

# Mitigated Securitization and Criminalization on the Israeli-Egyptian Borderland

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During the past two decades, various scholars have called attention to the growing involvement of military and paramilitary forces in controlling the border. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as “militarization” or “securitization” of the border,<sup>1</sup> is most apparent in the advanced industrialized regions of the world, especially the United States and the European Union,<sup>2</sup> as well as in contact zones between the global north and south.

The militarization of the border has raised growing concerns regarding its costs and consequences, the repeated violations of human rights<sup>3</sup> and the frequent use of violence against civilians.<sup>4</sup> Existing scholarship on the subject often focuses on policy, both at the national and supranational levels.<sup>5</sup> Far less scholarly attention has been given to the actual implementation of border policies, or to how military forces deployed on the border behave and manoeuvre between different logics<sup>6</sup> at the tactical level.

A previous article<sup>7</sup> discussed two interconnected logics – securitization and humanitarianism – as they unfold in border regions ; a combination that result in an “arbitrary humanitarianism”. The following article broadens this discussion by investigating the relationships between securitization and criminalization – another operational logic that is common among border forces.<sup>8</sup> Rather than investigating these logics as institutionalized policies that are imposed from above to the State’s ground level agents, the analysis here focuses on the micro-sociological level in which ground troops develop models of action and soldiering vis-à-vis the reality they encounter on the border. Although all local experiences of soldiers are influenced by institutional and organizational contexts of border deployments, reducing the analysis to formal policies and institutional guidelines does not get us very far, since it neglects the aggregate effect of the actual experience of soldiers on the ground. This point is theoretically significant, since it posits that complex situations, on the ground, have a significant impact on the actualization of border polices, often far more than formal regulations and military doctrines.

Hence, this article discusses the relationships between the two logics of action of securitization and criminalization on contemporary borders and asks what influences the

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<sup>1</sup> Palafox, 1996 ; Dunn, 1996, 1999, 2001 ; Brownell, 2001 ; Bigo 2014 ; Gabrielli 2014; Takaya 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Andreas, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Palafox, 1996 ; Huspek *et al.*, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Dunn, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Huysmans, 2000; Carrera, 2007; Jorry, 2007; Neal, 2009 ; Léonard, 2010 ; Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011 ; Messina, 2014 ; Takaya, 2015 ; Yossef’s article, this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Dunn, 1996, 1999, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Ben-Zeev & Gazit, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Golash-Boza, 2010 ; Aliverti, 2012.

alteration between them. To answer these questions the analysis focuses on two characteristics of contemporary border missions: the ambivalent character of the mission and the frequent encounter with ambiguous others.

I posit that the ambiguities experienced by the soldiers at the border are translated into a unique hybrid civilian-military operational mindset – a mitigated and integrated version of the two operational logics. While governmental policies bring to increase securitization of borders, other logics of action may mitigate this tendency.

The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2012 and 2017 on the Israeli-Egyptian border.

## **Theoretical Background**

One of the traditional roles of modern (and pre-modern) militaries is to protect the nation-State's borders and maintain its sovereignty against the invasion of foreign militaries. Yet, during the past two decades, various scholars have called attention to the growing involvement of military forces in securing the border against an array of other phenomena that include hostile insurgency, terror, smuggling of drug and weapon, human trafficking and irregular migration. Since these phenomena are often interpreted by States as a genuine risk to their sovereignty, it legitimates the use of military forces to conduct non-traditional military missions on the border such as screening the movement of individual civilians and policing.

Previous scholarship trying to come to terms with “*the militarization and securitization of the border*”<sup>9</sup> often focus on the extensive use of military hardware (e.g. watchtowers, surveillance cameras and balloons, optic sensors, barbwire fencing and fortification<sup>10</sup>) and the deployment of high qualified military forces in border zones.<sup>11</sup> The analytical focus is either on the implications of border control policies on human-rights violations and humanitarian concerns<sup>12</sup> or its influence on core national security interests of states and international organizations.<sup>13</sup>

Less attention has been given to their implications on the military forces deployed at contemporary border zones and how it affects their model of soldiering. A major concern in this regard is the movement of soldiers between different operational circumstances that may include warfare, the epitome of soldiering, and missions that are outside the military's traditional roles. Hence, while acknowledging the importance of the macro implications of border militarization, this article wishes to consider how the growing involvement of military forces at the border shapes the soldiers' perceptions and their actual interactions with the actors they encounter.

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<sup>9</sup> Dunn, 1996, 1999, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Sun *et al.*, 2011 ; Boyce, 2016 ; Feeney, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Andreas & Price, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Walters, 2011, 2014 ; Fassin, 2011a, 2011b ; Basaran, 2014, 2015 ; Albahari 2015 ; Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Adamson, 2006.

The article builds on a previous analysis by Eyal Ben-Ari and Meytal Eran-Jona (2014) that conceptualizes the military as an organization that is characterized by multiple logics-of-action.<sup>14</sup> This notion emphasizes the institutional rationalities of military actions and the principle guidelines and frameworks upon which soldiers should act and perform their duties. Ben-Ari and Eran Jona list eight ideal-types of logics in industrialized democracies' militaries: high-intensity conflict, peacekeeping, internal policing, anti-terror, counter-insurgency, military administration, humanitarian assistance, and border policing. The main value of their analysis lies in underscoring the various tensions emerging out of the intense interactions between combat soldiers and civilians in 'fuzzy' operational environments,<sup>15</sup> for example in border regions. They suggest that the difficulty that soldiers face generates a hierarchy of logics in which that of high-intensity combat is the default. This operational logic is most easily invoked by soldiers and commanders in case of unclear situations; a dynamic that might explain the use of military violence in non-combat situations.

I wish to argue with this hypothesis. Based on an ethnographic study of the Israeli military forces along the Israeli-Egyptian border, I posit that different military logics can also fuse into one another. Instead of one default logic – whether it be high-intensity combat or border policing –, the simultaneous adherence of two (or more) logics result in an amalgamation, a mixture of operational perceptions and behavioural principles. This amalgamation of logics is not only a combination of existing institutional settings that are driven from above and operate as a *doxa* ; it is also an emerging property of the complex operational conditions in the field. Hence, to disclose the practical logics of action and their implications, one needs to gain an insider (or -emic) perspective of military border missions. Such an approach invites the researcher to study both the discursive process through which the border and the border populations are socially constructed,<sup>16</sup> as well as the actual soldiering along the border.<sup>17</sup>

The multifaceted task of soldiers securing the border against irregular migrants, smugglers and terrorists involves (at least) three logics of action: border policing (monitoring the movement of people and goods), internal policing (maintaining law and order in the border zone), and anti-terror. At least two of them are not traditional military logics. The focus of the following analysis will be on the relationship between securitization of and criminalization on the border among Israeli soldiers deployed on the Israeli-Egyptian border.

## The Case

The Egyptian-Israeli borderline is 240 kilometres long. Its current incarnation is an outcome of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Agreement, signed in 1979. During the 1980s and

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<sup>14</sup> See also: Boëne, 2000 ; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Battistelli, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Waever *et al.*, 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Léonard, 2010.

1990s, this border area had a dormant image. According to the agreement, the Sinai was a demilitarized zone, and the borderline was marked primarily by milestones and occasional barbed wire. Crossing from one side to the other was simple. In the past decade, the Egyptian-Israeli border – Africa’s north-eastern external border and the only land border between Africa and Asia/Europe – has witnessed significant changes – growing waves of irregular migrants crossing from south to north, increased securitization, and as an outcome, a series of humanitarian catastrophes.

While smuggling has always prospered on this borderland, other illicit activities have evolved more recently. Armed insurgent groups (including factions associated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS) have been active mainly in the northern Sinai, targeting Egyptian forces as well as Western tourists and Israelis. Moreover, since roughly 2010, criminals in northern Sinai have established torture camps aimed at procuring ransom fees from kidnapped African migrants.<sup>18</sup> Irregular migration on this border has changed dramatically in the last decade, gaining momentum from late 2005. While prior to 2005, a mere 3,000 people crossed this border, since 2000 by 2014 the number of irregular migrants in Israel was over 60,000. The earlier waves of these migrants arrived from Sudan, escaping ethnic cleansing in Darfur and civil war in the South ; more recently most have been from Eritrea, escaping Isaias Afewerki’s infamous regime.

To stop the arriving migrants, Israel expanded the nearby prison to incarcerate those arriving, and built a large detention centre, adjacent to the prison, for irregular migrants. The Israel’s largest and most expensive enterprise was the erection of a high metal fence along this border, built hastily from 2012 to 2014 under the pretext of defending the State from “*a tsunami of Africans who will inundate the country*”, as well as against the armed attacks by Islamists from the Sinai. In addition, the government has fortified the border, increased its military forces in area and deployed more professional units, including special operation units. The perceptions and conduct of the Israeli military forces in this region is the focus of this paper.

## **Methodology**

The present article is part of larger collaborative project, funded by the German Research Foundation, on the social construction of three of Africa’s northern borderlands : in Egypt/ Israel, and in Ceuta and Melilla. It is based on an ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2012 and 2017 along the Israeli-Egyptian border as well as off-site interviews with soldiers who were stationed along this border and media reports. I also used soldiers’ affidavits, which were presented by human rights organizations to the Israeli Supreme Court.

## **A Confusing Border and an Ambivalent Military Mission**

For many years, since the peace agreement between the two countries, the Egyptian-Israeli border was defined as a “border of peace”. The loose and scattered barbed

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<sup>18</sup> Wieja, 2013.

wire fence that kept it open until 2012 only nurtured this perception among the soldiers deployed in the area. Until the 2000s, terror attacks were scarce and the number of security forces along the border was also very low. The main illicit activity in the area was the smuggling of goods (such as night gowns and cigarettes), but also drugs and human trafficking (mainly of women to the sex industry in Israel).

The Israeli informal policy towards these activities was a combination of tolerance and of turning a blind eye. Some of the officers interviewed speculated that a possible explanation for this policy was that Israel used the smugglers to gather intelligence on the other side of the border. During this period, the soldiers stationed in the area were mainly reservists and not the well-trained regular divisions of the Israeli Army. The main activity of these forces was to “demonstrate presence” [*Lehafgin nochecut*] in front of the Egyptian soldiers. Most of the time, they did not bother restraining these criminal activities.

However, since 2005, with the arrival of more African migrants and later with the toppling of Mubarak’s regime in 2011, the image of the border started to change and has become much more ambivalent. Terror attacks in Sinai intensified and occasionally also targeted Israeli soldiers and civilians along the border. In response, Israel mobilized highly-trained military forces to the border, highlighting its dangerous facet.

Those soldiers had to reconcile two contradictory images of the border. On the one hand, it still maintained its relatively dormant nature, especially when compared to the Syrian and Lebanese borders, and the ongoing clashes and violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. On the other hand, the southern border had also become a site of possible attacks. Even though the enemy on the other side of the border was vague and indefinite, from the military point of view it demanded a constant operational alertness. The soldiers highlighted this duality. Sergeant Karmel who was interviewed in the spring of 2013, shortly after he finished his regular Army service, explained:

[The border] is certainly not peaceful. You feel that something is bound to happen any minute although you see nothing. You are always very alert... There are many threats. The border is divided between smuggling – drugs, tobacco, etc., and *Faha* [Hebrew acronym for “threat of terror”], which you see all the time in front of your eyes. However, the main issue is smuggling. *Faha* happens once in a long time... You see all kinds of battalions. I’m not sure who they are, maybe Hamas. They roam free in the Sinai. We are given different names for them... for instance “Jihad”. There are battles inside the Sinai. Those forces occasionally get close to the border and occasionally they attack us. Those are a kind of teasing games.

Karmel highlights an operational tension fostered by army alerts and fuelled by the special military forces that were heavily deployed in the area. At the same time, he describes his role mainly as a passive witness, watching ill-defined events on the other side that occasionally “spill over.” It is not characteristic for a soldier (particularly a combat soldier) to be an idle witness rather than an active agent. Moreover, he does not fully understand what he is watching and what mode of action is required. Are those on the other side of the border associated with the Jihad? The Hamas? Or are they “innocent”

smugglers? Clearly, Karmel is quite confused by the situation, unable to tell who the enemy is and what his mission is. Other soldiers also told me that commanders did not brief them regarding the forces and activities on the other side of the border. They remained ignorant about those who conduct battles or trigger teasing games, as described by Karmel. This confusion is further intensified by the criminal activities along the border.

By 2010, Bedouins stationed west of the border discovered the economic potential of incarcerating Eritreans and Sudanese migrants in makeshift prisons and asking for ransom. The prices for each prisoner rose to reach tens of thousands of dollars. This criminal activity was carried out by a small number of Bedouins, linked through previous smuggling networks to people located as far as the Eritrean border. This development attests the ambiguity surrounding the border, which is both peaceful and threatening. The soldiers witness horrific events that take place on the other side (including acts of rape and executions), yet were unable to do much about it. “The other side” is where troubling things happen, but it is beyond their control, and they are not permitted to cross over. This ambiguity and the soldiers’ sense of ignorance were also influenced by the vague operational instructions received with regard to what their main border mission is.

The growing alertness of the soldiers in the face of potential terror attacks across the border has led them to be more of vigilant of the criminal activity in the area. In the absence of a clear enemy to confront, pursuing the smugglers has become their main activity in the region. Ori, a reserve soldier in an armoured unit who was deployed in the area in 2008 explained:

This border is *so* boring... Our mission was to chase smugglers. We did not have our tanks. It was a border of peace. A no man’s land. No law, no order, no nothing. There was no fence during that time. We were patrolling between 20 and 30 km. It was insane to patrol such a long route with no fence. Only our Bedouin tracker could detect an infiltration. Our main mission was not *Faha* [Hebrew acronym for “threat of terror”], it was to deal with the smugglers. It is a police job. Not a job for combat soldiers like us.

The mission of confronting criminals along the border, that the soldiers felt is not suitable to combat soldiers, also influenced the rules of engagement developed in the field, as Ori continued to explain:

The rules of engagement were very [obscure]... Eh... It is a ‘border of peace’... This notion of ‘border of peace’ means that you do not shoot towards the border even in case of infiltration. Most of the people wandering there are smugglers. Many of them are Bedouins who have Israeli citizenship. You also do not want to kill Egyptian soldiers [...] As I see it, when there is an infiltration there are three scenarios: One, [is that] these are refugees. In such a scenario, my job is to make sure they will survive. That they will manage to cross [safely] and that the Egyptians won’t hurt them. A second scenario is smugglers. Those are people that we should detain or chase. This is almost an impossible mission with the equipment we have. They [The smugglers] have special pickup tracks with balloon tires and ATVs [all-terrain vehicles] and we can’t catch them in this desert terrain. The third scenario is of terrorists... There are many soldiers that are captured in this scenario; that a terrorist will jump over the fence and attack them.

Some of the soldiers do consider the last scenario as plausible and thus do not abandon the logic of high-intensity combat. Yet, the implementation of this logic is often remained indecisive, as explained by Yoav, a soldier in an elite unit deployed in the area on 2010 :

It is a bit complicated. With smugglers on the Egyptian side of the border we hardly have any interaction. They usually do not cross in. If they do, they are considered “terrorists”. This is the meaning of crossing a border. The guys [smugglers] from the Israeli side... Well I do not remember the procedures exactly... You do not ignore them, but you do not shoot them. This is a criminal activity, not a security threat...

The ambivalent operational reality on the border brings the soldiers to simultaneously hold the two distinct logics of action. On the one hand, the danger of a surprising terror attack nurtures the combat state of mind among the soldiers and their operational vigilance. On the other hand, the dormant character of border brings them to seek alternative missions to break the boredom and tediousness, which develop a mitigated version of an anti-terror logic. Confronting the smugglers is the most accessible mission and commanders that were deployed in the region also explained that in the absence of “real” military missions, the only way to keep their soldiers alert is to “create activity” by confronting with smugglers as substitute to real enemy, as explained by Danny, a Nachal Brigade officer who was stationed on the border in 2010:

It is not my job to prevent smuggling. I am not a policeman or a Border Police officer.<sup>19</sup> This is not a job for combat soldiers. Yet we [also] do this stuff. We did try to ambush smugglers. It is so boring down there that you must fill the time with some kind of activity. If you can't chase terrorists you chase what can, be it smugglers... At least it keeps you active and vigilant, in case something serious will happen in the region.

### **“Terrorists”, “Criminals”, “Refugees”**

The ambiguity surrounding the logics of action of the soldiers is also influenced by the groupings<sup>20</sup> they encounter during their border stints – African migrants, local Bedouins and Egyptian soldiers. These groupings are attributed with a variety of characterizations, often of a contradictory nature. While borders are supposedly sites of distinction, this study found that the Israeli-Egyptian border is a zone of perceptual instability, which destabilizes social categorizations and social relations.

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<sup>19</sup> Israel Border Police (*Mishmar Ha'Gvul*) is a para-military security branch of the Israeli police. While its original task was securing Israel's borders it is now mainly deployed in assisting Israeli soldiers in the West Bank.

<sup>20</sup> The term ‘grouping’ is somewhat more accurate than ‘group’ or ‘population,’ since it does not assume that a certain social affiliation and a corresponding (ethnic or religious) we-group exists (see the critique by Brubaker 2004). The existence and common use of categories such as ‘migrants’, ‘inhabitants’, ‘smugglers’, etc. does not automatically indicate the existence of a we-group that is identical or similar to the respective category; although the widespread use of such categories is likely to hint at acts and discourses of exclusion that are performed by some kind of grouping that itself shows some traits of a we-group, such as a dominant ‘majority’ or socio-political elite.

The soldiers' understanding of the border and its populations are caught up within interesting dialectics. On the one hand, the soldiers are the official agents of the State. As such, their narratives should supposedly voice, or at least echo, the State's official border policy. At the same time, being in the field, they are confronted with actual forces that shape the border reality and which are beyond the full control of the state. Therefore, they must bridge the formal idea of the border with its actuality. In light of the "newly discovered" conditions, the soldiers alter both their practices as well as their understanding, at times in ways that contradict the official policies.

Israeli public discourse surrounding the Israeli-Egyptian border can be characterized by three main tags – security, criminality, and humanitarianism. Often, each of these tags is associated with a social grouping: the armed Islamists inside the Sinai are tagged as "terrorists" and a security threat, the Bedouin smugglers are the "criminals", and those arriving from Africa and attempting to cross the border are a "humanitarian issue" (and dangerous "infiltrators"). However, these tags, even as expressed by politicians and the media, are not clear-cut; it transpires that the "armed Islamists" in the Sinai are often local Bedouins and there is a loud debate on whether those who arrive from Africa are migrants seeking a better quality of life or asylum-seekers escaping danger.

### *The African Migrants*

As noted earlier, Africans began arriving in growing numbers from late 2005. For lack of a clear Israeli immigration policy, the soldiers developed their own ground-level conduct towards these migrants. Soldiers were the first to receive them, since many of those arriving waited for the Army patrol. Soldiers were ordered by their superiors to follow security clearance procedures on their first contact with those arriving. This was somewhat strange, said the soldiers, as the arriving migrants were exhausted and often wounded, yet had to be treated as potential terrorists. Tamir, who completed his Army service in 2012 in an elite fighting force, described the procedure as follows. Note his usage of phrases and slang used only in the Army, oftentimes sanitizing the language, creating a distance from other available ways to describe the acts:

At first they [the Africans] would cross and we had to contain them [*lehachil otam*], encircle them from all directions; make sure that they are all together and no one is escaping. Doing clearance [*la'asot lahem zikui*], make sure that they are not carrying weapons [*emtsa'ei lehima*]. You mustn't stand near them. The men must pull up their clothes and the women must attach their clothes to their bodies so that we will see that they are not carrying weapons of this type or the other.<sup>21</sup>

After that, the soldiers were often those to tend to the wounds of those newly-arrived Africans, feed them and often keep them at their Army post for a day or two, until they would be dropped off at nearby urban centres or handed to the police or Prison

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<sup>21</sup> This procedure is very similar to the one used by the Israeli Army at checkpoints in the occupied territories vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

Service, re-tagging them as mere criminals (or infiltrators) who cross the border illegally; although many of the soldiers interviewed expressed empathy to the migrants. Some of them used interchangeably the notions “infiltrators” and “refugees”. While most of the soldiers did not consider the migrants as a liable threat, they did maintain operational vigilance and implement the rules of engagement they are used to from other operational situations (e.g. the occupied territories), yet in a much more restrained manner.

### *The Bedouins*

The majority of the Sinai and Negev Bedouins have a history of grievances with the authorities, be they Israeli or Egyptian. Families and tribes were separated when the border was set in 1979 and Bedouins were forcefully removed even earlier, after the 1948 War. Moreover, these populations have long been neglected and little was invested there in terms of infrastructure and employment. Smuggling has been a common source of income for the border Bedouins, and during the past two decades they have become more involved in human trafficking, smuggling of drugs and weapons, and kidnaping African migrants.

In the eyes of the Israeli soldiers, the Bedouins residing near the border played contradictory roles. On the one hand, those settled on the Israeli side held citizenship and many were recruited into the Israeli Army.<sup>22</sup> In light of their upbringing, their common military role has been that of trackers (*gashashim*), detecting border crossings. For their talent and their good citizenship, they were highly regarded. Yet at the same time, Bedouins from both sides are this border’s smugglers. As the numbers of African migrants dwindled, the smugglers became a prime target for the Israeli soldiers. Moreover, as noted, the Israeli soldiers became witnesses to the awful deeds carried out at the Bedouin prison camps. Hence the Bedouins were concurrently seen as “saviours”, when they were good trackers, *and* as “bandits” when they were ransom lords and smugglers. Some of the Bedouins also became associated with the newly emerging Islamist armed squads in the Sinai, thus tagged as “terrorists”.

These contradictory images were expressed in the Israeli soldiers’ narratives. Some voiced suspicion towards their Israeli-Bedouin comrades and assumed that they were being misled during operational missions. There was a basis for this suspicion since Bedouins serving as soldiers on this border have been found in court guilty of collaborating with smugglers. However, we should bear in mind that non-Bedouin soldiers have done so too. When Mosh, a social activist in his late thirties, was on his reserve border stint in 2008, he and his reservist friends decided to set up an ambush for the smugglers, without notifying their comrades – the Army’s Bedouin trackers:

Through the wireless it was evident that trackers were disclosing information from our side to their side. We knew it since trackers were caught earlier through telephone conversations that ran to the other side and things like that.

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<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that not all Bedouins in Israel serve in the military. While there is an obligatory military service for Jewish citizens, military service of non-Jews is mostly voluntary.

*Did you know it at the time or only discovered it later?*

We knew that some people were caught two months before we arrived and said to ourselves that if there was one occasion, it is certainly not singular. So our basic assumption was that everything said on the company or battalion radio network is exposed not only to someone on the other side who speaks Hebrew but also to someone on our side who can disclose the information to the other side. So if someone can make a few more shekels from the smugglers, if it's a poor Bedouin who chose to be a tracker over being a smuggler, he still has the temptation. It's not as if he's smuggling terrorists ; it's only drugs, and all he does is "tip" the smugglers.

And so, Mosh and his Army friends set up a secret ambush, abstaining from any talk about it on the military radio. They could tell that there was an attempt to carry out smuggling on the night of their ambush, but it was cancelled in the last minute... Mosh noted : *"They [the smugglers] must have sensed that something is fishy and retreated"*.

As we see, the Bedouins, for the Jewish-Israeli soldiers, are both comrades, on whom one should rely on in case of a terror attack, as well as potential traitors, whose bonds to "the other side" may be stronger than with their fellow soldiers. They are understood as powerful in the context of border crossing, yet are also "poor Bedouins," with few employment opportunities, located low in Israel's citizenship "packing order". Perceiving the Bedouins soldiers as potential criminals and questioning their loyalty, undermine the unit's cohesion, and induces mistrust among the soldiers. In addition, there is no definite perception of the situation as neither criminal nor militaristic. Similarly, the Egyptian security forces bear multiple identities that influence the Israeli soldiers' logics.

### *The Egyptians*

According to the 1979 Peace agreement, Sinai was to be a demilitarized zone ; yet Egypt did man military posts along the borderline. In recent years, with the growing opposition of the Sinai Bedouins to the Egyptian rule, these posts are prone to attacks. In light of this enemy "from within", the Egyptian border fortifications often face the direction of the Sinai rather than Israel. Israeli soldiers portray the Egyptian soldiers as convicted prisoners who were sent to this remote border instead of serving a prison sentence. They tend to view them as unprofessional, untrustworthy, "trash soldiers".<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Israeli soldiers feel that they cannot rely on the Egyptian commitment to secure the border.

The Egyptian soldiers are understood as unreliable also in the realm of smuggling. On the one hand, since the clear majority of the smugglers are Bedouins, the Egyptian soldiers willingly exert violence. On the other hand, many of the Israeli soldiers have

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<sup>23</sup> The perception of the Egyptian Army as unprofessional and disreputable is deeply rooted in the Israeli military culture. It goes back to the 1967 War and the commonly used picture of Egyptian soldiers escaping Israeli soldiers "leaving the shoes behind". Although the Egyptian Army is said to have reclaimed its honour in the 1973 War, this arrogance still characterizes Israeli soldiers, although most of them were born after 1973.

reported that Egyptian soldiers cooperate with the smugglers in return for bribes. Therefore, it is hard for the Israeli soldiers to predict the Egyptians' modes of operation. Yoav was an Army officer who served for almost six years. I interviewed him in the autumn of 2012, two years after he completed his regular service.

Once, we were on a 72-hour ambush [by the border]. Suddenly, we detected two ATVs near the fence picking up four young men with large bags... Driving in the middle of the day. Now listen, it is certain that they bribed the Egyptians... All the soldiers there are prisoners, criminals, so money works hard there. It was one hundred percent bribery. Now, because those guys actually crossed in... It is a different situation compared to just throwing goods over the fence. They actually crossed in. They could be terrorists. It could be a major event. It really looked suspicious. [And then] they [the Egyptians] opened fire ; they were shooting at them [the smugglers]. A bullet hit one of them in the leg. They also hit one of the ATVs but the smugglers managed to escape. We found out that it was not a terror attempt. It was smuggling. We found a lot of money inside the bags.

From this account we cannot decipher why the Egyptian soldiers suddenly changed their mind and shot the smugglers. Were they only pretending, putting on a show for the Israelis ? The Israeli soldiers tend to portray the Egyptians as “trigger-happy,” who do not hesitate to use lethal violence. This description stresses the inconsistency of the Egyptians, who sometimes refrain from shooting in return for bribes, and at other times open fire against both migrants and Bedouins. Both soldiers and Jewish settlers told us that over the years, when larger numbers of African migrants were crossing, the Egyptians could be overheard shooting almost every night. As the officer above told us, the Egyptians were suspected of being in partnership with the smugglers, thus undermining the security of the border.

The Egyptian soldiers go through a process of criminalization in the eyes of the Israeli soldiers, they are the “bad players” on the border. In that sense they were viewed like the Bedouin trackers, as part of the security system but also in collusion with the smugglers. On the border, then, it is not only logic and reasoning but also group identity that seem to dissolve.

Yet, the Israelis also expressed sympathy for the Egyptians and the Bedouins when referring to their difficult living conditions. This empathy is closely linked to the unequal power relations between the groups. The Israelis, unlike the latter, have access to the latest military apparel, arms, and equipment. Moreover, they perceive themselves to be more committed to human rights and professionalism, which they understand as foreign to the Egyptians. As Clark (1997) observes, sympathy is often used to establish superiority over others, offered in games of micro politics to emphasize one's higher position in the hierarchy. Furthermore, presenting the Egyptians as corrupt serves the self-promotion of the Israelis as more professional soldiers, an image that seems to crack [up](#) in this operational environment due to their contradictory missions.

The position of the Israeli soldiers vis-à-vis their Egyptian counterparts generates an ambivalent logic of action. Many soldiers described the clear limitation on using military force in the region. They related to the border as a “border of peace” but consider the formal amity with the Egyptians as fragile. They fear that any incidental use of fire by them may be interpreted by the other side as an act of anti-Egyptian hostility that would put Israel relations with Egypt at risk. At the same time, Egyptian shooting against smugglers and migrants who often slip and cross into the Israeli side and endanger the Israeli soldiers. In such incidents the emergency siren is activated, and the soldiers intensely enter a mode of operational alarm, yet it is clear that they are very limited in translating this alarm into actual operational conduct. This generates a dissonance among the soldiers. On the one hand, the recurring emergency alerts maintain the soldiers’ operational vigilance and bring them to hold to their combat logic of action. However, at the same time, realizing that that this emergency is mainly initiated by criminal activity on the Egyptian side of the border softens this logic and even brings them to feel that there are not performing genuinely and appropriately as soldiers, as they perceive it.

## **Conclusion**

Although borders are institutional entities used by States to mark sovereignty and maintain spatial and political order on their margins, they often generate the very opposite. Border phenomena such as smuggling, insurgency and irregular migration make the border a confusing operational environment in which soldiers should carry out multiple and often contradictory missions. On the one hand, some of these missions are more associated with traditional military conduct, and include counter-insurgency, anti-terror, and protecting the border against foreign invaders. On the other hand, soldiers find themselves conducting non-traditional military missions, such as internal and border policing.

Inconsistent governmental border policies<sup>24</sup> only increase the soldiers’ confusion. The deployment of military forces under the general pretext of “protecting the border” leaves the ground level officers and commanders in an operational puzzle ; it is not clear what exactly their mission is and how they should react in different scenarios. In addition, the soldiers encounter various populations on the border that they find difficult to classify. While they try to adhere to the formal status of the individuals they meet – “Israeli citizens”, “Egyptian soldiers” – these categories seem much more liquid in the field and intensify the soldiers’ perplexity.

Ben-Ari and Eran Jona (2014) posit that in such fuzzy environment soldiers should move very quickly between logics of action ; a transition that creates potential for personal and organizational crises. They mainly focus on the emotional burden of moving from one logic of action to another. Ben-Ari and Eran Jona hypothesize that this difficulty leads ground troops to adhere to the high-intensity combat logic. As we have seen, not only is there no clear hierarchy of operational logics, but there seems to be a mélange of guidelines

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<sup>24</sup> Fassin, 2011a ; Walters, 2011.

and factors that shape the soldiers' perceptions and behaviours. In response to their immediate ill-defined environment, soldiers tend to develop local practical knowledge that is a mixture of operational logics.

Since the logic of action of military forces in contemporary border missions is instable and it is very hard to predict the actual behaviour of soldiers. As demonstrated above, the criminalization of border phenomena may lead to a mitigated version of militarism and limit the use of violent force. At the same time, however, the use of military forces in border control missions along the threat of terror may certainly increase the risk of violence against civilians. To avoid this danger, States need to take into consideration the complex reality ground troops face at the border, and to train their forces to the multi-facet missions they are apt to encounter in "active" border zones.

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