Border-Zones Between and Within Military Occupied Territories: The Israeli-Palestinian Case

Nir Gazit
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Introduction

During the past decade, various scholars have called attention to the growing involvement of military forces in controlling the border. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as “militarization of the border” (e.g. Andreas, 1996; Brownell, 2001; Dunn, 1996, 1999, 2001; Palafox, 1996), reflects the increasing influence of a “paradigm of suspicion” (Shamir, 2005) that determines the “license to move” and to cross borders in proportion to the degree to which the agents of mobility are suspected of representing a threat.

As a consequence border-zones and especially border-checkpoints in recent years have come function as security buffer-zones, oriented toward closure and to the blocking of access (Cunnigham, 2004; Shamir, 2005), and consequently, have come to be increasingly dominated by a military rational and a militaristic mode of action. While this development has raised growing concerns regarding its costs and consequences, for example, in the repeated violations of human rights (Huspek et al., 1998; Palafox, 1996) and in the frequent use of violence against civilians (Dunn, 2001), the involvement of military forces at the border raises further questions and complexities that have gone largely unexamined.

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2 The presented paper is part of a wider research project regarding the checkpoints operated by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in the Occupied Territories carried out by Eyal Ben-Ari, Meirav Maymon, Ron Shatzberg, and Nir Gazit. Correspondence should be directed to Nir Gazit, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mt. Scopus Campus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel; e-mail: msngazit@msec.huji.ac.il.
In this article, I would like to propose that the recurrent encounters between military forces and civilians at the border-zones have transform them into civilian/military hybrid spaces that are characterized by inherent tensions between (at least) two distinct systems of discourse and practice: those of the unprivileged civilians who struggle to cross the border and thereby improve their life opportunities, and those of the privileged, who try to standardize and even entirely prevent such border crossings--mainly for security, economic and political reasons.

Consequently, such a transformation of the border raises a number of questions: First, how are such hybrid border-zones being managed and controlled by the soldiers? This question relates to the actual mechanisms the military employs at the border and focuses on the actual performance of soldiers in their border missions. Furthermore, it is especially interesting in examining whether the soldiers import their conventional militaristic modes of action to their border posts or whether they adopt certain modifications and restraints in response to the civilian facet of their border missions? Second, what kinds of tensions emerge as a consequence of the transformation of the border into a multifaceted social sphere and what are the points of friction between the soldiers and civilians? And third, what are the intended and unintended social dynamics that characterize the border and can we identify certain dynamics that challenge the inherent oppositions embodied in such hybrid border-zones?

While these questions are relevant in any case of the penetration of military forces into civilian spheres, they seem to carry special importance particularly during blurred or ill-defined situations of neither war nor peace, when the formal status of the border-zone is ambiguous. In such cases, for example, during low intensity conflicts and during prolonged military occupation, the civilian routine at the border is
accompanied by active and violent clashes between the military and rival armed militias. Yet the civilian dimensions of the armed conflict around the border must also not be discounted. Against this mixture, it seems that analyzing the phenomenon of the “militarization of the border” in the context of such indefinite situations has the potential to disclose the contradictory forces that shape the border and the experiences of groups and individuals engaged at the border.

In this article, I attempt to frame the checkpoints between Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories as a diagnostic site where we can study the dynamics of power and control of militarized border-zones in general, and specifically in the context of a prolonged military occupation. The analysis will focus mainly on the Israeli soldiers and their performance and dilemmas during their service at the closure checkpoints within the Occupied Territories and at the border checkpoints between these territories and Israel.

Accordingly, the aim of the analysis is threefold: first, to systematically describe the interrelated modes of control as implemented by the Israeli soldiers at the checkpoints; second, to conceptualize the complex tensions, relations, and images of the checkpoints, as they are conceived and interpreted by the soldiers who manage them; And third, to offer preliminary conclusions and recommendations for the potential improvement of such border mechanisms, considering security needs, and human rights and humanitarian necessities.

The focus on the analysis of the micro-practices and experiences of the soldiers is not incidental. As I intend to illustrate, the ambiguity of such border procedures and the lack of clarity regarding the gap between the official and the actual status of the checkpoints, bring forward the central role of participant individuals in
managing and designing the border. Furthermore, it emphasizes how their perceptions and actions might have meaning and consequences far beyond their concrete setting.

**A Note on Methods**

The analysis was based on threefold methodology that enabled a multidimensional analysis of the phenomenon. First, the research team conducted more than 50 interviews with Israeli soldiers and officers and more than 15 interviews with Palestinians on the border between Israel and the Occupied Territories. The interviewees for this project were located in two ways. About half of them were located by using personal networks and the snow-ball method. The other interviewees were located and interviewed during observations at Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) checkpoints in the Occupied Territories. Second, 15 observations were carried out at IDF checkpoints, mainly at the Kalandia checkpoint between Ramallah and Jerusalem and at the checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The third and complementary method consisted of analyzing unclassified documents of the Israeli army and other security forces, including press releases and unclassified internal reports concerning checkpoint procedures and the public debate surrounding them.

**The case**

The border between Israel and the Palestinian territories is not an official or recognized international border. As long as Israel and the Palestinian Authority fail to resolve the conflict and arrive at a final status agreement regarding the Occupied Territories, the border between these two political entities, and particularly the ubiquitous checkpoints along it remain areas of dispute and sites of friction between
Israelis and Palestinians that symbolize the conflict and are characterized by manifest disorder and frequent acts of violence by both sides.

Although Israel has controlled the West Bank since 1967, the IDF began to establish its border and enclosure checkpoints only during the Intifada (1987-1993), the first Palestinian uprising against Israel (Bornstein, 2001, 2002, Rosenfeld, 2005). According to the United Nation Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the IDF operates approximately 60 permanent checkpoints along the border between Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories and within the West Bank (OCHA 2005). The operational rational behind these checkpoints was the need of the Israeli authorities to monitor and regulate the movement of Palestinian laborers from the Occupied Territories into Israel, and of Palestinian civilians within the Occupied Territories themselves—mainly for security and demographic reasons. This concern has become particularly acute since 1996, when a series of terrorist attacks, led mainly by the militant Palestinian organizations of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, struck at major Israeli cities, claiming the lives of dozens Israelis and injuring hundreds more. When these attacks became a continuous threat, particularly after the eruption of the second Palestinian uprising (2000-2004), Intifada El-Aqsa, the checkpoints became a major element of the Israeli military’s “preventive policy” against terror.

According to official IDF documents (Vainer and Shatzberg 2004), the checkpoint has four main objectives: (1) preempting terror activities by restricting the movement of certain individuals; (2) apprehending suspected terrorists with outstanding warrants on the basis of available intelligence; (3) blocking of axes of movement at the checkpoint; and (4) the protecting the force that is deployed there. However, realizing these objectives has not been easy.
The most conspicuous feature of the checkpoints is their being condensed spaces in which various populations and rival sides interact on daily basis. At the checkpoints, we can find various Israeli forces (comprising army units, regular police, and Border Police officers), Palestinian civilians representing the entire spectrum of the Palestinian population (women, children, the elderly, workers, student, officials, service personal, and so on), Jewish settlers, media correspondents, human rights activists, and members of humanitarian organizations--each with his own perceptions, purposes, and agendas.

As a result, the checkpoints are much more than “neutral” passageways. For the Palestinians they constitute a prominent symbol of the Israeli occupation and of the humiliation, constraints, and animosity associated with them. For Israelis, these are primarily sites for discovering actual and potential terrorist threats and are seen as a means of protecting the country and its people. Consequently, the checkpoints are more than just border crossing-points or mechanisms of security: they represent unique social locations in which rival sides meet, interact, and practice their conflict.

The sheer scale of the movement of people and goods through the checkpoints, the diversity of groups and individuals (each with their own interests and characteristics) found there, and the great difficulties of distinguishing between armed aggressors and innocent persons on the part of the security personnel, make the management of the checkpoints an exceedingly difficult task for the Israeli military. As a consequence, it has instituted three (analytically distinct) modes of control of the Palestinians moving through them: an administrative mode, a security mode, and a humanitarian one.
The administrative mode of control

One way to understand the function of border checkpoints in the Occupied Territories is to look at them as administrative “processing machines” that have been established by Israel: that is, as a mechanism for controlling the movement of Palestinians between different territories. In other words, one facet of the soldiers’ work at these points involves making decisions based on a set of bureaucratic rules, regulations, and classifications that have been produced and defined by Israel’s security forces on the basis of demographic data (such as age, place of residence, family status and health condition), past “behavior” (such as involvement in terror activities or links to others who have been involved) and family ties with people who have died in Israeli attacks (the assumption being that they may seek revenge). These data are collated by the security forces and then distributed down through the lowest levels of the military hierarchy to the soldiers at the checkpoints, who control the passage of Palestinians through them.

The aim of this mode of control is the proper and efficient handling of cases so that the civilians flow through the “filter” of the checkpoints, while those who should not, are stopped by it. Yet attempts to institute this mode – based on the sorting of Palestinians into various categories seems to fail consistently – mainly due to the difficulties of the soldiers in applying the general categories defined by the military to various concrete cases, and in reacting to the constantly changing orders and regulations stipulated by the Israeli security forces.

The Israeli army divides the Palestinian population into no less than four general classes and over forty sub-categories, each of which entails different regulations regarding movement through checkpoints. To give a few examples of the variety of cases soldiers must handle, one can find Palestinians with blue
(Israeli), green and orange (Palestinian) ID cards, residents of the territories with foreign passports, individuals with VIP status and documentation, pupils and students, tourists, and journalists (local and international). Each of these categories, or a combination thereof, is governed by different regulations allowing various kinds of passage between differentially defined areas.

It is not surprising to learn that one implication of this situation is the depersonalization of Palestinians. Instead of an individualized, case-by-case scenario, the interaction occurs between categories and roles. It is distanced and alienated and therefore depersonalized. The effect is exacerbated, furthermore, by the informal categorizations employed by both sides. The soldiers and the Palestinians perceive one another as undifferentiated collectivities, through vague categorizations, such as the “pregnant woman,” the “good” and “bad” soldier.” These stereotypical distinctions intensify the mechanical nature of the work in the checkpoints, and as I will show, many times trigger verbal and physical abuse of soldiers against Palestinian civilians.

Conversely, they create numerous difficulties for the soldiers: First, for the soldiers who were interviewed, deployment at checkpoints represents a duty that does not fit their image of soldiering. The reasons, of course, are that these assignments are usually monotonous, routine, and involve civilians as the object of various procedures. Therefore, for soldiers Israel’s combat forces, operating checkpoints involves a constant tension between their self-image as fighters and the routines of law enforcement personnel. We found that many soldiers, consequently, close the perceived gap between their military status and their everyday work at the checkpoints by maintaining the image and reputation of their
units as strict, self-confident, and assertive and by translating these images to aggressive behaviors towards the Palestinian civilians.

A second and probably more difficult problem is that the classifications supplied by the IDF both constantly change and are difficult to apply. The orders governing the procedures at checkpoints seem to be in constant flux. As a reservist told us,

There was a briefing… I asked the commander what I should do when an old man comes to me without a permit. So he answers me ‘Under no circumstances do you let him through’… A minute later they tell you which populations you have to be sympathetic with: women (mainly with young children) and the elderly… So tell me what am I supposed to do, to let the old man pass or not? You feel as though they are insincere with you with these arbitrary principles and that in the end, you have to be the one to make the decision… I think this is the hardest part of the checkpoint, that you don’t have black-white, everything is gray. Every humanitarian case can turn into a suicide terrorist in seconds, and every suspect can be just a poor guy on the way to work and when you delay him you put more hate into his heart.

Another reservist told us,

The experience of the checkpoint is one of a big confusion… You don’t know who is against whom… It is especially true of the big checkpoints… simply a market… There are soldiers of all kinds, peddlers, taxi drivers and add to that the women of MachsomWatch… And you are in the middle of this noise and you have to find the suicide terrorist on his way to Jerusalem. Tell me how you do it. I think that something is wrong with this whole idea and they try to improve things all the time and this is part of what creates the confusion. Everyday they change
the regulations. But go explain this to the thousands of people who were given another explanation yesterday.

From the military’s point of view, the third problem is that the Palestinians are highly adept at learning the system and using it to their own advantage. Palestinians often gather information about which unit is staffing which checkpoint, how easy it is to pass through, and who are the “good” soldiers that can be talked to (and persuaded). As a brigade commander in the reserves commented (Harel and Isacharoff 2004: 340), “You get a directive not to let students through and within five minutes all the Palestinians that are going there by bus present themselves as construction workers. They have developed an ability to adapt themselves to the hardships we pose, in order to survive.” These micro-tactics that make good sense for Palestinians facing barriers are part of something wider. Within the Israeli army, lower-level commanders are often left with much leeway in implementing policy. They are able to render their own interpretation of a given case within the broad parameters established by senior commanders. In this way, the deputy commander of the checkpoint company commented that the “problem is that everyone here has his own interpretation in the name of humanitarianism. There’s [room for] interpretation here, a lot of grey area. There are those that interpret in a lenient way and those that do it in a way that’s bad for the Palestinians.”

What this situation also implies is that the wide latitude for discretion and the adaptive capacity of the Palestinians turns the checkpoints into sites of constant “negotiations” with the security forces. Within these parleys, Palestinians
often look for coalition partners among the soldiers. One example was provided by a reservist we interviewed:

A Palestinian man of about 45 or 50 arrived and did not have a permit… The soldier that was checking him was a bit young and very quickly it led to arguments and shouts… Suddenly, I see that he notices me and immediately runs forward and gives me his papers (that were not up to date)… I can’t really explain it, but I think that he thought “Here is this older reservist who will let me through”… They identify us [reservists] as a weak link.

Moreover, soldiers encounter constant difficulties in making decisions based on the categorizations at their disposal. The situation is marked by a pull in two directions: the soldiers want to place each Palestinian in a stipulated category and many Palestinians want to show the soldiers that they do not belong to the categories of civilians barred from passage through checkpoints. A female squad leader told Vainer and Shatzberg (2004):

What stories the Palestinians make up!!! Wow! They have a hospital, it seems to me, the size of the whole country. Everyone is going to hospital, everyone is sick. This one, his grandmother died, and this one, his father died, all sorts… They are not very smart in these cases. They have all sorts of permits and documents and can invent an infinite number of documents. Like that they are teachers of something that is not even taught but because there is an order from the commander to let teachers through, then…
The fourth difficulty is that of language. In the first place, as surprising it may be, very few soldiers at the checkpoints speak Arabic and this simple language barrier prevents many small problems from being solved. As Kapra (2003), a journalist who spent time as a volunteer at a checkpoint, observed, once a soldier handed out some pages with translations of Arabic words (including polite phrases), but the soldiers seemed to learn and use only the most common and crude words. Moreover, while in the field we wanted to know whether soldiers were using a small handbook published and distributed by the IDF containing Arabic phrases but found no evidence of its use. Rather, a very rudimentary and vulgar language based on a pidgin Arabic, called “machsomit” (roughly translated as “checkpointese”), has developed over the years. It consists of basic Arabic words, but uses a rather crude and offensive rendering of them. While “functional” at one level – the language allows some communication and transmission of meaning – it certainly intensifies and reinforces the Palestinians’ sense of humiliation.

The final and fifth problem to be noted here is that the checkpoints sometimes create a process of resensitization (Lifton 1973) among at least some soldiers, a process that may, from a military point of view, impair their performance. The experience of the checkpoint provides soldiers with an unmediated interaction with the “enemy” – with Palestinian civilians. The problem, however, is that in contrast to situations in which the military is combating armed aggressors, at the checkpoints it may face severe difficulties in maintaining a distance between soldiers (perpetrators) and Palestinians (victims):
What can I tell you? It’s not easy to see older people and students, women and babies, each one of whom is trying to convince the soldiers at the checkpoint that they have a right to pass and that their story is justified and that despite the fact that they many not have a permit, there is this closure and they just have to go through. I am not even talking about moving into Jerusalem but even the move from one [Palestinian] city to another or from village to village.

Another reservist observed,

The situation at the checkpoint is very ambivalent. On the one hand, you feel that you will prevent the next attack, and if you are too lenient or are too preoccupied by secondary questions of human rights and justice, you will betray your role and a disaster may occur… On the other hand, all of the values that you believe in are in danger. For example, how can you, as a human being, holdup an elderly man on the way to hospital. How can you let an old woman “fry” in the sun because you have just received an order no to let anyone through at the moment…?!

I should be clear that I am not quoting unrepresentative statements or attempting to portray Israeli soldiers as victims of circumstance; rather, I am citing evidence of a process that we found in abundance in our data. The point is that that such a process of sensitization underlies the distress and anxiety that many soldiers experience.

**The militarization of the checkpoint**

Together with overseeing the bureaucratic ‘processing’ of the Palestinian population, the IDF has transformed border checkpoints into military outposts charged with the task of preventing terror attacks and protecting the forces
deployed there. In other words, alongside of their “policing” function, the checkpoints operate as military spaces and employ military procedures in managing the border-zone between Israel and the Occupied Territories. Given the difficulties involved in properly applying the system of categorization, together with the sheer scale involved in the task of handling large numbers of Palestinians, the IDF feels compelled to employ military tactics in the management of border checkpoints. But this is not to suggest that militarization is an alternative to the bureaucratic mode of control; on the contrary, it operates in tandem and parallel to it, as the following examples illustrate:

First, underlying the attitudes and behavior of many (if not most) soldiers toward Palestinians is a very basic military posture that derives from envisioning worst-case scenarios. In other words, the Israeli military, like any military, is an institution that is based on preparedness for the gravest eventualities of attack or aggression. Specifically, the two scenarios to which the checkpoints are linked involve the “slipping” of armed Palestinians through these points to wage terror attacks within Israel, and the possibility of assaults on the checkpoints themselves. One reservist epitomized the thoughts of many soldiers:

It makes me mad, all this talk about “yes to the checkpoints or no to the checkpoints.” All this playing ‘coy.’ My battalion caught three suicide terrorists last year. After you catch that son-of-a-bitch that was going to explode in your face, you understand that you shouldn’t have anything to do with this humanitarianism. Right, it’s hard to be a Palestinian, but it is much harder to take a bus in Israel without knowing if you will come out of it alive. The minute you look at things from that perspective, all question marks disappear.
Thus, many soldiers reported that conditions at checkpoints are perceived as threatening. The feeling of being a small minority in a sea of Palestinians, the close physical proximity to the throngs of people, and the difficulty in distinguishing a terrorist from a civilian has generated a great deal of apprehension.

A second expression of the militarization of checkpoints is the widespread tendency to create fear and trepidation among the Palestinians for the purpose of producing deterrent effects. Generalizing from a relatively trivial case of “misbehavior,” a battalion commander told us:

It starts from the little things. They come to the checkpoint in a hurry, don’t do what they’re told, then they curse and everything starts from the little things… If we don’t react to this obnoxious behavior, we may be perceived as weak and this does not look good. If he [the Palestinian] feels that there is no reaction, tomorrow he will come here and attack us.

The third point involves what military strategists call “force protection”. This term suggests that given the conditions that generally obtain at checkpoints, commanders make the safety of soldiers one of their most important concerns. The concrete measures involved in force protection involves include the use of large, reinforced concrete blocks (with soldiers stationed behind them), watchtowers, machine guns and rifles, and the taking of higher grounds around the checkpoints, so as to prevent potential attacks. Here again, while such measures may contribute to the deterrence of potential armed aggressors, they also add to the alienation of innocent Palestinians who have to cross the checkpoints and to their feeling that the strategies deployed by the IDF are arbitrary.
Fourth, the variety of approaches and violent practices that the soldiers use are themselves grounded in their military experience. When we reviewed the ways in which some soldiers have treated Palestinians, we were reminded of the world of basic training. NCOs and lower level officers often talked about, and to, the Palestinians as though they were trainees that should somehow be “educated” and disciplined. A reservist gave a typical example:

A conscript came over and told me ‘Hold him up… Don’t let him pass.’ When I asked why, he said that a few days ago he was obnoxious to him… Now understand, this Palestinian is about my age and at his age he could be the soldier’s father. And here at the checkpoint, he is educating him, making him run from one place to another. At the beginning it was very hard for me to accept this. Then you understand that he does not have an alternative and that this is a situation that forces you to use different logic.

This reflection leads us to the final, but perhaps the most important implication of the militarization of the border: the frequent use of violence or, as the IDF describes it, of “irregularities” against Palestinian civilians and to the way such action is explained and justified.

Let me begin with a few short examples of what the Israeli army regularly terms “irregularities.” An interviewee, a sergeant and the commander of a checkpoint who was photographed hitting Palestinians and breaking the glass of Palestinian cars said, “I could not control myself. This was the only way I could gain control over the checkpoint.” Another example is from a television program produced and directed by Michal Kapra (2003), who volunteered to staff a checkpoint for two weeks. In one scene, a Palestinian man whispers to a woman
standing next to him to pretend that she is his wife (on the assumption that as a married couple they will be allowed through the checkpoint more easily). When a soldier overhears them, he takes their ID cards as a punitive measure for lying to him.

Palestinians reported similar experiences. In the course of several observations, we noted that soldiers ordered Palestinians to remain in their cars for long periods of time with windows closed and without air-conditioning during the hot hours of the day. In other cases, keys to cars were confiscated as “punishment” meted out to Palestinians who approached the soldiers too many times to ask when they would be allowed to pass a roadblock. Palestinians also reported a practice that was discontinued for a few months but is being renewed: the puncturing of the tires of cars that attempt to bypass checkpoints.

It seems that the manner in which punishments is meted out is also related to the fact that checkpoints are often surrounded by hills and that much of what is going on is open to scrutiny by a variety of actors such as the media and human rights groups. Soldiers at the checkpoints are very keenly aware of this “publicness” and their actions are tailored accordingly. Thus, when they do want to be physically aggressive towards Palestinians some soldiers take them to relatively private spaces – “behind the scenes,” as it were – such as offices or rooms located in or very near checkpoints. Or, the action takes place at night, when many of the usual mechanisms of control are weakened.

One explanation favored by the IDF is to see all of these cases as “irregularities,” abnormalities or aberrations. The following passages are typical in this regard. One officer who served in the territories said, “The cases that were exposed were done so only in a few cases in which the Palestinians complained to
the IDF or when an officer passes a place and sees that something is wrong. Now, when there is fighting in the area it is even harder to control things than when things are calmer.”

By defining various phenomena as “irregularities,” the IDF seems to explain them away. In a sense, the army individualizes illegal and unjustifiably violent actions by attributing them to a few non-professional soldiers, the proverbial “few rotten apples.”

Yet what is it in the context of IDF actions that leads to such actions? What can explain the use of violence? One explanation is what Rosenfeld (2005) calls the “pleasures of duty” among soldiers at checkpoints: the intoxication and “addiction” to the power that comes from being an occupying force. Along these lines, a soldier from the Artillery Corps who carried out infantry work at checkpoint told Amos Harel and Avi Isacharoff (2004: 339), two leading Israeli journalists:

I was surprised at how friends of mine from basic training, people that I loved, enjoyed the small humiliations like making Palestinians stand and sing. The Border Police had their own punishment: a shock grenade for every car that did not stop exactly on time at the checkpoint. We had an officer who made a Palestinian check a suspected bomb on the road instead of waiting for a bomb disposal expert. He said that in this way he was shortening the time for everyone including the Palestinians. It was clear that the attitude at the checkpoints became tougher after [Palestinian] attacks [against Israelis] and that it was not a question of getting tougher directives from our superiors.
Yet to be fair, while we can find such occasional “pleasure-seeking” behavior among soldiers in more combat oriented missions, it appears to be generally uncommon in the present context. Thus, the fuller picture seems to be much more complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, the tendency toward militarization seems to supply pre-conditions for the existence of violence; but on the other hand, the military code of behavior defines such measures as illegitimate as applied to innocent civilians. As illustrated above, it seems that the blurring of the military routine emphasizing the civilian facets of the situation increases the perplexity and apprehension among the soldiers, and as a consequence occasionally removes any moral constraints concerning the use of force or violence. The ambivalence becomes even more striking in the humanitarian and third mode of control.

**Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues**

The third mode of control that relates to human rights and humanitarian issues is perhaps the most interesting since it underscores the inherent tensions that characterize the checkpoints. One could well argue that the militarization of the checkpoints is unsurprising, even banal: if you place combat troops and units at the checkpoints, the reasoning goes, militarization will most likely result. This kind of argument, however, stands in contrast to both the declared policy of the IDF and to certain developments that have occurred over the past fifteen years or so within the Israeli army. To begin with, senior commanders and many soldiers have rather consistently declared that beyond the formal aims of checkpoints, including the minimization of the loss of life and interference with the livelihoods of the broader Palestinian population, there is a need to distinguish between
innocent civilians and armed aggressors and to provide a smooth and efficient “handling” of the people moving through them. Moreover, this kind of emphasis should be seen in its historical context. With the eruption of the Intifada Al-Aqsa, the IDF began to change its public rhetoric and to create a humanitarian discourse centered on its actions in the Occupied Territories.

When we examine the way this rhetoric has been implemented by the IDF, however, we find that it has actually adopted a very narrow definition of human rights: one that restricts the rights of the Palestinians to only very basic needs, such as essential livelihood or medical care in cases of extreme need.

What’s more, the adoption of a human rights discourse and humanitarian rhetoric was largely an as externally generated mandate with which the IDF has had to comply for a variety of reasons, such as public relations, the pressure of the media and social movements, international norms, and public debate within Israel. Specifically, these discourses are often understood by local-level commanders as “just” another operational parameter – such as terrain, weather, or forces to be deployed – to be taken into account in running the border checkpoint and that could, under certain circumstances, be ignored. We found much evidence of such developments in the interviews. One reserve commander with considerable experience in the territories told us that the rules and regulations found at permanent checkpoints explicitly emphasize the need to maintain, as far as possible, the well-being of innocent civilians. In reality, of course, tension always exists between the general intentions of the IDF and its specific security considerations. As another commander told us:
Sometimes we are “over-large” and you see it in the cases where you find like a boy with an explosives belt inside an ambulance and in other cases. But despite these cases we continue to provide a humane passage [through the checkpoints] because it’s important.

Against this background, the IDF adopts two complementary organizational mechanisms that are most clearly recognized as concerned with humanitarian issues: military “humanitarian officers” deployed at the border checkpoints and the informal and rather active involvement of human rights groups at the border checkpoints. Examining these phenomena reveals another aspect of the manner in which checkpoints are managed and controlled.

“Volunteers on the Seam-Line” is the official designation of what are popularly called “humanitarian officers.” As one of the initiators of this organizational appendage of the IDF notes, the project began because of the blatant disorder that characterized the checkpoints during the first two years of the current Intifada. The situation included frequent shooting in the air to gain military control, the hitting and abuse of Palestinians, and a general lack of shelters and infrastructure. As a consequence, a few IDF reserve officers came up with the idea of trying to change the situation. The IDF agreed to a pilot project, begun in March of 2002, when three or four reserve officers (later they included NCOs) volunteered for ten to fourteen days of service to function as “arbitrators” with respect to who can move through the checkpoints and who cannot. Within a few months of its initiation, the army decided to adopt the project as a regular feature of some checkpoints. As our interviewee explained:
The whole rationale of the project is to bring older, more mature people who receive a much more thorough preparation before moving into the checkpoint. They are usually deployed in groups of three or four volunteers. And the trainers commit themselves to coming to the checkpoint once in ten days giving a long briefing of about three or four hours. [In addition] they always coach the new team for a full day so that they internalize the problematic aspects of this job. They [the trainers] are impressive people who have already contributed tens of days to this project.

The way in which such reservists talk about their experiences at the checkpoints underscores the above observations:

I felt a bit like I was babysitting the younger soldiers. Even the commander of the conscripts told us this straightforwardly: that they expect us reservists to worry that things will not get out of control, that there will be no violence and that there will be no “humanitarian cases.” By this they mean that they will not find themselves in the news with a Palestinian that has been beaten or a woman that has given birth at the checkpoint. And it’s funny because what the hell do I know? I do my reserve duty once a year and the regulars and the Border Policemen are here 365 days a year and they know that checkpoint and the [Palestinians] better than any reservist.

In fact, one Palestinian in his mid-thirties told us, “With the pedestrians crossing the checkpoint, it sometimes helps. Why? The older reservists there are capable to using their discretion.” Thus, it may well be that the volunteers are especially suited, as one perceptive individual told us, to showing “the human side of the army.”
Another and rather new development at the checkpoints between the Occupied Territories and Israel is an active and influential involvement of human rights activists engaged in an effort to mitigate the friction between the soldiers and the Palestinians. During the first two years of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, a host of representatives of human rights movements monitored and interceded at the checkpoints. The most ubiquitous and active movement at the checkpoints has undoubtedly been CheckpointWatch (in Hebrew: “MachsomWatch”). This movement was established during the first year of second Intifada in response to repeated reports in the press about human rights abuses against Palestinians crossing checkpoints (http://www.machsomwatch.org). Volunteers from this exclusively women’s movement travel to checkpoints in small groups of two to four members, observe what is going on, document their observations, and report – in text and pictures – to external bodies such as media representatives and to their web-site.

On occasion, some MachsomWatch volunteers actively intervene in the dynamics of the checkpoints. Thus, for example, on one of our visits to Kalandia checkpoint, we witnessed how an inquiry from one MachsomWatch volunteer led to the opening of an inspection position additional to the two that were already functioning. At other times, as we saw in September of 2003, they enter the “negotiations” between the members of the security forces and Palestinians. Most importantly, a direct and independent line of communication was opened to the brigade level and became part of the movement’s “tool box.” What seems to have happened is that the army and the movement have struck a sort of unwritten contract. Particularly at the level of field commanders, the situation implied a willingness to improve things.
I should be clear, however, that the success of the movement is limited. First there are disappointments on the Palestinian side. One interviewee (in what is a rare case) told us that in one instance she talked to three members of the movement and then tried to get around the checkpoint. When that did not work out she returned to seek their help, but they were gone, “And I thought to myself, here they didn’t have the patience to be real participants in our suffering or to wait with us until we passed.” Second, the very presence of the volunteers sometimes contributes to the tensions between soldiers and the Palestinians. As one Palestinian interviewee explained, sometimes the presence of volunteers from MachsomWatch is not a help to the Palestinians:

It fires up the soldiers and let’s them delay the people on purpose. And they sometimes understood this and they distanced themselves. They went over to where the taxis are and only wrote down [their reports].

Thus soldiers tend to see MachsomWatchers as either a hindrance, another obstacle to carrying out their duties or as a mechanism for calming a highly emotional and aggressive situation. In this latter sense, members of the movement act as mediators, as third parties who seek to observe and sometimes intervene in what is going on.

In short, MachsomWatch, like other movements and organizations, seems not to influence many army commanders. In the perspective of the movement, it may serve to diminish the irregularities and ameliorate some of the negative implications of the checkpoints.
Conclusion

The case of the IDF checkpoints, dotted along the borderline between Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories, exemplifies some of the complexities and consequences of the militarization of the border. It also allows us to draw some preliminary conclusions and recommendations for the potential transformation and improvement of such border mechanisms, in accordance with security needs and human rights requirements.

The penetration of the military forces into the border-zone and their participation in a security mission, combined with law enforcement activities among civilians, transforms the border into a twilight zone, in which standards and conventions blur. This dynamic has significant implications on the ways in which the border-zone is managed and on the potential for spontaneous violent confrontation between the military and the civilian who strive to cross the border.

As illustrated in this article, the ambiguity surrounding the definition of the border-zone results in the soldiers of the militarized border checkpoints adopting local and changeable interpretations about the nature of the border-zone and the rational of their border missions. This entails several possible consequences. First, the military—a fighting force—faces acute difficulties in carrying out policing activities in civilian surrounding. As demonstrated here the Israeli army, like that of any military establishment, is an institution that is based on preparation for the gravest eventualities of attack or aggression. The dominant scenario held by the soldiers at the checkpoints includes the fear of “slippage” of armed Palestinians through these points to carry out terror attacks within Israel and the possibility of their assaulting the checkpoints themselves. The implications of this scenario are such that Palestinian civilians are viewed fundamentally and without exception as
potential enemies that could attack Israelis across the border or the military personnel manning the checkpoints. Thus, many soldiers reported that conditions at checkpoints are perceived as threatening. The feeling of being a small minority in a sea of Palestinians, the close physical proximity to the throngs of people, and the inability of military personnel to distinguish a terrorist from an innocent civilian have generated a great deal of uncertainty and increased the justification of “irregular” behavior, such as vulgarity and even violence against civilians at the border--behaviors that would not be tolerated in any other circumstances.

Yet the same ambiguity surrounding the status of the border checkpoints generates creative mechanisms that on the one hand emphasize the above mentioned tensions, and on the other, also alleviate them. The three interrelated modes of control instituted by the Israeli soldiers indicate their awareness of the complexity of their mission at the border. While the first two modes of control, the administrative and the militaristic, were established in order to fulfill the security functions of the checkpoints, the humanitarian mode of control was intended to lighten the burden of the first two on the subordinated civilians, and as such has become an integral part of the operational apparatus of the soldiers. This combination represents the need for ground-level soldiers to develop informal and temporary arrangements in order to adjust to the unconventional mission at the border, arrangements that even have the potential to challenge the inherent oppositions embodied at the border, between friends and foes, between perpetrators and victims, and between the powerful and powerless.

Indeed, by focusing the analysis on the level of micro-experiences and micro-practices, we can comprehend the actual challenges the soldiers confront at the militarized border. Consequently, we can also realize the significant influence
that the soldiers, as social agents, exert on concrete reality at the border. It seems that the more the official regulations become insufficient and inadequate, the more significant this local influence becomes.

Accordingly, a first step toward improving the border checkpoints mechanisms and reducing the potential for violence and human-rights violations at militarized border-zones must concentrate on the micro-level, rather on the level of official policy and official border-crossing regulations. In other words, as long as the military is deployed at the border, this effort should be focused on the military agents that control the border. The Israeli-Palestinian case, given its particularities, supplies some starting points in this direction.

First, a major problem with the checkpoints is the governing assumption on the part of the IDF that they are somehow temporary arrangements and that the involvement of the military at civilian borders will naturally decrease over time. This assumption is connected, no doubt, to the feeling among some senior commanders that the role of the IDF is to maintain the minimal requirements of order so that politicians may work out a long-lasting solution to the conflict. But the neglect of the checkpoints – their placement on the lower rungs of the army’s ladder of priorities – also carries an important, if perhaps unintended, message to the soldiers. In other words, the neglected physical infrastructure of the checkpoints and the relatively low level of technologies deployed there affect the way in which soldiers understand their missions and consequently conduct themselves. Hence, a possible solution to this problem is to create greater stability in the management of checkpoints. This would be possible only by thinking more systematically about the rationale and the efficiency of checkpoints mechanisms,
including a consideration of the micro implications of checkpoint policy on the subordinated civilians and on the soldiers.

A second step toward improvement is to reconsider the quality of the military units deployed at the border checkpoints. One option is to make greater use of older and more experienced soldiers with more moderate attitudes (e.g., mature reservists), a measure which could eliminate certain irregular behaviors directed at innocent civilians. Another option is to heighten the awareness of the soldiers to the needs and problems of the various populations that use the checkpoints. For example, during the past year, the IDF has prepared and distributed a kit for soldiers deployed at checkpoints. This kit – entitled “Values at War: Checkpoints” – includes a cassette-tape and brochures with analyses of events that have taken at the points. It also includes descriptions of the missions involved, scenarios of possible conflict with Palestinians, explanations of the human-rights movements that operate in the field, and accounts of the possible emotional effects of checkpoints on soldiers.

In the same way, creating an ethos of professionalism among the soldiers at checkpoints might serve to reduce the dissonance between their martial image and their pseudo-civilian border mission. It would also minimize any tendency toward irregular and deviant behavior. This could be achieved only by intensive educational and educational instruction among the soldiers and by placing more emphasis on training prior to their employment. Special attention should be given to training sessions emphasizing respect for civilians moving through checkpoints, the prevention of unnecessary delays, the need to apologize for inconveniences, and the ethical imperative of eliminating bribe-taking. These should be supplemented by the preparation of commanders and soldiers for carrying out
their missions through intensive instruction on human rights provisions, security, justice, and familiarization with the customs and needs of the civilian population.

Finally, and probably the most immediate improvement to the checkpoints would be to establish a decent environment for the soldiers stationed there and for the civilians passing through. Environmental improvements would include building toilets, erecting large and clear signposts, clearly displaying telephone numbers for handling civilian complaints, and creating mechanisms for contacting the administration with suggestions for improvement. In other words, the involvement of the military at the border does not necessarily preclude a more benevolent attitude toward civilians, despite the fact that some may represent a threat to the soldiers and to the country.

Scholars have yet to theorize and explain the wider implications and significance of the trend toward increasing the involvement of military forces at the border in general and especially in situations of low intensity conflicts, when the civilian routine at the border is disrupted by military considerations. However, such an effort might well contribute to a broader understanding of the consequences of military intervention at the border also in peace times. Situating particular cases, such as the Israeli-Palestinian border tension, in a comparative perspective would appear to vital to any such effort--and increasingly urgent, given the likelihood that military intervention at border crossings will become commonplace in the era of the global war against terror.
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