Juggling Logics on the Egyptian–Israeli Borderland: Soldiers between Securitization and Arbitrary Humanitarianism

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Abstract
The following article investigates two interconnected border logics—securitization and humanitarianism—as they unfold as part of soldiers’ border experiences. We wish to show the alternating implementation of these two logics and to elaborate on how are they bound together. Our ethnographic fieldwork was conducted between 2012 and 2014 along a section of the Israeli–Egyptian border, consisting of observations, as well as off-site interviews with soldiers who were stationed along this border, and analysis of media reports and court affidavits. Dedicating special attention to the interactions between soldiers and irregular migrants, we argue that the ambiguities experienced by the soldiers at the ground level result in what we call “arbitrary humanitarianism.”

Keywords
border logics, humanitarianism, securitization, Israeli military, irregular migration.

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Introduction

In recent years, scholars have called attention to the “militarization of the border,”¹ a process that includes the tendency to tag irregular migrants as a “security problem” (Bigo 2002; Takaya 2015).² In parallel, there is concurrent recognition that this “security problem” is also a “humanitarian” one. Securitization often is the cause of humanitarian concerns, as one of its major roles is to restrict passage. Moreover, under the pretext of a humanitarian action, countries heighten militarization, deploy more forces and apply new technologies at the border (Fassin 2011a, 2011b).³ The “emergence of the humanitarian border,” as William Walters points out, is a particular governmental strategy that should be understood alongside other strategies of governmentality (Walters 2011, 147).

Much of the literature on the dialectics of securitization and humanitarianism on borders focuses on policy, both at the national and super-national levels (Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011; Carrera 2007; Geddes 2003; Huysmans 2000; Jorry 2007; Léonard 2010; Messina 2014; Neal 2009; Takaya 2015). Less scholarly attention, however, has been given to the actual implementation of these policies, or to how the state’s ground-level agents maneuver between different border “logics” (Dunn 1996, 1999, 2001). It is our intention here to probe these interrelations by asking how securitization and humanitarianism are employed by soldiers and how do they influence and shape one another?

To answer these questions, we point to the relationship between two levels of border management: the institutional level of state policy and the tactical level of the soldiers, who are expected to implement the policy on the ground. The soldiers are by definition the state’s ground-level agents and as such they are expected to translate the state policy into actual practices. However, the more abstract governmental policy becomes, and the more it generates ambiguity among the soldiers, the greater is the influence there is to personal interpretations and local circumstances.

To discuss these dynamics, we borrow the analytical framework of “fragmented sovereignty” (Gazit 2009). We posit that the reality on the border represents a unique type of governmentality, which is based on policy inconsistencies and governmental ambiguity. Those, in turn, allow for greater power for the local actors and for situational considerations. This implies that the soldiers have a leeway to choose among the different tropes offered by the institutional level. Furthermore, this seeming disorder may well serve state interests.⁴ This type of governmentality is essential for the state’s effort to maintain its borders in a way that enables it to perform the securitization of borders while also incorporating some humanitarianism. However, this
“fragmented sovereignty” on the border results in an incoherent implantation of both logics. In what follows, we wish to illustrate how soldiers bridge between the statist framing and the actual tasks.

The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2012 and 2014. It explores how Israeli soldiers who were deployed along the Israeli–Egyptian border maneuvered between these logics, and how, in retrospect, they interpret their missions. In addition to our fieldwork along the border, we interviewed off site soldiers who served on this border and asylum seekers who crossed it. We also reviewed media reports and court affidavits.

Why consider the Israeli–Egyptian border? First, because it is the only land border between Africa and Asia/Europe, and as a result has attracted irregular migrants crossing from south to north, especially since the mid-2000s. Second, because it is a meeting point between Israel’s relatively prospering economy and Egypt’s much weaker one, an inequality that attracts both migrants and smugglers. Third, because this border has been effected by the recent political turmoil in the Middle East, and specifically by the events of the Arab Spring in Egypt. The Sinai Peninsula—part of the Egyptian State yet also a hub for insurgents—is where Egypt, Israel, and parties active in the Sinai “meet.” While these characteristics may appear unique to the region, what connects them to other borderlands are the vast inequalities in power and wealth, rooted in colonialism. Border policing in many instances portray “others,” primarily irregular migrants, as simultaneously vulnerable and in need of help and as threats in need of containment. On this border we discover, once more, the close affinity between seemingly opposing arenas, in this case humanitarianism and securitization, and their complementarity.

Securitization, Humanitarianism, and Fragmented Sovereignty

James Scott (1998) argues that in our “high modern” era, state projects aspire to simplify, rationalize, and standardize complex realities. Although Scott does not focus on borders, his ideas can apply to them, because they are major projects of the nation-state (Anderson 1991). When borders overheat, to borrow Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s terminology, as in times of increasing waves of irregular migration, governmental attention to the border correspondently grows. However, even under such circumstances, this does not mean that states always implement categorical policies with regard to their borders. On the contrary, border policies often remain vague and incoherent.

Etienne Balibar (2002, 79–82) suggests that international borders are polysemic because they are the outcome of overlapping arenas: political,
cultural, linguistic, and economic. Therefore, despite the fact that states, at least at the discursive level, wish to impose separation and classification, borders often generate the very opposite. Borderlands become social and political entities characterized by what seems like indecisive policy. Indeed, the state itself, as Heyman and Smart (1999, in Fassin 2011a, 217) observe, may ignore its own laws and engage in illegal practices on the border. It is not rare to encounter state institutions facilitating the blurring between legitimate and illegitimate actions taking place on the borderland (Coutin 1995). For example, at certain periods or along particular sections of the Egyptian–Israeli border, Israel turned a blind eye to illegal migrants or permitted smugglers to pass, especially if the smugglers supplied intelligence. Hence, while states are certainly invested in legibility and standardization, borders reveal how they also do the opposite.

Didier Fassin dwells on the affinity between a humanitarian and a military reason along borders (2007, 2011a, 2011b). States, he argues, need an ethical disguise for their political moves. Humanitarianism and militarism complement one another, when, for example, military interventions in “third world” countries are carried out in the name of threatened populations and are framed in humanitarian terms (Fassin 2007). For Fassin, under certain circumstances humanitarianism and military reason are interchangeable (Fassin 2011b).

Humanitarianism, specifically, has been extensively studied in the last decade. It is often understood as a substitute for an earlier emphasis on Human Rights (Ticktin 2014). While the latter is closely associated with the judicial world and is set in laws, humanitarianism is about the ethical and moral, and is open to ad hoc interpretations. Ticktin (2006) demonstrates the growing pressure on the sans papiers in France to prove illness in order to be granted asylum. In line with Agamben’s work, she argues that the state’s choice in favor of the suffering body is also a way to de-politicize refugees.

Humanitarianism has further been criticized for the fact that refugee camps do not offer the protection they espouse to (Agier 2008), that aid workers find themselves the gatekeepers to resources (Feldman 2007) and practice triage (Redfield 2013), and are often motivated by their career aspirations (Malkki 2015). Altogether, humanitarian institutions and their workers participate in the creation of hierarchies of humanity, which value some lives over others (Asad 2003; Fassin 2007). What we discover among soldiers on the Egyptian Israeli border is in no way disconnected from these contemporary characterizations of humanitarianism.

William Walters considers humanitarianism as a form of governmentality specific to borders, which he calls “humanitarian borders.” He argues that such borders exist on frontiers where there is “an uneasy alliance of a politics of alienation with a politics of care” (2011, 144)—where people fleeing from
disintegrated states or escaping oppressing regimes arrive at the doorstep of richer and more stable states. The implementation of humanitarianism at such borders, he notes, is neither coherent nor universal; it is a strategy that comes into play only in specific locations and in certain circumstances (Walters 2011, 146–47).

This “shifting strategy” is apparent at two levels: On the institutional level, where formal border policy is decided, and at the tactical level, where the policy is translated into actual practices. Although there is a typical structural gap between the two levels, and ground-level state agents often receive general instructions from their superiors, the incoherence of institutional policy generates a unique type of governmentality characterized by “fragmented sovereignty” (Gazit 2009). This governmentality is based on an increasing power of ground-level state agents who shape the actual policy. Fragmented sovereignty is common in contested political situations, and when it is in the state interest to base its authority on multiple, localized and temporal cores of governance, instead of formal political institutions. It is important to note, however, that even in such cases, the state and its institutional settings are never really absent; its directive power, as vague as it may be, continue to influence the ground-level agents.6

This generates a political order that is governed by seemingly contradictory logics that are implemented in an arbitrary and changeable manner. Before exploring the implantation of these logics, we outline the recent history and geopolitical characteristics of the Israeli–Egyptian border.

**The Setting**

The Egyptian–Israeli borderline is 245 miles long. Its northwestern edge is located along the densely populated and besieged Palestinian Gaza Strip, while its main part runs through arid, sparsely settled desert land. Its south-east end is in Taba, south of Eilat, on the Gulf of Aqaba (see Figure 1). This border was set in 1906 as a dividing line between the Ottoman and British realms of influence; and during World War I these two armies fought in its vicinity, with the consequent British victory. Shortly thereafter, the League of Nations handed a Mandate over Palestine to Great Britain while Egypt remained under indirect British influence; hence, this border lost its significance for a time. In 1948, the border re-emerged, separating Egypt and Israel; but during the 1967 war, Israel invaded and captured the Sinai Peninsula, once again rendering this line irrelevant. Finally, in 1982, following the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Agreement, the border re-emerged again as an international boundary.
Two important points become clear from this brief political history. First, this borderline, as many borders elsewhere, was set by empires during the colonial era. Such colonial boundaries persist and continue to play a role long after the empires dissolve. Second, a borderline is somewhat like a reef under a tide, at times surfacing, at other times remaining submerged. This dialectic is linked to the “sacredness” and “triviality” of borderlines, which has found its way into the Israeli public perception of international boundaries (Kemp 1998).

Figure 1. The Egyptian-Israeli Border and the Sinai Peninsula.
During the 1980s and 1990s, following the signing of the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Agreement, this border area had a “sleepy” image, especially when compared to Israel’s militarized northern borders. 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. Smuggling, long a source of income for the local population, prospered. Egyptian investments in the Sinai Peninsula’s development focused primarily on the Red Sea shore, and emigration from the Nile Basin was mainly to these beach areas (International Crisis Group 2007). Egypt paid far less attention to the infrastructure of the Peninsula’s hinterland and to its indigenous Bedouin population. The latter, for the most part, remained marginalized and grew alienated from the Egyptian state (Lavie 1990; Goodman 2014).

While smuggling has always prospered on this borderland, other illicit activities have evolved more recently. Armed insurgent groups have been active mainly in 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 irregular migrants (Lynch 2012; Gittleson 2012; Wieja 2013). The Egyptian state has little control over vast areas in the Sinai. During a visit to the Nitzana border-crossing in July 2013, we witnessed trucks perforated by bullets. The official accompanying us explained the phenomenon, and spoke at length of the disruption of truck transports from Egypt due to these Sinai road attacks.

The turmoil in Sinai was also influenced by changes in Egyptian regimes: Under President Mubarak, tension increased between the central government and the Sinai Bedouins; during the short term of President Morsi, there was a rapprochement; but the instatement of President el-Sisi saw once again the deterioration of these relations.

Irregular migration on this border has changed dramatically in the last decades. During the 1990s there was increase in the trafficking of women from East European countries for the sex industry market in Israel. This trafficking dwindled by the early 2000s, when a different wave of irregular migration, that of African migrants, gained momentum from late 2005. This was partially due to a police crackdown on a refugee demonstration near the UNHCR Office in Cairo. While prior to 2005, a mere three thousand people crossed this border, by 2012, the number of irregular migrants in Israel was more than sixty thousand (Israeli Government 2013). It is important to note that the majority of these migrants would be granted asylum by many states worldwide. 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.
In an attempt to stop the arriving migrants, Israel deployed more military forces along this border. Furthermore, it expanded the nearby prison to incarcerate those arriving, and built the “Holot” detention center, adjacent to the prison, for irregular migrants. It used these measures also to dissuade migrants from arriving. The government’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 the “tsunami” of [Africans] infiltrator who will inundate the country from Egypt, as well as against the armed attacks by Islamists from the Sinai.

The fence led to a dramatic drop in African arrivals. While roughly seventeen thousand people entered through the Egyptian–Israeli Border in 2011, only eighteen managed to do so in 2013. In parallel, Israel’s legislation policy toward the irregular migrants has grown harsher. Since the summer of 2012, a new rule defined every such migrant as an “infiltrator” and allowed for their incarceration in the detention center for a minimum of three years. These newly introduced laws have been challenged in court and some were deemed illegal, but in general the state’s policies seem to have gained the upper hand.

The Methodology

Our study was conducted during a period when this border and the struggles over migrant policies were major public concerns. Fieldwork, which began in May 2012 and was concluded in May 2014, covered a time of dramatic changes. Our main research methods were participant observation and interviews, which we paralleled with surveys of local and international media regarding the border events. Our observations were conducted through roughly twenty day-fieldtrips, in which we visited some sites on a regular basis, including the border fence, military posts, the detention center (while under construction and later when inhabited), the Nitzana commercial border crossing, and the army’s registry office for the Multinational Task Force (which is based in the Sinai and whose personnel often cross into Israel). During these day-trips, we did not conduct long interviews but rather engaged in conversations with the people we met, including soldiers.

In addition we conducted ten in-depth interviews off site with Israeli conscript and reserve soldiers who served along the Israeli–Egyptian border between 2005 and 2014. Our interviewees served in different divisions in the Israeli army, including elite, infantry, and observers’ units (the latter being responsible for monitoring the border.) The interviewees were located through personal contacts and Facebook. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew by the authors and two research assistants in the interviewees’ homes, workplaces,
and in cafes. Our informal chats with soldiers at the border took place near military posts, near the civilian settlements, and at the border fence.

In Israel, all citizens other than Palestinian-Arabs are obliged to serve in the army. In light of the shared background between researchers and researched, it was relatively easy to find contacts and establish trust. Still, there were topics on which the soldiers tended to keep silent about such as the pushbacks they were expected to carry out against irregular migrants. In these cases we used soldiers’ affidavits, which were presented by Human Rights Organizations to the Israeli Supreme Court. In order to safeguard the interviewees’ identities, we use pseudonyms here, and where needed we omitted identifying information such as names of units and the exact location of the events described. Since this study on the soldiers’ conduct is part of a larger project, which includes interviews with asylum seekers, we used some of the latter’s accounts in order to allow for triangulation.

The Shifting Borderland

For many years, the public image of the Egyptian–Israeli border was that of a peaceful one. However, since 2005, with the arrival of more African migrants and later with the toppling of Mubarak’s regime in 2011, this image changed. Moreover, terror attacks in the Sinai and on the Fence received more publicity and were linked to events elsewhere in the Middle East. After such attacks, more highly trained Israeli military forces were mobilized to the border, thus highlighting its dangerous facet.

The soldiers stationed at this border had to reconcile two contradictory images of it. On the one hand, it had a seeming dormant nature, especially when compared to the Syrian and Lebanese borders, and the ongoing clashes and violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. It was considered a “border of peace” and the loose and scattered barbed wire fence that kept it open only nurtured this perception. On the other hand, the southern border has become a site of occasional attacks, and even though these were from a rather vague enemy in a country with which Israel has a peace agreement, from a military perspective it demanded an operational alertness.

The soldiers highlighted this duality. We interviewed Sergeant Karmel in the spring of 2013, shortly after he was discharged from regular army service. He had been stationed on the border as a combatant soldier with a patrol unit between February 2012 and February 2013, during which time hundreds of migrants were arriving monthly and the fence was being built, and he told us,

[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 borderzone and occasionally they attack us. Those are kind of teasing games. . . . Altogether terror attacks are not common. However, there is tension because something might occur any minute and there are alerts all the time.

Karmel highlights an operational tension fostered by army alerts and fueled 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 events on the other side that occasionally “spill over.” It is not characteristic for a soldier to be an idle witness rather than an active agent. Moreover, he does not fully understand what he is watching. Are those on the other side of the border associated with the *Jihad*? The *Hamas*? Clearly, Karmel is quite confused by the situation, unable to tell who the enemy is and what his mission is. Other soldiers also told us 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. As a result, informal information was transmitted between soldiers and units.

Sergeant Yael, another (female) soldier working as an observer on Egyptian–Israeli border, provided a similar description: the events happening on the other side of the border were not clear to her and were quite shocking. She spoke about the testimonies of her comrades. This time, the soldiers witnessed violent episodes, involving the subjugation of African migrants to fatal violence:

*Yael:* They would shoot at them, shoot at them, rape them. They would catch them and rape them and bury them in the sands.

*Did you see that?*

*Yael:* Me? No, thank God. We came after that. I don’t wish to elaborate on what the battalions that were stationed there before us witnessed.

*They saw it?*

*Yael:* They sure did, and you cannot help them because it’s on the Egyptian side, not our business. You can, but you mustn’t, because you don’t want to initiate a war.
These firsthand accounts attest to the ambiguity surrounding the border, which is both peaceful and threatening. This ambiguity, and the soldiers’ sense of ignorance, are intensified by the vague operational instructions they received. The soldiers witness terrible events that take place on the other side, yet are 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, are intensified by the vague operational instructions received with regard to what their main border mission is.

This “haziness” seems to be in operation even when the soldiers come into contact with migrants who cross into Israel. While the official state discourse relates to migrants as “infiltrators” and tags them as a “legal problem,” the soldiers interviewed adopted what can be taken to be a racial discourse, when many referred to all migrants as the “Sudanese.” This generic term was their way of tagging those arriving from Sudan, including those from Darfur and South Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, and even those arriving from West African countries. It was a term that evolved within the army, and attested to an unstated policy that was not interested in the exact identity of those arriving. It reverberated a neocolonial discourse representing the perceived hierarchical relations between the Israeli soldiers and the inferior “Sudanese.” In addition, the choice to use Sudanese as the collective term, rather than Eritreans, highlighted the fact that these are people arriving from a state in enmity with Israel. At the same time, however, it also captured the image of the migrants as refugees escaping poor countries and harsh tyrannies.15

Hence, the border is experienced by the soldiers as a confusing environment characterized by indistinguishable actors and troubling events. The duality of the border as peaceful and threatening at the same time is also intensified by the lack of clear institutional orders that would define the situation and guide the soldiers. The intersection of two border phenomena, the growing irregular migration and the occasional cross border insurgency, obliged the soldiers to maneuver between what they experienced as two contradictory operational logics of security and humanitarianism. The soldiers understood these logics as institutional guidelines but what did they entail?

**Securitization and Arbitrary Humanitarianism**

The soldiers were the first to receive the migrants as they crossed into Israel. The migrants, having completed a long journey, would be exhausted, hungry, and often wounded. Those having gone through the Sinai torture camps were in the worst condition. They would cross the barbed wire and wait for the Israeli patrol on the detection road. The army commanders ordered soldiers
to follow security clearance procedures at this first contact. This procedure echoed the one regularly imposed on Palestinians crossing checkpoints in the Occupied Territories. Such clearance was likely part of a more general attitude to tag those arriving as a potential threat: at this point of first contact, the migrants were “securitized.”

One of the soldiers, Staff Sergeant Hagai, described this phenomenon during an interview we conducted in early 2013, shortly after he completed his regular army service. In September 2012, a cross-border attack on Israeli forces securing the erection of the fence led to the mobilization of his special force unit to the border. Although they were sent to deal with potential armed attacks, they found themselves encountering hundreds of migrants crossing into Israel. “Some of the security alerts in the region,” he noted, “were warnings of terrorists arriving from the Sinai alongside the Eritreans and Sudanese. This was the greatest fear.” Unlike others, Hagai did relate to the difference between Eritreans and Sudanese. Yet he connected both to the securitization discourse, fearing that terrorists could easily infiltrate with migrant groups. He described his first encounters with migrants, highlighting the security procedure:

At first they would cross and we had to contain them, encircle them from all directions; make sure that they are all together and no one is escaping. Doing [security] clearance, making sure that they are not carrying weapons. You mustn’t stand near them. The men have to pull up their clothes and the women must press their clothes against their bodies so that we will see that they are not carrying weapons of this type or the other.

While Hagai seemed to adopt this securitizing logic, some soldiers did not easily subscribe to it. In another interview, Sergeant Major Itzik, an older and more experienced reserve soldier, argued the opposite:

It sounds to me far-fetched to assume a terrorist would enter a group of refugees and shoot from within it; it’s racial bullshit. . . . It’s a One Thousand and One Nights’ fable to say that terrorists fight from within a civilian population. . . . It’s very rare. . . . You wouldn’t seek a situation whereby four armed soldiers surround you at a distance of two meters when you are in the midst of a civilian group and you are white and they are black. . . . You have to be stupid to buy this scenario and sell it to others. Whoever is scared of such a scenario is a hostage of fear.

These words reveal suspicion toward the rationale disseminated from above, intended to inform Itzik of his role. As a social activist in his midthirties, Itzik is perhaps more willing than others to expose the “manipulation of
ambiguity,” which operates at the border. The soldiers were instructed to follow regulations but as we see, they were not always persuaded by the logic behind them.

Shortly after the “clearance procedure,” soldiers were to don their humanitarian gowns. At this point, the migrants were transformed from potential terrorists to destitute people in need: the soldiers tended to their wounds, offer them food and biscuits, and occasionally host them at their army post for a day or two. In these cases, the soldiers temporarily became humanitarian aid workers—to the extent that some army bases stocked baby food and diapers, as one of the officers mentioned with pride. These acts of humanitarianism also echoed in the migrants’ narratives. Gabriel, an Eritrean asylum seeker, told us the following:

I was surprised by the attitude of the Israeli soldiers. They were pleasant, sympathetic. They approached us and gave us food and water and brought us to their base. Then, one of the soldiers took us to the Central Bus Station in Beer Sheva [the largest city near the border, from where buses leave to Tel Aviv]. He told us to wait. We were several refugees there. We waited but he did not come back. We then understood that we must take care of ourselves.

As we see, after nursing the migrants and addressing their immediate needs, the soldiers would drop them off or hand them to the police or Prison Service, depending on the decision of the commander or the prevalent practice.

In parallel to the above trajectory, which was the common one, a far less humanitarian logic was also in operation. These were the “hot returns,” a euphemism used to describe the immediate push-back of arriving migrants to the Egyptian side. This procedure was in use from as early as 2003 and became more widely spread in 2007, as the numbers of migrants arriving increased. When soldiers asked their commanders about the legality of the procedure—and here again we encounter the soldiers’ discomfort with their role—they were often told there was “an agreement” with the Egyptian side at the field level. At the same time, they were told that despite this agreement, “officially, Egypt is not willing to accept these people back to its territory.” It was unclear to the soldiers if such an agreement actually existed and how binding it was. Hence, they sensed that they were operating in a gray area, possibly constructed as such to enable juggling possibilities.

In the absence of a formal protocol, “hot returns” were implemented in a variety of ways. Some units sent the migrants back immediately after they crossed the border, while others took them to their base, registered their names, offered emergency medical assistance, and then sent them back. At some point, following legal recommendations, the army began conducting
interviews on the border, a mock imitation of a legal intake, to ensure that the migrants were not asylum seekers before they were sent back. The Egyptians would not take migrants back unless it was a “hot return.” Therefore, on some occasions, if migrants were brought to camp and only later returned to Egypt, the army staged a spectacle aimed at the Egyptians, creating the impression of an emergency security event. In an affidavit for court, a reserve soldier named Avi testified following his involvement in such a staged event:\textsuperscript{17}

In order to create the impression that the people just arrived [the migrants], the soldiers were obliged to push the group back to the Egyptian side of the border. Then we fired flares, shot in the air and shouted, as if we had just discovered an infiltration. The lit night, the shooting as well as the shouting were our way of “warning the Egyptians,” indicating that we have just identified “suspicious individuals.”

Avi was to play a role in this theatre, staged to allow for the pushback (De Genova 2013).\textsuperscript{18} He was reluctant to do so because of its consequences and went on to describe how, in carrying out the command, soldiers often faced begging refugees:

When the people [African migrants] understood that we’re going to hand them back to the Egyptian policemen, who arrived on the scene, they cried and begged us not to do so. We didn’t understand their language but it was evident that they were frightened. It was awful. We ignored their pleas and transferred them to the Egyptian policemen who gathered at the other side of the border. . . . We were afraid of what would happen to the people we just handed back to the Egyptians. We asked our [Bedouin] tracker to tell the Egyptian policemen [in Arabic] that we had registered all the names and we took their pictures and that we were transferring this information to the Coordination and Liaison unit. We did that so that the Egyptians would think we had a method of inspection, following their treatment of the people we had just handed back. Although in fact, we didn’t have the chance to register their names due to the chaos.

As we see, some soldiers were at a loss for having to carry out such orders. This was not the moment intended for a humanitarian stance. All Avi could do on the spot was a feeble attempt to help the distressed migrants by telling the Egyptian soldiers that the migrants have been registered and therefore cannot disappear. The soldiers had good reason to fear for the migrants, having witnessed the violence that rules “the game” on “the other side” and being aware as well of the dangers awaiting them in their home countries should the Egyptians send them back.
The following account by Tesfay, an asylum seeker from Eritrea, illustrates the confusion of the soldiers when they were not entirely sure whether they should carry out a hot return or not:

They [the soldiers] talked Arabic. I said that I don’t know it. “Ok, what shall we do?” They were talking to each other: “Ok. Talk to them in English; let us talk to them in English”, they said. . . . “Who knows English?” [I said:] “I do, a little bit”

“Ok, where you are coming from? Why you are coming here?”

“I don’t know why I’m coming. To save my life. I don’t know.”

Ok. They [i.e., the soldiers] talked to each other for five or six minutes.

“Ok, it is ok” they said. “Come here, come here.” [and that’s when they decided to allow the asylum seekers to stay].

We sat in the cars, military cars, and then they took us on the road, maybe ten minutes, and told us to get out of their cars. Then they said: “Put your hands one on one another . . . make a line.” They asked us to make a line. We made a line [laughing]. We didn’t criticize them, and we put our hands one by one like a student in front of the flag, like this.

“Ok, now,” they said, “now walk this way, go back!” they said “Go back!” [pause].

We were confused [laughing]: “What problem is facing us? What is wrong?”

They started to scare us: “Go back! Go back!” they said. They shouted out loud like military orders: “Go back!” Like that. Ok we started, two, three steps. Then, we said: “We don’t go back like this. If you want to kill us, kill us. If you want to kill us you can kill us because if I go back I will not continue my life. If you kill us, it is the same, so you can kill us. We’ll not go.” We shouted, we cried. We shouted on them. It was night; there was no noise. Would somebody hear us from far? . . . We shouted for maybe twenty minutes like that. They start to say, “Why [do you shout] like that?!” they said, they talked to each other. Then we shouted, “We can’t, we can’t. We’ll never go back because there are terrorists over there . . . We don’t go back to Egypt,” we said. Then they talked with us: “Ok, it is ok. Come back,” they said, “Welcome.” They welcomed us and we go to . . . there is camp . . . a refugee camp . . . Israel has a refugee camp over there [in fact, it is probably the prison which Tesfay calls a refugee camp].

Since there is no clear compulsory procedure to guide the soldiers, it is very hard to predict how the soldiers will act and according to which operational logic—securitization or humanitarianism. It depends on local circumstances:
the type of military forces deployed, the soldiers’ previous operational expe-
rience, the commander at the scene and the value system he adheres to. Very
few soldiers, such as Avi, violated orders and informed human rights organi-
zations of this conduct. These organizations appealed to the Supreme Court
against the hot returns. The appeal dragged on from 2007 until 2011, and
remained unresolved as the state attorney then declared that, for the time
being, the hot returns procedure would be suspended.20

The implementation of humanitarianism is also influenced by the presence of
media and human rights activists, yet again also in an inconsistent manner.
While the presence of journalists and human rights activists may encourage the
soldiers to adopt a more humane attitude toward the migrants, it may also bring
about the opposite and increase the staging of securitization on the border.

Because of the growing numbers of refugees who arrived along the border
and the pressure from human rights organizations, the Supreme Court, and
the international community to allow a fair asylum procedure, the State of
Israel was in search of a “quick solution” to the porous border. In 2010 the
government decided to build a fence and hastened its erection. Indeed, it was
nearly completed by the end of 2012. While the number of irregular migrants
arriving dropped dramatically as a result,21 the fence did not entirely “solve
the problem,” as it triggered situations whereby choices would again have to
be made between taking a humanitarian versus a securitization stance.

Migrants continued to arrive at the fence in the months that followed its
errection. Many of them were survivors of the torture camps, which by then
“prospered” in the Sinai. In the camps abducted migrants were incarcerated
and tortured for ransom. One event that drew international public attention
occurred between August 30 and September 6, 2012—at the height of sum-
mer, in the heat of the desert—when a group of twenty-one Eritreans was
stranded between the original barbed wire and the new, five-meter-high steel
fence.22 All were men, with the exception of two women, one of them preg-
nant, and a fourteen-year-old boy.

In this case, which was covered by the media, senior state officials entered
the picture and decided to perform a hard line, whereby no one will enter. At
the same time there was pressure from activists and human rights groups. The
soldiers were expected to act as a barrier between the stranded migrants and
Israeli civilians, who had arrived on the scene, attempting to deliver food and
water. The area near the fence was declared “a closed military zone” and only
the soldiers were permitted to stand there.23 The Haaretz newspaper described
the soldiers’ position as follows:

The group [of migrants] has not had food since Thursday. The Israel Defense
Force soldiers say they have been ordered to give them water, “but a limited
quantity.” One soldier said he is afraid the migrants might dehydrate; he said he and his fellow soldiers are upset that they have not received clear orders from their superiors as to how to relate to this stranded, vulnerable group of Africans.

The soldiers do not know what will happen to the migrants, whose circumstances are getting worse due to a lack of food and water, as well as the extreme heat. The IDF has supplied them with some material to protect them against the sun. [our italics]

The common interplay that we have already witnessed—creating a humanitarian crisis by closing off the border, declaring it a security issue, allowing for some humanitarian aid, cutting it short—is captured in this episode. Here is the dialectical nature of the trope: Humanitarianism and Securitization are not oppositional; rather, they are complementary. Yet for the soldiers, at least as described in the newspaper, it was a far more confusing combination.

After eight days, three of the twenty-one stranded Eritreans—the two women and the teenaged boy—were given permission to enter, while the eighteen men were forcefully pushed back into Egyptian hands. While usually, the soldiers were expected to traverse the gray areas of the border far from the public eye, in this instance they were in the spotlight. They were forced to act out the spectacle that would give the image that the border is uncrossable yet that there was a humanitarian component to the securitization.

As we see, at the institutional level humanitarianism and securitization are inextricably connected. However, at the level of the field, their implementation is often experienced as incongruous. While this duality was consistent with the way the two border logics are often carried out, the exposure and exceptional instructions from above intensified the tension among the soldiers.

Summary and Conclusion

Although borders are institutional entities used by the state to mark sovereignty and maintain spatial and political order on their margins, they often generate the very opposite; smuggling, insurgency, and irregular migration are inherent to borders, and generate what may seem as a disorder. Governments adopt inconsistent policies intentionally, including the simultaneous application of securitization and humanitarianism (Fassin 2011a, 2011b; Walters 2011).

Furthermore, a unique type of governmentality is implanted on the border—fragmented sovereignty. This governmentality is characterized by a nebulous definition of the border (whether it is a border of peace or a zone of conflict).
It fosters an evasive policy with regard to how the border should be managed. This ambiguity, and specifically the simultaneity of securitization and humanitarianism, is handed down to the state’s ground-level agents—the soldiers.

In the case we presented, the soldiers were supposed to grasp the border as a sleepy one, due to fact that it was a “border of peace,” yet at the same time there were “terror alerts.” Moreover, it was also an active site of criminal activity, primarily of smuggling and a zone through which African asylum seekers/migrants were arriving. As a result, the soldiers grappled with different tropes during their stints.

Moreover, they had to juggle the state’s contradictory logics, often in an arbitrary manner. The political order of disorder has also allowed for a more central role to other agencies such as human rights organizations and the media. While the involvement of human rights activists and the presence of journalists could encourage the soldiers to adopt a more humanitarian attitude, it could also bring about a hardened line of securitization line.

The shifts between logics was influenced by the type of military forces deployed. Mature reserve soldiers tended to have a more critical view toward commands while younger conscripts, who often arrived on the scene after serving in the Occupied Territories, were more compliant. The implementation of humanitarianism and securitization also depended upon the personal choices of commanders on the scene. Therefore, it is not easy to predict when each logic will prevail.

As suggested by Fassin and Walters, securitization and humanitarianism are interlinked governmentalities, derived from governments’ desires to keep their border monitored and secured and, at the same time, to present a humanitarian impression. As we have hoped to show here, their implantation is far from coherent, not merely because the policy itself is vague. The ambiguity develops as a result of the interaction between the governmental inconsistent policy, at the institutional level, and the soldiers’ experiences and moral dilemmas at the field level.

Consequently, the implementation of humanitarianism on contemporary borders is situational and arbitrary. There is a pendulum movement between the logics, whereby one also encapsulates the other, which ultimately leads to a diluted version of each. The only times when one of the logics fully prevails, and it is usually securitization, is during cross-border attacks or when the government wishes to reaffirm institutional control. Under such circumstances, which are exceptional, the soldiers lose their limited agency.

While this article offered a close-up exploration of the Israeli soldiers’ perceptions and conduct of the Egyptian–Israeli border, we can assume that it is not all that different from the circumstances on similar borders. When
there are vast inequalities in power and wealth between the “south” and “north,” and when irregular migrants are treated as a suffering body with no political rights, the close affinity between securitization and humanitarianism is inescapable. A close look at the ways these two operate on the ground is a disturbing one.

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Notes

2. We use the term “irregular migrants” to refer to migrants whose movement takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit, and receiving countries. As we shall elaborate on further down, many of these migrants are seeking asylum, escaping harsh conditions in their home countries.
3. See also Fassin at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDT2mYg6mgo.
4. Another way of putting it is an “ordered disorder.” The term is borrowed from Yonatan Paz (2011), who wrote about Israel’s general policy toward the irregular migrants and asylum seekers arriving through the Egyptian Israeli Border in recent years. Paz borrowed the term from Bertolt Brecht’s *The Exception and the Rule*, 1937.
5. See http://www.sv.uio.no/sai/english/research/projects/overheating/.
6. Fragmented sovereignty also exists as a dominant governmentality in other regions such as in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the West Bank (Gazit 2009, 2015; Ron 2003). The political and legal ambiguity surrounding the Israeli control of these territories has produced greater influence to ground-level Israeli
soldiers and their local initiatives (in contradiction to many other armies). One may argue that this inherent ambiguity makes ground-level agents the only ones who could make a reasoned decision. This generates local initiatives by ground-level commandoes and even common soldiers an important component of the Israeli military doctrine.


11. For African entries in 2011, see Israel’s official data: https://www.gov.il/he/departments/general/foreign_workers_stats


13. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

14. Few soldiers approached Israeli human rights organizations to report the pushbacks in which they participated on the border. Their affidavits shed light on a topic otherwise kept rather secret.

15. In Israel, the term “Sudanese” is often used to refer to dark-skinned Africans, in contrast to the lighter-skinned and “more legitimate” African citizens of Israel, namely, Jews of Ethiopian origin. The legitimacy of this population makes the use if either “African” or “Ethiopian” problematic in our context. That may explain the soldiers’ use of the “Sudanese” tagging toward Eritreans as well.

16. Regular service in the army for Israel’s soldiers lasted three years (and has recently been shortened). During “civilian life,” men are expected to return for a period to the army every year, as reserve soldiers (known as miluim).

17. This quote is taken from an affidavit to a nonprofit legal organization, which was preparing an appeal to the Supreme Court in an attempt to stop the “hot returns.”

18. See De Genova (2013) for a discussion of border spectacles rendering migrants as “illegal.” There is much to be said about border spectacles in the context of the Egyptian–Israeli border, but we do not pursue this direction here.

19. We have carried out some editing of the original text, to make it more clear.


23. To watch the event, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpm4ti_23Fs.

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