

PROJECT ANNOUNCEMENTS

Project:	The social construction of border zones: A comparison of two geopolitical cases
Principal investigators:	Prof. Dr. Gabriele Rosenthal (Georg-August Universität Göttingen), Dr. Efrat Ben-Zeev & Dr. Nir Gazit (Ruppin Academic Center, Jerusalem)
Researchers:	Eva Bahl, M.A.; Habtom Mehari; Or Macover, B.A. Arne Worm, M.A.
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The project examines the social construction of border zones and border activities as well as the processes by which they are transformed. In our selected cases, the borders gradually changed in recent years from being relatively porous for irregular migrants to their almost complete closure. In both cases, though, the border is made porous again through the pressure exercised by migrants and smugglers. We will focus on two structurally very different geopolitical contexts: on the one hand the border regions between African countries and Spain - the maritime border between West Africa and the Canary islands and the border region between Morocco and the Spanish exclaves Ceuta and Melilla - and on the other hand, the border region between Egypt and Israel. This contrastive comparison will help to reconstruct similarities and differences in the construction of border zones and in the practical reality of their implementation by the (inter-) actions of members of different groupings within these localities - the 'doing' of borders. The centers of attention will be, firstly, on the subjective experiences of members of different groupings which are involved in 'border activities' (migrants, policing forces, NGOs, smugglers, inhabitants of border regions, etc.) and the processes of the genesis of their perspectives; secondly on the figurations between and within these groupings which have unequal power chances and, thirdly, on their concrete interactions in everyday life. Apart from the ethnographic research on current experiences of actors and on face-to-face interactions between members of different groupings, we are also interested in the reconstruction of divergent collective, family and life histories resp. of stocks of knowledge of illegalized/irregular migrants in regard to different border areas. Furthermore, we will ask how informal (or unofficial) practices of actors (those practices besides formalized practices of governmental and non-governmental organizations and groupings) are interwoven with formal migration policies and legal frameworks.

First empirical observations: at the border between Morocco and Melilla (Spain)

In April/May 2014, we¹ were in Melilla for our first field stay. In that period of time there was again an increased international media attention focusing on the – at first sight seemingly insuperable – border

¹ The authors Eva Bahl, Gabriele Rosenthal und Arne Worm.

fence between the Spanish exclave and Morocco which, however, hundreds of migrants had managed to surmount in the weeks before.²

The main impression of this stay was that the international media coverage offers a rather one-sided and stereotypical image of this border. Much of what can be observed comparably easy on-site remains frequently unmentioned and has, however, complex reasons at the same time. The absence of the Syrian and Algerian migrants in the coverage is especially striking. Usually, the news are about young Black men³ on both sides of the fence surrounding Melilla. These are on the one hand those who are staying in irregular camps which are located in the forest on the Gourugu Mountain (on the Moroccan side of the border). They are trying and failing to surmount the fence again and again. At the same time, they are being harassed by the Moroccan police, persecuted, injured (sometimes mortally) and expelled violently. On the other hand, there are those who “made it”, but who are now staying in the *Centro de Estancia Temporal de Inmigrantes* (CETI), the local refugee camp that is located in the city’s periphery. There they have to wait until they will finally be brought from Melilla to the European continent. In most cases they don’t have any insight in the further procedure awaiting them.

In the following, before we elaborate on the homogenizing depiction of the young migrants from many different countries in sub-Saharan Africa which neglects the tremendous efforts they had to invest in their migration usually involving considerable burdens as well as a considerable capacity to organize and to orientate themselves, we first want to expand on some observations concerning the Syrian and Algerian migrants.

We had an informal talk with a Guardia Civil officer at the border crossing Beni Enzar. He claimed that the Syrian refugees make up at least *half of* the migrants who are currently crossing the border irregularly.⁴ He added: “But nobody’s talking about that.”⁵

As we learnt during some ethnographic interviews and a group discussion with several Syrian men we had met outside the CETI, the Syrian refugees are crossing the border using fake Moroccan passports. This is possible because Moroccans from the neighbouring regions Tetouan and Nador are exempted from the visa requirements for the autonomous Spanish cities of Melilla and Ceuta.⁶ The very large

² Cf. TAZ (18.03.2014, <http://www.taz.de/!135090/>, retrieved 17.06.2014); FAZ (08.04.2014, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/fluechtlinge-menschenhaendler-passen-ihre-routen-nach-europa-an-12884547.html>, retrieved 17.06.2014); Spiegel-Online (17.02.2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/melilla-30-000-fluechtlinge-wollen-ueber-spanische-exklave-in-die-eu-a-954012.html>, retrieved 17.06.2014); New York Times (27.02.2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/world/europe/africans-battered-and-broke-surge-to-europes-door.html?_r=0, retrieved 17.06.2014).

³ We capitalize “Black” to emphasize that this – originally stigmatizing – social construction has also become a political self-description.

⁴ In the CETI-camp, Syrians are at present the biggest group after refugees from Mali. Cf. El Faro Digital: El número de sirios en el CETI se triplica en apenas mes y medio (<http://elfarodigital.es/melilla/sucesos/144411-el-numero-de-sirios-en-el-ceti-se-triplica-en-apenas-mes-y-medio.html#sthash.uKzXOBvt.dpuf>, retrieved 18.6.2014).

⁵ More specifically, in the research process we will try to interview (insofar as is possible) border officials and to reconstruct their perspectives and patterns of action. In the conversations, their depiction of the situation at the border ranged from an emphasis of the necessity to maintain migration controls to feelings of being unable to cope with this task and of being “left alone” due to the lack of support of other European countries. Additionally, they stress that this border is a European matter and most migrants won’t stay in Spain anyway. The involvement of Spanish border officers in documented violations of human rights (Cf. Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de Andalucía (APDHA): Derechos Humanos en la Frontera Sur 2014: http://www.apdha.org/media/frontera_sur_2014_web.pdf, retrieved 17.6.2014) was expectedly not addressed.

⁶ “Cf. the following document about Spain’s accession to the Schengen Area - Declaration concerning the cities Ceuta and Melilla: <https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-1994-7586> (retrieved 5.6.2014).”

number of daily border crossings add to make this migration route difficult to be controlled. At the checkpoint, an officer of the Guardia Civil told us: “We are requested to guarantee security and a smooth progress at the border. This is a contradiction in itself.”

Migrants from Algeria are even less represented in the media coverage. According to the daily *Melilla Hoy* of April 18th, 2014, in April 2014 200 of the 1800 people in CETI were Algerians. Until the end of 2013 they had even formed the largest group. Syrian CETI-residents told us that the Algerians often remain in the CETI for a very long period of time (for several years) as their first and foremost goal was to apply for the Spanish citizenship.⁷

News items do not live up to this complexity and multiplicity of migration movements at the border of Melilla. Syrians crossing the border using Moroccan passports and women and children in rubber boats produce images which are less spectacular than images of migrants trying to surmount the fence or their almost warlike interactions with the guards on both sides of the border. And neither Syrians nor Algerians nor the migrants from the various countries of south of the Sahara fit the picture of “poverty migrants” who attempt a “run” on the “bulwark” Europe. This stereotypical image shows cracks if we look closer at the multiplicity of backgrounds, motivations, and at the social, cultural, and economic capital (in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu) of those crossing the border irregularly.

Thus, the image conveyed through the media about the migrants from sub-Saharan countries is changing if we meet these migrants and engage in a conversation and listen to their biographical accounts which go beyond the practiced we-presentations and self-presentations. The young migrants from the diverse countries in sub-Saharan Africa are a grouping way less homogenous than the stereotypical media images suggest. Most of the migrants from Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Cameroon with whom we conducted ethnographic or biographical interviews had in common that their markedly difficult and partly perilous route forced them to thousands of overland kilometers, cost them a considerable amount of money, and that they were on the road on their own or with peers. Furthermore, it became apparent how enormously important their intellectual and social competences were to succeed on their route: they were sometimes required to adopt resp. invent a new national, ethnic or religious belonging and they needed to have the necessary means (such as a mobile phone or appropriate language skills) to gather the information needed. In contrast, their life histories differed considerably with regard to the family and life historical constellations when they were departing from their countries of origin, regarding their motives for migration as well as concerning the experienced difficulties during their journey. The length of their migration process to date was first and foremost dependent on their financial resources. Also the experience of the relations to other migrants and the necessity to accomplish different self-presentations during the migration was presented quite differently.

The life-historical constellations which conditioned a departure from their context of origin – partly not with the intention to go to Europe – vary widely. They range from fleeing from collective violence or also familial conflicts, to the wish to enhance their own professional or educational careers. Their sometime ambitious educational aspirations aim at a continuation of their higher education at a European university. Regarding the complex figurations of the migrants with each other, we received markedly diverging depictions. On the one hand, some were emphasizing the solidarity among each

⁷ Migrants who were granted the refugee status are entitled to apply for citizenship if they have stayed in Spain for five years. Cf. http://www.mjusticia.gob.es/cs/Satellite/es/1215198282620/Estructura_P/1215198291413/Detalle.html (retrieved 17.6.2014).

other – especially along the lines of national belonging – and made it clear how necessary this was for a successful migration. On the other hand, other migrants were criticizing power inequalities between and within the different groupings as well as the authority of the leaders, talking about the resulting injustices which they experienced. Most notably visible is the clear tension between francophone and anglophone migrants.

Oftentimes, these migrants had a high social, cultural and/or economic capital; to exemplify, we only name their networks which include siblings and friends who have already migrated to Europe, a (at least started) university education, or language skills. Economic capital and especially the ways to access it, are a further important component of a successful migration strategy. Several men told us that they had carried cash on their body and that, hence, they were exposed to blackmail, theft, and assaults. Therefore, they needed a longer time for their migration route. They were thus forced to work for some time in the countries they were in and to use cheaper transportations routes. Others, however, had stashed money at trustworthy friends and had it then delivered in stages via money transfer services such as MoneyGram or Western Union. An interviewee told us about informal “banks” along the route. One could hand over money there to have it sent to oneself later on (e.g. after the successful border crossing).

These rather sophisticated “practices and strategies of migration”⁸ remain underexposed in the countless media reports. Often they are described in a generalizing and undifferentiated way as dubious mafia activities, although strategies of networking, transferring knowledge and gaining support during the migration cannot be captured in such simplistic terms. Rather these activities are embedded in a framework of unequal power balances, on the one hand between the migrants themselves and on the other hand between them and other actors (e.g. the local population in transit countries). The resulting dynamics of their interactions may be described as a complex and partly contradictory pattern oscillating between economic profit orientation and solidarity.

What equally does not appear at all, or only at the margins, are migrating women and children. They don’t cross the border via the fence,⁹ but by rubber boat¹⁰ or hidden in cars. Here it has to be considered that these routes on the one hand require a way larger economic capital, but less bodily fitness than the surmounting of the fence. On the other hand, the passage is way less dangerous for the migrants’ lives in this geographical context.¹¹

⁸ Marion von Osten 2007²: Eine Bewegung für die Zukunft. Die Bedeutung des Blickregimes der Migration für die Produktion der Ausstellung Projekt Migration. In: Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe (Ed.): *Turbulente Ränder. Neue Perspektiven auf Migration an den Grenzen Europas*. Bielefeld: Transcript. p. 180 (our translation).

⁹ During an informal talk with some Guardia Civil agents, they were explaining that the first woman had crossed the fence a month before. According to them, it was otherwise a migration route only used by men. The USECNetwork-Magazin, citing local NGOs, has it that in February 2014 already the third woman in ten years had crossed the fence (but she was the first minor and additionally suffered a broken shinbone) (<http://usecmagazine.usecnetwork.com/?p=105235>, retrieved 2.6.2014).

¹⁰ Images of rubber boats are very much present in the media. But they usually serve to illustrate the crossing of the Mediterranean in the Aegean Sea or towards Lampedusa. In Melilla, the rubber boats are taking short trips along the coast. Cf. BBC: *Syrians accuse Greece of ‘pushing back’ migrant boats* (<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22757485>, retrieved 18.6.2014); i24 news: *Italy rescues 1,100 boat migrants, warns of surge* (<http://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/europe/140206-italy-rescues-1-100-boat-migrants-warns-of-surge>, retrieved 18.6.2014).

¹¹ A trip that is comparable to the surmounting of the fence regarding the low financial costs and the high danger for life and health is the way across the water (without rubber boats). This strategy gained notoriety when at least 13 young men from Western Africa drowned while they were trying to get to Ceuta swimming. According to the NGO Caminando Fronteras,

In our further research work, which will include the Spanish exclave Ceuta during the next field stay, we will specifically follow up the heterogeneity in the social construction of borders – the varying practices of action and patterns of interpretation of the different actors, their genesis, and their interdependency. Above all, it will be necessary to focus more than before on the perspectives and life historical experiences of Spanish (Muslims and Christians) inhabitants of Melilla and Ceuta in reference to the borde

Eva Bahl, Gabriele Rosenthal & Arne Worm, June 2014

Observations from the Egyptian-Israeli Border

Our study considers social groups associated with the Egyptian Israeli border: Eritreans who have arrived in Israel through this border, Bedouins living near it, Israeli soldiers stationed on it and Israeli settlers who have chosen this location, at the margins. There are other populations along this border but due difficulty of access, we will discuss them only indirectly: Bedouins dwelling on the Egyptian side, the Egyptian police manning the border, the Multi National Task Force (stationed in the northern Sinai) and agricultural laborers brought in from Asia to work on the border plantations.

Why focus on this specific border, stretching from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea? This is a line that may be defined as a boundary between Asia and Africa. To some extent it is an exemplary border since it divides the richer 'north' from the poorer 'south' and the flow of migration is from south to north. It is also a border with two different forms of governance on each side. On the Egyptian side is the Sinai Peninsula, settled mostly by Bedouins and only partially controlled by a state apparatus. In this 'vacuum,' prominent features are insurgents' armed activities, smuggling networks and torture camps established to extract ransom from abducted migrants. In contrast, the Israeli side of the border has evident indications of governance, including army camps, the state's largest prison, a detention center for 'illegal' migrants and a state-sponsored settlement project.

Fieldwork, which began in 2012, came at a time of dramatic changes along this border. In reaction to the growing numbers of those arriving through this border, the government of Israel built a fortified fence (between 2012 and 2014) along its 240 kilometers as well as a large detention center for those arriving. Our study followed the changes. As we have already interviewed settlers, soldiers, and Eritreans, in what follows we summarize some of our initial observations.

With regards to the Jewish settlers, we have recently completed a paper titled "The Quest for a Neo Frontier: Settlers on the Egyptian-Israeli Border." The paper explores the border narratives of Jewish settlers who have moved there since it was set in 1982, following the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement. We develop the term "neo-frontier" to describe a mindset that characterizes these settlers. Being distant from the state's center and far from urbanity, the neo-frontier is constructed as a place detached from the common social order and from mainstream ideas. It resembles the classical Fredrick Jackson Turner frontier in its pioneering spirit, the search for an untouched land, and it walks a thin line between hyper-individualism and hyper-communality. It is also characterized by an ambivalent stance towards the indigenous dispossessed population, often treated as noble savages. While the

they had been shot at with rubber bullets and teargas canisters. Cf. <http://www.abogacia.es/2014/03/14/informe-de-caminando-fronteras-supervivientes-de-ceuta-acusan-a-la-gc-de-disparar-y-negar-auxilio/> (retrieved 17.6.2014).

government expects the settlers to “see like a state” (to paraphrase James Scott, 1998¹²) or at the minimum, to comply with the state’s maneuver between permeable and penetrable borders, the settlers are not quick to adapt. Some settlers adopt a post-national order (if somewhat nascent), both nostalgic and utopic in nature, longing for an open, non-statist spatiality.

We have also begun analyzing the interviews conducted with Israeli soldiers who were stationed at this border. There are three main discursive tags used by the soldiers when engaging with the border’s social groups - security, criminality and humanitarianism. Although each of these tends to be related to a specific social group (insurgents, Bedouins and refugees, respectably), the three easily collapse into one another and the identity of a group swiftly changes in the soldiers’ narratives. The African migrants’ identities range from poor refugees to threatening infiltrators. The Bedouins are the talented trackers, shrewd smugglers and cruel oppressors incarcerating poor Africans for ransom. The Egyptians are simultaneously corrupted bandits and poor prisoners turned soldiers. We suspect that the unstable border reality, including the Israeli government’s erratic policy, the influx of the African migrants and the instability in the Sinai, foster these incoherent identities. We see that the soldiers’ border narratives reflect incoherent representations both of border populations as well as the role of the soldiers themselves. One could almost argue that the most stable characteristic of their border experience is its instability.

Our next steps are to continue biographical interviews with Eritreans and study the Azazmeh Bedouins point of view regarding the border. In both cases the narratives will be analyzed as part of a broader ethnographic perspective. Gradually, we hope to expand the comparative dimension by looking at “our border” in light of the findings in Ceuta and Melilla and vice-a-versa.

Efrat Ben-Ze’ev and Nir Gazit, 19 June 2014

¹² Scott, James C. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale University Press, 1998.