



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Moral othering at the checkpoint: The case of Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians

Grassiani, E.

DOI

[10.1177/0308275X15597307](https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X15597307)

Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Critique of Anthropology

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Grassiani, E. (2015). Moral othering at the checkpoint: The case of Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians. *Critique of Anthropology*, 35(4), 373-388.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X15597307>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

Moral othering at the checkpoint: The case of Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians

Erella Grassiani

University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Abstract

In many ways the Palestinian civilian is the ultimate or significant ‘other’ for the Israeli soldier serving in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). (S)he is the one who will be stopped, checked, controlled and at times arrested. (S)he is the one who negotiates, pleads, begs and sometimes curses the soldier. This other represents, amongst other things, disorder for the soldiers. (S)he becomes the ‘face’ of the hardship, the frustration, anger, doubt and boredom the soldiers associate with their work within a military occupation. To regain a sense of order, control and normalcy soldiers construct the military checkpoint as a ‘moral geography’ where the Palestinian is actively ‘othered’. In this paper I will explore how moral boundaries are drawn along these physical borders in a landscape of conflict, while not losing sight of the symbolic meaning of this border. I will do this by exploring the way Palestinians are made into a moral other by Israeli soldiers, in an effort to create a certain sense of order, at the checkpoint. I will first discuss the checkpoint as a site of ‘moral geography’ that enhances and legitimizes these processes of othering that I will explore next. Finally, I will discuss the way Palestinians are made into a moral other, while tracing this back to a moral discourse that is geared to establish a ‘normalized’ self.

Keywords

Israel, soldiers, moral othering, checkpoints, Palestinians, Occupied Palestinian Territories, moral geography

Corresponding author:

Erella Grassiani, Department of Anthropology, P.O. box 15508, 1001 NA, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Email: e.grassiani@uva.nl

... the roadblock serves as the threshold of an opportunity for contact between the two sides at the roadblock: the 'I,' in military garb, with megaphone and weapon, and carrying out orders; and the you,' who requests, insists, and surrenders (Zanger, 2005: 47).

In many ways the Palestinian civilian is the ultimate or significant 'other' for the Israeli soldier serving in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). (S)he is the one who will be stopped, checked, controlled and at times arrested. (S)he is the one who negotiates, pleads, begs and sometimes curses the soldier. This other represents, amongst other things, disorder for the soldiers. (S)he becomes the 'face' of the hardship, the frustration, anger, doubt and boredom the soldiers associate with their work within the military occupation (Grassiani, 2013). Through processes of numbing soldiers go through and which are closely related to these associations and the spaces in which they work, soldiers experience uncertainty and moral blurring within their daily experiences in the occupation (Ibid.). Within this reality the Palestinian is actively made into an 'other' within the space of the checkpoint.

This moral othering, as I call it here, is not so much based on individual soldier's decision-making and categorization, but it should be seen as part of the behaviour of soldiers that is influenced by the broader (military) system or context they are part of. The military occupation in which Israeli soldiers serve and within which they need to perform specific activities forms the social and political backdrop against which soldiers perform their tasks, but it also presents the actual physical context in which they work. I believe that all aspects of this system influence the behaviour of soldiers, in particular their moral decision making. Thus, instead of looking at individual moral deliberations, I will here analyse the discourse and activities by Israeli soldiers in the larger context they are part of and especially their physical surroundings and the operational dynamics within them (Grassiani, 2013).

I will argue in this paper that this othering by soldiers is done in an effort to regain a sense of order, control and normalcy within the blurred reality of their work. More specifically, I will place the moral othering within the actual spaces where soldiers and Palestinian citizens (often involuntarily) interact on a daily basis. I will argue that soldiers then construct the military checkpoint as a 'moral geography' (Matless, 1997).

Often anthropologists have taken borders and boundaries as their subject of enquiry, where boundaries refer to symbolic and social demarcations and borders to 'real' physical ones (Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler, 2002). While I use this distinction here as well, this dichotomy can be problematic because physical borders can be imbued with symbolic and social meanings as well (Donnan and Wilson, 1999). We should thus combine the two in our approach (Fassin, 2011).

In the context of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, borders are first of all either unclear or even non-existent. Border concepts such as the Green Line refer to historical agreements about territorial separation; however, they are not

connected to daily reality and subsequent human practice. However, the Israeli state has put in place numerous 'border markers', such as checkpoints, walls and fences which have become part of the landscape and of the daily experiences of most Palestinians who are forced to pass or circumvent them on their way to work, school, hospital or simply to visit a relative. As such, this study is not about borders or border crossings that are internationally recognized, but about borders that separate territories and people from each other following the logic of the most powerful actor: the Israeli state as occupying power. Secondly, the checkpoints and the wall/security fence built by Israel in the West Bank in recent years are powerful symbols of the occupation of Palestinian land by the Israeli state and the difficulties this brings for Palestinian daily life. They not only physically hinder Palestinians to move freely, they humiliate people by their mere presence in Palestinian space. It is a continual reminder of the asymmetrical power relations between Israel and Palestine.

This article explores how moral boundaries are drawn along these physical borders in a landscape of conflict, while not losing sight of the symbolic meaning of this border. I will do this by exploring the way Israeli soldiers craft Palestinians into a moral other, in an effort to create a certain sense of order, at the checkpoint. I will first discuss the checkpoint as a 'moral geography' (Matless, 2000) that enhances and legitimizes the processes of othering which I will discuss next in the context of the idea of the need for order. Finally, I will discuss the way Palestinians are made into a moral other by using ethnographic material which shows a moral discourse used by soldiers, that is geared to establish a 'normalized' self. To analyse this discourse I will trace its historical and social roots and look at four of its different aspects in soldiers' speech about their work at the checkpoint; the Palestinian as violent other, the Palestinian as not trustworthy, the Palestinian as human (in an effort to normalize soldiers' behaviour) and finally I will discuss the way Israeli soldiers try to 'keep their own dignity' during their activities.¹

The checkpoint as a space of othering

Elsewhere I have already argued that the spaces in which soldiers work are very influential for the way they morally behave and their moral decision making through numbing processes (Grassiani, 2013). When analysing these spaces and their operational dynamics in a systemic approach, we can come to a clearer understanding of the way these direct physical realities and their operational dynamics influences soldiers' work and the way they morally categorize the Palestinian other. Especially the checkpoint, discussed here, is central and serves as a symbol to the meeting of the two, soldier and Palestinian civilian. It is a site which through its very planning and logic enhances the processes of othering and (b)ordering (Van Houtem and Van Naerssen, 2001).

Zanger (2005: 38) describes it as follows: 'the checkpoint functions as the regulator of control and rule: the mechanism of surveillance and control operates by

spatial, ideological, and linguistic means, which include a ritual of such repetitive acts as identification, obedience, reward and punishment'. These checkpoints, which can be found within the OPT in different shapes and sizes, can be seen as 'a central symbol of the Israeli occupation' (Ben-Ari et al., 2005: 2) for the Palestinians, while they represent 'an unusual mix of power and vulnerability to potential attacks' (Ben-Ari et al., 2005: 2) for Israeli soldiers. In the OPT there are large, permanent checkpoints which in recent years have become actual terminals with a strong resemblance to 'real' border crossings.² There are also smaller ones with a few soldiers manning the post, checking passing Palestinians randomly or blocking the road in case of a closure. There are also temporary or 'flying' checkpoints which can be set up on any road in the OPT to stop suspicious cars or to demonstrate the military presence in the area and deter potential attackers. In this last case, only a few soldiers and a jeep are employed to block roads and check the traffic that comes through. According to the UN Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) there were 542 obstacles in the OPT as of September 2012, amongst which fixed checkpoints (98 according to Human Rights organization B'Tselem),³ ad-hoc staffed checkpoints and gates.⁴ Since 2008, the Israeli authorities started to 'ease' the conditions for Palestinian citizens resulting in fewer checkpoints and more open gates that can be closed when necessary.⁵

Technically, checkpoints are, as the name states, sites where checking is done; people and goods are examined by soldiers to make sure no explosives are brought through from one side of the checkpoint to the other and identity cards are inspected to make sure that no unwanted person tries to pass. Checkpoints have been discussed in the context of their panoptic power and function as surveillance mechanisms (see, for example, Braverman, 2009). Soldiers, especially in the modern terminals, are often unseen and one cannot communicate with them directly. Thus, one is never sure who is watching and wherefrom they are observing you; people are not only checked, but they are also controlled.

The logic behind the checkpoint from the official Israeli point of view is one of security, a central concept in Israel's (inter) national policies. The state's and military's standpoint is that checkpoints are needed to ensure no forbidden goods, weapons and explosives reach Israel proper (Israel within the Green Line).⁶ At the same time, however, checkpoints severely disturb Palestinian civilian life in the Territories. In recent years many checkpoints have been dismantled for this reason, or in official language 'to ease the lives of the Palestinians'.⁷ However, many remain and are central in the daily experience of Palestinians and their relation with the occupying Israeli entity.

Tawil-Souri (2011) has analysed one such checkpoint both as an 'anthropological space' and as a 'nonplace' using Auge's concept. By using both these concepts she emphasizes the meaningfulness of the checkpoint for Palestinian life; it is 'a space where people exist' (2011: 14), but also the fact that checkpoints are places where no one lives, where people only go through, where relations are not built,

a place that is only made as space of transition. While Tawil-Souri analyses the checkpoints from the point of view of the Palestinian, my focus is that of the Israeli soldiers. For them as well the checkpoint is a place with a certain meaning; a place they need to govern, control and keep safe. In the 'anthropological' sense Tawil-Souri uses, soldiers give meaning to the checkpoint by maintaining a certain order. This need for order, which also entails their own sense of 'normalcy' is an important factor for the construction of the checkpoint as a 'moral geography' (Matless, 1997, 2000).

Matless, as quoted in Pow (2007), defines moral geography as how 'the conduct of particular groups or individuals in particular spaces may be judged appropriate or inappropriate and the ways in which assumptions about the relationship between people and their environments may both reflect and produce moral judgments' (2007: 1544). As Pow (2007) noticed in his work on gated communities in Shanghai, these judgments made by one group about another are closely linked to the idea of order. While in Pow's work this order meant maintaining the 'Good Life' within wealthy city enclaves, in this case it concerns the maintenance of order by soldiers in an effort of 'selfing', of constructing a clear and 'normalized' idea of themselves within the context of a military occupation. While constructing a clear other as inappropriate, in Matless' words, the self becomes appropriate and firmly rooted within the moral boundaries of the own social group.

The space in which this moral othering takes place is thus important. Order is maintained by controlling the flow of Palestinians and by making clear who can go through and who can't. Van Houtem and Van Naerssen (2001) have also called such processes '(b)ordering' where bordering is played out by immobilizing people. The features of many 'modern' checkpoints with soldiers sitting behind glass, almost invisible for the passers-by, and all communication going through intercoms and microphones make it easier for soldiers to categorize Palestinians passing through as 'others', as being different. The physical separation between soldier and Palestinian civilian in the new terminals enhances a 'blurred' view. David Grossman (1988: 19) writes about this in his famous novel *The Yellow Wind*. He shows how Israelis often see Palestinians as one mass. This way of looking makes one ignore the individual within the 'blur' and uphold his different-ness, his otherness. In the work of Ben-Ari et al. (2005) on checkpoints in the OPT, this depersonalization also comes to the fore, the Palestinians, if not seen as a mass, are turned into categories as we shall see below.

Thus, communication often happens through intercom systems and ID-papers are passed to soldiers through a latch in a bulletproof window that further distances the Palestinian from the soldier. There is virtually no direct human contact. Not only are both 'groups', Israeli soldiers and Palestinian citizens, within these circumstances physically separated, possible feelings of responsibility or general human empathy for the plight of the Palestinian are also diminished.

When speaking about their work soldiers often relate about the hardship they go through, the monotony and the arbitrariness of the on the spot decision-making.

In the following quotation, a commander explains the work at a checkpoint during a curfew and a closure:

If there was a closure or curfew, it's hard [the work at the checkpoint]. You prevent everyone from getting out . . . when there is a curfew they [the Palestinians], don't leave their houses. With a closure they don't get out of the village, they have to stay in their village. There is no passing between the villages; from Hebron there is no passing to Halhul, and from Halhul to . . . these passages are closed . . . there is no traffic between the villages. You have the permanent checkpoints and you stand there and just . . . there is a closure, there is no passing. You prevent exit. You let the Red Cross through and aid organizations and humanitarian cases of course, after a thorough check and if a woman is giving birth in the ambulance you check if she really is giving birth, and you check if it's not something else, then you release it.

This example clearly shows that the checkpoint is thus not only a physical obstruction; it can be seen as a moral geography, a site where the other is produced within a specific space, using moral terms in an effort to create a specific order and a clear distinction between both groups (self and other). Important here are the obvious asymmetrical power relations; the Palestinians going through the checkpoint are in every way dependent on the Israeli soldier working in this space. This and other operational dynamics, such as the hard routine of this work and subsequent boredom that soldiers often mention, increase, I believe, this urge for order, an order that gives soldiers a sense of 'normalized' self, as I will explain further in the next section.

Creating order

Here I argue that the creation of order by soldiers and their need to establish a positive self-image within the context of their work within a military occupation is central to the moral othering they engage in. Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]) already wrote about the importance of classifications to maintain order and the function of 'matter out of place' when we try to strengthen our identity and the boundaries of what we understand to be our culture or collective. She thereby emphasizes the strong relation between processes of order and the concept of othering.

In her work on the conduct of the Canadian military in Somalia during operation deliverance, Razack (2000) links the misconduct and severe violence used by Canadian soldiers against Somali civilians to the feelings of these soldiers of racial superiority within a colonial context. This operation was a Canadian peace making military operation that took place in 1992–1993 during the Somali civil war. The white Canadians coming from a '...country of innocence' arrived in Africa, Razack explains, to bring order in the chaos of the 'black wilderness' (2000: 129). She writes: 'Somalis . . . have become the embodiment of disorder and dirt' (2000: 128). In other words, Canadian soldiers used a process of othering by

portraying the other, Somalis in this case, as dirty and primitive, to reproduce their own positive identity as white and civilized.

Such depictions of the other as poor, dirty and backward justify the needs to create order and is also found in the context of Israeli soldiers in the OPT. Israeli soldiers, for example, often explain their work at checkpoints in terms of order and professionalism (Grassiani, 2011), as one commander put it: 'We want order at the checkpoint, because order is professionalism'. In the following example, a soldier makes this point even clearer; the Palestinian who crosses an imaginary line at the checkpoint makes him angry (for more on these 'imaginary lines' as modes of control at the checkpoint see Kotef and Amir, 2011). He realizes, however, that he is not really bothered by the trespassing itself, but that his anger comes from the disturbance of order it entails:

For example, you say 'don't cross that line'. So if they would cross the line I would get angry. If it really bothered me they crossed it, no. In the beginning yes, but as an experienced soldier you want to get things going. 'Yalla' go through; [he] passed the line; that pissed you off. Then he would stand [back] at the line and you would call him.

Both Israeli and Razack's Canadian soldiers use the theme of 'order' as something they need to bring into the chaos that the 'other' in some way is producing. The other becomes a symbol for the hard work of soldiering they need to perform. Furthermore, it emphasizes the inequality between two parties, Canadian soldiers and Somali civilians in Razack's work or Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians in this study. In the discourse of Israeli soldiers Palestinians are seen as inferior to Jewish Israelis, living in poor, dirty and violent circumstances, comparable to the way Canadian soldiers viewed the Somalis. The Palestinians then become the embodiment of the cold, the heat, the dust, the boredom and the hardship of the work of the soldiers in the OPT, which they often refer to as 'black' or dirty work (Grassiani, 2013). These experiences and interpretations by soldiers, as I have mentioned above, lead to processes of numbing, their moral abilities become blurred and the need for order becomes stronger.

Moral othering and categorization

During their work at the checkpoint soldiers do not only check human beings in order to find threatening individuals or terrorists, they also categorize people in moral terms. They are in a continuous process of negotiation as they shift between following orders from above (the official code of conduct, for example, an 'institutional morality' (Zigon, 2008)) and between their own agentic powers of categorization. Furthermore, they deal daily with the negotiations of the Palestinian civilians who pass through the checkpoint.

I assert that much of the categorization soldiers perform is at the same time a way to create an order, as shown above. By clarifying who belongs to what moral

category, soldiers create a sense of knowing and understanding their reality and surroundings. Palestinians are morally categorized, as we shall see later, in an effort to establish the 'normal' or sane position of the self within the realities of working in an occupation. These circumstances of the occupation, as mentioned before, influence the experiences of soldiers profoundly.

The process of othering by Israeli soldiers divide their world into different categories and consequently label these categories with (unconscious) labels, such as 'like me' or 'not like me at all' in a hierarchical manner. Consequently, this categorization gets translated into feelings of empathy and justice concerning the other. David Morris, for example, writes that the state of suffering is a social status that we can withhold or extend to someone, depending on whether he or she is included in our moral community (1997: 40). In this case, where Palestinians are excluded from the soldiers' moral community, their suffering is often not appreciated or simply denied. Staub (1987) calls this form of moral exclusion a process that '... occurs when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply' (cited in Opatow, 1990: 1). Moral exclusion varies from extreme forms, such as genocide where the other is dehumanized or even demonized, to milder forms, such as discrimination where the other is often simply non-existent (Opatow, 1990: 2). This moral exclusion '... emerges when group differences (or 'we-they' distinctions) are salient and when difficult life conditions (such as harsh social circumstances, destructive conflict, or threat) exist' (Opatow, 2001: 174).

While '... the affirmation of common humanity can bring out the best in others' (Bandura, 2002: 110), differences between groups, especially in times of conflict and insecurity and struggles over scarce resources can enhance processes of othering and the erection of moral boundaries. These others then become '... eligible for harm; considerations of fairness do not apply to them, and their resources (i.e. land, home, possessions, etc.) can be usurped' (Opatow, 2001: 157).

Palestinians as moral others

Through exploring and analysing the ethnographic material I collected, I argue that soldiers use a moral discourse that is influenced by an oriental discourse soldiers learn in Israeli society that enhances this othering of the Palestinian as backward, not worthy and dangerous. Often they categorize the other as distinctly different from themselves while asserting that they (the soldiers) stay 'human beings', which I interpret here as part of their moral discourse that is used to create a certain order and a sense of normalcy. I will begin by tracing in short some of the historical and social roots of this moral discourse. I will then connect this to four features of the discourse found in soldiers' speech.

Within the OPT where Israeli soldiers and Palestinians 'meet', a virtual boundary is constructed between both groups. Israeli soldiers (re)produce differences with ideas about the other they learn from the society they grow up in and that shape their national and social frameworks. Israeli society, in particular, has

always been in desperate need of an 'other' to clarify its own identity and legitimacy.

Contemporary othering in the context of a military occupation, finds its roots in the late 1800s when different groups of Jews from Western and Eastern Europe and Arab countries were consecutively made into an 'other' through processes of 'orientalization' by Western Christians and later by Western Jews (Khazzoum, 1998). Soon after, Palestinians went through a comparable process when they were 'orientalised' by the Israeli Jewish community. Every part of this chain can be explained in different terms, such as the creation of European states and prevalent anti-Semitism in 19th century Europe, but the orientalization of the Palestinians by Israeli Jews had its rationale in the emphasis on the European, white, Jewish character of the State of Israel (Khazzoum, 1998, 2003; Shohat, 1999). Thus acts of orientalization (Said, 1978) are repeated time and again by the groups who were submitted to it at first; the orientalised orientalises the other next in line. It is this part of the chain, that of the Jewish collective in Palestine and later Israel, orientalising and othering the Palestinian as a different, unworthy people that should be taken as starting point when exploring the way the Israeli soldiers other Palestinian civilians at the checkpoint in recent times.

In defining the boundaries of the collective proper and in order to construct the boundaries between those who belong and those who do not, military service is crucial within Israeli society. In her work on militarism and the construction of life-worlds of Israeli men, Helman (1999) asserts that serving in the military in fact intrinsically means being Israeli. Military service is a homogenising experience within Israel (being engaged in military activities as a collective) that creates inclusion within a particular in-group (the Jewish military serving collective), while it differentiates and excludes other groups that do not serve (Helman, 1999).

The group that is the most 'extreme' other for this military serving collective is the Palestinian nation. Bar-Tal (1990: 70) speaks of a process of de-legitimization; '...the majority of Israeli Jews believe the ultimate objective of Palestinians is the annihilation of Israel and the establishment of a Palestinian state' thus de-legitimizing them as 'others'. A similar process, however, also takes place at the (Israeli) Palestinian side who believes '... Israeli Jews disregard the existence of the Palestinian people, neglect their national aspirations, and forcefully take their land' (1990: 71).

Baumann and Gingrich (2006: 21) assert that orientalization as a 'grammar of identity or alterity' is characterized not only by the emphasis on the negative of the eastern other, but at the same time by the idealization of certain aspects of the East. But even though early Zionists from Europe romanticized the Arabs as 'noble savages' and wore Bedouin headdress as a symbol of purity and a deep relation to the land and pastoral beauty (Almog, 2000), for a long time this romantic view of the Arab was not present within Israeli Jewish culture. Positive traits of the East have only surfaced in recent years with Eastern culture, such as music, gaining popularity within the general Israeli society after it had been silenced for many

years. Yael Berda (2008: 14) has called this a form of Israeli 'Arabism' which is distinctively 'Palestinian-less'.

This 'Palestinian-less' discourse and the otherness of 'the Arab' or Palestinian are enforced through the strong emphasis Israeli society puts on Western culture as the 'proper' Israeli culture, largely dismissing oriental or Arab Jewish culture as well as Palestinian culture as 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 2002 [1966], see also, Shohat, 1999). Education within Israel does not deal with Palestinian culture in depth and if it does '... the defining characteristic is stereotypical and... negative images... are attributed to them [Palestinians]' (Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari, 1999: 7).

In the moral discourse of soldiers, they, the Palestinians, are first of all depicted as violent others who either use violence against civilians or who at least support it. Soldiers, on the other hand, are perceived as using violence to protect themselves or their nation and this violence is legitimized. The following examples are very telling for the way Israeli soldiers speak about the Palestinians they meet at the checkpoint. In the first example, a soldier tells how Palestinians see him, the soldier, as a monster:

You meet people [Palestinians], OK I'm generalizing here, but the people you meet on the street aren't people who are interested to start a certain dialogue with you. You are the monster [the soldier] and we are something else. We're different creatures...

Another soldier defines Palestinians as inherently violent:

The place where I'm from and where he's from, there is a huge gap. Those people you arrest, all, I'm generalizing, but most have been throwing stones or something, they have a violent resistance. How can I talk to a person who communicates by taking a rock and throwing it? His speech is in violence. Of course I'm the one who is walking around with a gun, but to hold it and to use it are two different things. I'm not... I'm not walking around the city with it and killing people. That's the difference. I'm not walking around, also not in the territories, just looking for a situation to load my gun and 'just give me someone to kill'. It's not there, I'm talking only about myself, there isn't this need. Never in my life had I thought of killing someone, also not to throw a rock or raise my hand. I wasn't raised like that, I was raised the complete opposite.

In the last example the perceived differences become even more outspoken:

Yes, because we are different, we are above them. We are not animals, we don't kill babies...

In the last two quotes the Palestinian is first of all very clearly an 'other' who is distinguished from the Israeli self by his violent behaviour and communication and by his willingness to kill. From the excerpts it becomes clear that the other is seen as different in the way (s)he was raised and in his (her) motivations. Palestinians are even depicted as animals 'who kill babies' and as 'different creatures', clearly de-humanizing them. Such ideas about the 'enemy' open the way for legitimizing

the use of violence as a form of control. The identity of the 'we' as 'good' and moral is then strengthened against the other who is placed securely outside of this boundary. In her work on Canadian soldiers Winslow (1997: 86) wrote in this respect that when a hyper-investment in group identity occurs, the '...capacity to relate to others outside of the group becomes significantly diminished and the potential for xenophobia increases' (see also, Verrips, 2006).

A second feature of the moral discourse soldiers use is the way they categorize Palestinians as not trustworthy and to be pitied. They are not equal to the soldiers and relationships between the two should never be normalized. In the following example, bribes by Palestinians show how there sometimes is a risk of a relationship forming. Soldiers often relate about Palestinians trying to 'bribe' their way through the checkpoint by offering the soldiers drinks or food. Accepting something from a Palestinian at the checkpoint, this soldier believes, would normalize the relationship between soldier and Palestinian and would even put a soldier in 'debt' with a Palestinian and this is seen as unacceptable:

There is this thing of respect. If I took [something] from them I have to give it back. [Speaking about bribes at the checkpoint] We're not in that kind of relationship. In the end they are beneath me. What can you do, it's maybe horrible but it's reality. You can't accept presents from people that are beneath you. You can even say we're enemies. I never saw them as enemies; I see them as a population you pity.

This soldier sees the Palestinian as 'beneath him' and thus a 'normal' reciprocal relationship cannot and should not be established. The description above of the Palestinian as someone who should be pitied also shows a clear feeling of superiority by the Israeli soldiers. A second example of this feature is the following quote by a soldier who uses derogatory language to describe the Palestinians.

It's clear that this [work at the checkpoint] wears you out, especially when they are really not reliable these people... First of all they are not reliable between themselves, they aren't reliable as a nation and especially when the military comes, let's say you get to the house of the mother of a terrorist, you can't expect that when you ask if he's home, if he is hiding in the house, she will answer 'yes sure he is hiding behind the closet'.

The soldier quoted here believes Palestinians 'are not reliable' and hence it is difficult to 'work' with them. He even goes as far as saying they are not a reliable nation, while on another level he seems to understand that a mother will not betray her son.

A third feature of the discourse soldiers use is perhaps more surprising than the ones described above. In this scope of the discourse, soldiers actually conceptualize the Palestinian as human, emphasizing this expressively. I argue that this seemingly contradicting feature of their discourse is in reality part of their efforts to normalize their own (often violent) behaviour. While placing the Palestinians outside of their

own group through othering, the Israeli soldiers interviewed seemed to remind themselves time and again of the fact that these others were actually human beings. Sentences as ‘They are human beings’, ‘We treat them as human beings’ and ‘In the end they are only human beings’ were very common in the soldiers’ discourse on their treatment of Palestinians and the way they were told to treat Palestinians by commanders. This commander makes this point clear when he explains the rationale behind the treatment of Palestinians:

In the end we are talking here about human beings and not about animals, it’s true there are terrorists amongst them, and Israel haters, and . . . from the Islamic Jihad and from Fatah and from Hamas, and Tanzim . . . but you don’t have to treat them as if they are . . . in the end they are human beings. Everyone is innocent until proven guilty.

One soldier, who served in an elite unit that would mostly do nightly operations within the OPT, remembers what he was told by his commanders about the treatment of Palestinians, especially during arrests:

First rule is the treatment of a human being as a human being, not to hurt. To come to do what we need to do, to catch who you need to, sometimes you don’t even know if he is guilty and also if he is guilty, maybe he is crazy, maybe his family is not connected [to terrorism], after we arrest him then the Shabak [General Security Service] or someone else will do what is needed, it’s enough for us to arrest, not to educate anyone, not to teach them a lesson.

Bar and Ben-Ari (2005: 133) encountered the same phrases by soldiers in their work on Israeli snipers. Instead of dehumanizing their victims, the snipers acknowledged their ‘basic humanity’. The authors, however, dealt with a very specific soldier for whom ‘the other’ was the person he was about to kill. Snipers generally do not interact with Palestinians within a daily context as happens at the checkpoints. In the case of this study, the people whose humanity the soldiers remind themselves of are not their direct adversaries, but people they deal with on a daily basis.

Hence, the repeated underscoring of the human side of Palestinians is part of the Israeli soldiers effort to create a sense of normalcy around their own behaviour and activities within the practice of occupation. This is even more emphasized in the last feature I will discuss; the way soldiers continually state how they, themselves, want to keep their human dignity, in other words, their normalcy as human beings.

Often soldiers refer to ideas about ‘our own humanity’ and ‘our own human dignity’ when talking about their work in the Territories. Maoz (2001: 246) also mentions this when she notes that ‘victimizers are also described as using the mechanisms of “paradoxical morality” to preserve a human image of themselves’. Within this discourse, the concern of Israeli soldiers is not so much the well-being of the other, the Palestinian in this case, as their own ‘saneness’ and the

preservation of their intrinsic human properties, i.e. being a moral human being. The following shows this clearly:

If we need to check a car, we will get everything out of the car. The question is how you do it. You don't throw anything, you don't start messing in his stuff but you ask the person to take the stuff out of the car. Maybe it doesn't interest the person if you do it in a polite way, but it's more to keep our human dignity (*tselem enosh*).

This preoccupation with the moral wellbeing of the self, the effort to keep the moral characteristics of the self intact, clearly represents the demarcation of the soldiers' moral universe. Soldiers who reason in this fashion have a clear goal in mind, a goal that is principally directed to their own feelings of worth and much less towards the well-being of others.

One soldier told a striking story of an arrest operation after which he found himself in the back of the military vehicle with an arrestee. He noticed that they had both been born in the same year and tried to make conversation through an interpreter:

When I was sitting with the terrorist, it was very important for me to have some kind of contact, maybe naive of me, I was determined to stay a human being and not become a machine of hate and fear.

As becomes clear from his words, this effort to make conversation with the Palestinian man sitting next to him, handcuffed and blindfolded, has a clear goal, namely that of making this soldier feel like a human being and not 'a machine'. This conversation was, then, not initially instigated in order to understand the arrestee but in order for the soldier to feel he was doing a good thing as a human being.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to show how Palestinians are morally othered by Israeli soldiers. I placed this othering within the checkpoint, a moral geography in which soldiers and Palestinians meet on a daily basis. The moral behaviour of soldiers, I argued here, is embedded within a military system, a complex system within which soldiers' experiences, behaviour and decision-making are shaped. This system is the product of soldiering within a military occupation and the kind of military spaces, tasks and operations that are part of it. Here I explore how the particular space of the checkpoint influences the moral othering of the Palestinian civilians. I further argued that in an effort to (re)create order, to regain a sense of normalcy about their own activities as soldiers in an occupation, Israeli soldiers use a moral discourse that constructs the Palestinian other as violent, not reliable and as to be pitied. The discourse of soldiers, however, also showed a need

by soldiers to categorize Palestinians as 'human beings'. I interpret this as part of the effort to create normalcy and a sense of humanity for themselves. Much emphasis was put on the fact that the soldiers were 'human beings' themselves, and on the fact that they wanted to keep their 'human dignity' and thus their normalcy. This shows us how in an effort to construct a moral other in a specific moral space, ideas about the self of the soldier are upheld and clarity is formed in an imagined chaos.

As I have already argued elsewhere (Grassiani, 2013), when exploring soldiers' behaviour and their (moral) categorization, it is crucial to take a systemic approach that includes not only their speech in our analysis, but also the physical spaces and their features that influence the way they perceive and interpret their social reality. Only in this manner will we be able to understand the complex relationship between space, moral behaviour and the categorization of the other within violent conflict.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The research on which this article is based was funded by the Netherlands Defense Academy and the VU University Amsterdam.

Notes

1. The research on which this work is based was conducted between 2006 and 2007. Fieldwork was carried out in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, approximately 30 in-depth interviews with soldiers were held and dozens of testimonies by soldiers were analysed. Checkpoints all across the OPT were visited for observations.
2. See Mansbach (2009) for an analysis of these new terminals.
3. http://www.btselem.org/freedom_of_movement/checkpoints_and_forbidden_roads as accessed on 15 July 2013.
4. http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_movement_and_access_report_september_2012_english.pdf as accessed on 17 October 2012.
5. Most probably this was done in an effort to create goodwill from the international community who became more and more critical of the occupation by Israel and especially the restrictions it put on Palestinian civilians.
6. However, many, amongst whom former military officials, have made clear that the checkpoints cannot be legitimized under this pretext anymore. Many even claim that the hardship of Palestinians caused by the checkpoints poses a greater risk for Israel's security than the possible explosives going through them.
7. <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/idf-to-remove-major-west-bank-checkpoint-to-enable-palestinian-movement-1.342612> as accessed on 15 July 2013.

References

Almog O (2000) *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Bandura A (2002) Selective moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. *Journal of Moral Education* 31(2): 101–119.
- Bar N and Ben-Ari E (2005) Israeli snipers in the Al-Aqsa Intifada: Killing, humanity and lived experience. *Third World Quarterly* 26(1): 133–152.
- Bar-Tal D (1990) Causes and consequences of delegitimization: Models of conflict and ethnocentrism. *Journal of Social Issues* 46(1): 65–81.
- Baumann G and Gingrich A (2006) *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books.
- Ben-Ari E, Maymon M, Gazit N, et al. (2005) *From Checkpoints to Flow-points: Sites of Friction between the Israel Defence Forces and Palestinians*. Jerusalem: Harry S. Truman Institute of the Advancement of Peace, the Hebrew University.
- Berda Y (2008) The erotics of the occupation. *Eutopia Magazine* 19: 13–20.
- Braverman I (2009) Checkpoint gazes. *Legal Studies Research Paper Series*, Paper no. 2009-09.
- Donnan H and Wilson TM (1999) *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Douglas M (2002 [1966]) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge Classics.
- Fassin D (2011) Policing borders, producing boundaries: The governmentality of immigration in dark times. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40: 213–226.
- Grassiani E (2011) When soldiers explain: Discursive strategies used by Israeli conscripts when recounting their experiences in the field. In: Six-Hohenbalken MM and Weiss N (eds) *Violence expressed: an anthropological approach*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd, pp. 91–108.
- Grassiani E (2013) *Soldiering under Occupation: Processes of Numbing among Israeli Soldiers in the Al-Aqsa Intifada*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Grossman D (1988) *The Yellow Wind*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Helman S (1999) Militarism and the construction of the life-worlds of Israeli males: The case of the reserves system. In: Lomsky-Feder E and Ben-Ari E (eds) *The Military and Militarism in Israeli Society*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 191–221.
- Khazzoum A (1998) *Orientalism, Ethnic Identity, and social Closure: The Origins of Ethnic Inequality Among Jews in Israel*. PhD Thesis, UC Berkeley, USA.
- Khazzoum A (2003) The great chain of orientalism: Jewish identity, stigma management, and ethnic exclusion in Israel. *American Sociological Review* 68(4): 481–510.
- Kotef H and Amir M (2011) Between imaginary lines: Violence and its justifications at the military checkpoint in occupied Palestine. *Theory, Culture and Society* 28(1): 55–80.
- Lomsky-Feder E and Ben-Ari E (1999) *The Military and Militarism in Israeli Society*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Mansbach D (2009) Normalizing violence: From military checkpoints to ‘terminals’ in the occupied territories. *Journal of Power* 2(2): 255–273.
- Matless D (1997) Moral geographies of English landscape. *Landscape Research* 22(2): 141–155.
- Matless D (2000) Moral geographies. In: Johnston RJ, Gregory D, Pratt G and Watts M (eds) *Dictionary of Human Geography*, 4th edn. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 522–525.
- Maoz I (2001) The violent asymmetrical encounter with the other in an army-civilian clash: The case of the Intifada. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 7(3): 243–263.

- Morris D (1997) About suffering: Voice, genre, and moral community. In: Kleinman A, Das V and Lock M (eds) *Social Suffering*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 25–45.
- Opatow S (1990) Moral exclusion and injustice: An introduction. *Journal of Social Issues* 46(1): 1–20.
- Opatow S (2001) Reconciliation in times of impunity: Challenges for social justice. *Social Justice Research* 14(2): 149–170.
- Pow C (2007) Security the ‘Civilised’ enclaves: Gated communities and the moral geographies of exclusion in (post)-socialist Shanghai. *Urban Studies* 44(8): 1539–1558.
- Razack S (2000) From the ‘Clean Snows of Petawawa’: The violence of Canadian peacekeepers in Somalia. *Cultural Anthropology* 15(1): 127–163.
- Said E (1978) *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Random House Inc.
- Shohat E (1999) The invention of the Mizrahim. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29(1): 5–20.
- Staub E (1987) *Moral Exclusion and Extreme Destructiveness: Personal Goal Theory, Differential Evaluation, Moral Equilibration and Steps along the Continuum of Destruction*. Paper presented at American Psychological Association meetings, New York.
- Tawil-Souri H (2011) Qalandia checkpoint as space and nonspace. *Space and Culture* 14(4): 4–26.
- Van Houtem H and Van Naerssen T (2001) Bordering, ordering and othering. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 93(2): 125–136.
- Verrips J (2006) Dehumanization as a double-edged sword: From boot-camp animals to killing machines. In: Baumann G and Gingrich A (eds) *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books, pp. 142–154.
- Winslow D (1997) *The Canadian Airborne in Somalia: A Socio-cultural Inquiry*. Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing.
- Yuval-Davis N and Stoetzler M (2002) Imagined boundaries and borders: A gendered gaze. *The European Journal of Women’s Studies* 9(3): 329–344.
- Zanger A (2005) Blind space: Roadblock movies in the contemporary Israeli film. *Shofar: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 24(1): 37–48.
- Zigon J (2008) *Morality: An Anthropological Perspective*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.