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Encounters between Security Forces and African Migrants on the Egyptian-Israeli Border

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The Egyptian-Israeli border was set following a 1979 Peace Agreement. Defined as a “border of peace”, it was characterized by its porousness and low levels of securitization. As the only land border linking Africa to Asia and Europe, it has long attracted migrants, smugglers and traffickers. During the 2000s, growing numbers of irregular migrants took the Egypt-Sinai-Israel route, many being asylum seekers, escaping civil war in Sudan and Eritrea’s tyrannical regime. The arrival of the irregular migrants changed the nature of this border. The study presented here is a segment of a project still in progress, which looks at this border as a contact zone between the Global South and North, in this age of migration.¹⁾

Different populations are bound to this border : Security forces, both Egyptian and Israeli ; a Multi-National Force, monitoring the implementation of the Peace Agreement ;²⁾ the indigenous Bedouin population, some of whom make a living off smuggling and trafficking ; Israeli settlers, who have moved here searching for a life on the frontier ; Asian laborers working the agricultural hothouses managed by the Israeli settlers ; and the African migrants mentioned above.³⁾ The study presented here dwells on the ways through which Israeli soldiers stationed at this border deal with its complexity.

In recent years this has become an “overheated” border, to use Thomas Eriksen’s term.⁴⁾ The soldiers encounter illegal African migrants who arrive from a long hazardous journey. Some migrants arrive after being kidnapped, incarcerated and tortured for ransom money by criminal networks. Moreover, the border’s Egyptian side is the semi-ruled Sinai Peninsula, where revolutionary armed factions operate. The overheating of this border led Israel to build a fence along it, completed in 2014.⁵⁾

To explore the ways through which Israeli soldiers dealt with the border situation (until the erection of the fence, when the situation changed), we conducted anthropological fieldwork. Fieldwork, carried out between 2012 and 2014, was comprised of trips to the border ; interviews with Israeli soldiers ; interviews with Israeli settlers, Eritrean asylum seekers and Bedouins ; surveying media reports on this border’s event ; and reviewing Human Rights’ Organizations’ appeals to the Supreme Court on behalf of asylum seekers.

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1) On the contact zone, see Pratt 1992.

2) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multinational_Force_and_Observers

3) On the northern edge of this border is the Palestinian Gaza Strip. Our study excluded this northern section due to its particular nature. Moreover, our study could not cover the populations living on the Egyptian/Sinai side of the border.

4) <http://www.sv.uio.no/sai/english/research/projects/overheating/>

5) Ever since the erection of the fence, far fewer migrants take this route and many of the Sinai torture camps have closed down.

Our findings point to the contradictory roles which soldiers are expected to fulfill along the border. They are seemingly the embodiment of the state's military policy yet at the same time they also follow a moral code vis-à-vis the migrants/asylum seekers. As an outcome, there is a slippage from one type of logic to the other. Their military screening of migrant border-crossers turns into a humanitarian act of assistance, and then transforms into policing, when they take the migrants to prison or, at times, force them to cross back into the Sinai. This kind of ad hoc humanitarianism echoes studies that have pointed to the structural similarities between military and humanitarian actions (Didier Fassin 2007, 2011, 2012). William Walters argues that such a convergence is exceptionally evident on the "humanitarian border," which evolves on frontiers where there is "an uneasy alliance of a politics of alienation with a politics of care" (2011 : 144).

Soldiers on the Egyptian-Israeli border define their experience as being exceptionally puzzling, unaware of the fact that such confusion is a global phenomenon. The soldiers' encounters with the migrants/asylum seekers can be termed "situational humanitarianism."⁶⁾ For short spans of time, some soldiers play a role in assisting those arriving, sometimes as a local initiative, depending on the time, the officer, the mood. At the same time, soldiers are also expected to close off the border, thus placing the migrants at risk. Situational humanitarianism is a short-lived type of humanitarian action, easily overrun by other border logics. This triggers a set of questions regarding the gap between official state policies and a border's reality, especially on "frontiers of poverty" between the global south and north.

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6) See Gluckman 1958 on situational identities.