

# Guest Editors' Foreword

*By Uzi Ben-Shalom & Nir Gazit*

## Israel's Border Laboratory

State sovereignty is often manifested through physical borders and usually managed by State agents. When borders become unstable and volatile due to increased security threats, they often go through intense processes of securitization and militarization. While social research of borders and insecurity frequently focuses on border crossing by refugees, migrants and criminals,<sup>1</sup> the influence of borders on contemporary militaries has often been elided by social scientists. The current special issue of *Res Militaris* seeks to contribute to filling this gap in the literature through a distinct focus on Israel's borders and their influence on the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). Given the multiplicity of Israel's borders and the various potential threats they pose to the Israeli security establishment, this case may serve as a laboratory to investigate wider implications of contemporary borders that are also relevant to military forces in other countries today.

The ways in which the IDF grapples with its international borders is of unique interest due to the changing nature of Israel's formal and informal security concept. The "Arab Spring" has dramatically subverted many of the Middle East's most stable borders, undermined long-established Arab regimes, and weakened the security climate of the broader region. This has created new challenges to Israel's security apparatus and has also influenced the nature of Israel's civil-military relations. These concerns are at the centre of this special issue.

## The Collection of Articles

In the opening article, **Amr Yossef** explains how, in response to the change affecting Israel's environment, a shift has occurred in its military doctrine, which is reflected in the IDF's role along the borders. The IDF has long preferred offensive actions against enemy forces; yet, the current turmoil has detracted from its ability to enact an offensive doctrine. Among the partial solutions developed by the IDF are the mixed-gender battalions that were designed especially as "border specialists" with a declared purpose of releasing more elite ground units to better prepare themselves for offensive wartime operations.

As suggested by Yossef, the new IDF strategy betrays a reframing of certain long-lasting understandings of what border security is and how it ought to be implemented. Fieldwork offers social scientists a unique pathway to uncover the sociological processes that occur along the border itself. **Nir Gazit** analyzes these processes along the Israeli border with Egypt and points to the blurring of military, humanitarian and police action that

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<sup>1</sup> See: Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas & Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

characterizes this area. Gazit uses the concept of “securitization” of borders – one that spawns different linguistic interpretations and logics of action. This ethnographic study enables a microsociological analysis of border experiences.

A somewhat parallel view is expressed in **Uzi Ben-Shalom, Shimrit Engel** and **Eyal Lewin**’s study of the newly formed mixed-gender battalions that were devised in order to specifically operate in border zones. The operational activities of these units are an expression of the new IDF doctrine described by Yossef. On a more sociopolitical level, however, the creation of the unit and the experiences of these soldiers points to the IDF’s use of the border as a unique arena for creating and testing new concepts of gender integration within the military.

**Limor Samimian-Darash** and **Hedva Eyal** analyze one of Israel’s fastest changing security situations along its border with Syria on the Golan Heights. Currently the survival of Assad’s regime in Syria seems as a matter of fact. However, the seven-year civil war in Syria has pushed Israel to a dilemma concerning how best to contain the violence and increasingly desperate humanitarian situation along the Golan Heights border. In response to these pressures the State of Israel decided to marshal its elite medical facilities to offer succour and support to wounded Syrian civilians – and in some cases military personnel – while at the same time preventing mass numbers of Syrian refugees from crossing over into Israeli-controlled territory. The authors mobilize the term “boundary work” to describe the unique societal reality that has been established by this medical policy within Israeli hospitals. Documentary films and news reports have captured how within the medical facilities where the Syrian wounded are treated there is a blurring of roles between medical, police, and military personnel. The tempo of changing events in Syria sheds important light over this intriguing case of medical and security entanglements.

The Israeli doctrine of war is significantly centred on its technological superiority. However, present-day threats, such as the tunnels for smuggling and infiltration from the Gaza Strip, are more a “low-tech” issue. **Eran Ortal** analyzes the underground dimensions of the border and its interplay with the high-trajectory threat of rockets and missiles. Against Israel’s superior technology, its enemies’ are willing to adopt low-tech solutions; that constantly prove themselves useful, especially in Israel’s “post-heroic” condition. Israel’s lag in finding a solution to this threat has taken a heavy and detrimental role on the morale of civilian populations near the Gaza border.

**Chava Brownfield-Stein**’s paper analyzes the interplay between high-tech weapons system and border control. She argues that the border experience of soldiers should be analyzed by the gradual shift in Israel’s way of war from symmetrical high-intensity operations towards asymmetrical low-intensity and low-tech opponents. To grapple with this shift, she relates virtual reality gaming to the experiences of Israel’s current border sentinels. These mostly female soldiers utilize high-tech optical technology to cast an ever-watchful eye over Israel’s borders. Brownfield Stein discusses the many ethical and moral dimensions of this technology.

*Happy reading !*