and the Truman Institute, Hebrew University, Jerusalem

Affiliation in Japan of Ben-Ze'ev: The School of International Studies, Kwansei Gakuin University, Nishinomiya

Key terms: Irregular migration; the Egyptian-Israeli border; Israeli security forces; Borderland logic; humanitarianism; securitization; criminalization

Abstract

Background

The border between Egypt and Israel today is an internationally recognized line, set back in 1905 to separate the Ottoman and British Imperial realms, and readopted as an international border following the Egyptian-Israeli 1979 Peace agreement. However, it is far more than a line. It is an expanse where thousands of migrants have been crossing north in recent decades, especially between 2006 to 2012, escaping civil war in Sudan and tyranny in Eritrea; where smuggling has prospered for decades, serving as a source of income to the desert Bedouins of the Negev and the Sinai; where a Multi-National Observers and Task force, comprised of soldiers from around the world, resides in fortified camps; and where Israeli citizens have come looking for alternative lifestyles, many

drawing their livelihood from greenhouse farming. Asian laborers from Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar tend the vegetables growing in these greenhouses; the vegetables' destiny is primarily the European market. This remote borderland is in fact a multi-ethnic, multi lingual, multi-national micro-cosmos, affected both by local circumstances as well as global trends. We wish to suggest that such complex settings are characteristic of other borderlands, especially on the seam-line between what has come to be called the global south and north.

These borderland settings pose a challenge to security forces' personnel, who have to juggle between state policies and very complex environments. At the borderland, soldiers find themselves fulfilling contradictory roles. They are the agents who monopolize the state's legitimate use of violence, be it against 'terrorists' or 'criminals,' but they are also witnesses to and participants in the creation of human catastrophe, when they watch the suffering endured by migrants in ransom camps inside the Sinai Peninsula and when they prevent these migrants from entering Israel. At the same time, until quite recently, the soldiers were also a quasi-humanitarian force, because illegal migrants were often permitted to enter Israel and the soldiers were the ones to welcome them. How do soldiers juggle their contradictory missions on the border? How are illegal migrants understood through the soldiers' eyes?

### Short literature review

In our "high modern" era, argued James Scott, state projects aspire to simplify, rationalize and standardize complex realities (1999), including borders. However, the state's aspiration for clear-cut borders, what Thongchai Winichakul (1994) named geobodies, are challenged by their inherent ambiguity. On borders, legal and illegal exchanges of goods constantly take place and insurgent groups defy the state. International borders, argues Etienne Balibar, are of a polysemic nature, because they are outcomes of overlapping arenas -- political, cultural, linguistic and economic (Balibar 2002:79-82).

On the borderland, different and contradictory logics operate. New codes of conduct evolve that are not necessarily consistent with formal policies. Heyman and Smart note that

the state itself may not respect its own law and may engage in illegal practices on the border (Heyman and Smart, 1999 in Fassin 2011:217). Moreover, on the border, state institutions often facilitate the blurring between legitimate and illegitimate actions (Coutin 1995). According to William Walters (2011), many state actions along the border take on a humanitarian discourse, while in fact the actual reality is far from being humane. In light of this body of scholarship, we ask how does the humanitarian discourse manifest itself in the soldiers' border tales and how does it complement the security and criminality discourses?

### The paper's main argument

The Egyptian-Israeli border witnessed a dramatic change in 2012, when it was hastily closed off by Israel with a high fence, which still allows for smuggling of goods but not of humans. The prime reason for building this fence was the growing numbers of illegal African migrants entering through this border. Yet the security discourse was also used as justification, in light of the emergence of militant groups within the Sinai, on the Egyptian side. This paper considers both the developments that preceded the construction of the fence as well as its consequences, as understood and experienced by the soldiers stationed along the border. We posit that the recurrent encounter among military forces, migrants and smugglers at the border transforms it into civil/martial hybrid space. This space is characterized by the blurring of boundaries among three discursive and practical types of logic: securitization, humanitarianism and criminalization. We explore the manifestations of these logics through the border tales told by Israeli soldiers from their on-ground perspective.

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