Instrumental Morality Under a Gaze: Israeli Soldiers' Reasoning on Doing 'Good'

Erella Grassiani

In 2021, lethal violence against Palestinians by Israeli soldiers soared. In that year, 313 Palestinians were killed by Israel Defense Forces (IDF) fire, amongst whom many bystanders and 71 minors.[1] Israel is realizing that its soldiers are 'trigger-happy' and the IDF is doing its best to tackle this problem.[2] Interestingly, the reasons for doing so are often not based on ethical deliberations, but on instrumental ones.

For example, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported that 'IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi asked senior Central Command officers to take action to reduce the number of shootings of Palestinians by soldiers in the West Bank …[while] politicians and security officials criticized the conduct of Central Command chief Maj. Gen. Tomer Yadai … which they said could touch off escalation in the West Bank and hurt efforts the government is making to help the Palestinian Authority recover economically and politically'.[3] When criticizing the senior command of the IDF, these state actors did not mention that the killing of innocent people (such as non-combatants and children) was problematic in ethical terms, for its own sake. The reasoning behind reducing such lethal violence reflected the concern about the negative effects these killings could have in the shape of the violent aftermath Israel would have to deal with.

---

[1] https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20220104_in_deadliest_year_since_2014_israel_killed_319_palestinians_in_opt, accessed 3 February 2022.

[2] See for example: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/02/trigger-happy-israeli-army-and-police-use-reckless-force-west-bank/ and https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/to-deter-trigger-happy-soldiers-israel-must-exact-a-price-for-unjustified-killings-1.10105575, accessed 31 January 2022.

[3] https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-idf-chief-of-staff-asks-senior-officers-to-reduce-shootings-of-palestinians-1.10102726, accessed 7 October 2021.

E. Grassiani (✉)
Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: E.Grassiani@uva.nl

59

This is a clear example of what I will call here instrumental morality. Whilst used in the above by senior government officials, I have found that Israeli soldiers in the field also frequently use such reasoning when explaining their behaviour. I will argue that soldiers use such instrumental reasoning to explain, justify or legitimize their violent behaviour on three different levels, corresponding with different kinds of feelings of solidarity and responsibilities. These range from protecting the self, to the group (unit or military as a whole) to the whole nation-state. I understand instrumental morality to encompass both acts and the reasoning behind them, which are used as instruments or tools to achieve a certain goal, which is directed to the good of the self or the in-group and in the above example even the state as a whole. Such behaviour is not motivated by ethical reasoning that is guided, for example, by universal human rights or military codes of ethics. However, the end result of such acts could very well be the ethically best act, such as to stop killing innocent civilians in a situation of conflict. I explain the experiences and moral reasonings of Israeli soldiers in more detail elsewhere, where I also further explain the grounded, inductive approach that led me to my arguments (Grassiani, 2013).

The Israeli context is a specific example of 'extreme circumstances' within which this volume discusses expressions of violence by soldiers. The soldiers that feature in this chapter, whilst acting in mundane, sometimes even boring situations, are part and parcel of an extreme context that is fertile ground for extreme behaviour: the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. The moralities of these soldiers (Grassiani, 2013) are largely influenced by this context, which is characterized by contacts with civilians, but also by the proximity between the 'battlefield' and the home front, unlike other militaries in occupying settings (US, NATO). I therefore argue that their reasoning must be analysed in the context of Israel's politics, the militarization of society and soldiers' socialization.

In contrast to mostly philosophical approaches, I argue for the use of a more social and empirical approach to morality when studying soldiers, in which social contexts and relationships that influence soldiers' reasoning and intuitive moral behaviour are taken into account (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007). This means that in different situations and contexts, different logics, reasonings and decision-making can take place. Within the context of the military this means that soldiers' ways of thinking and their (moral) decision-making are strongly influenced by the power relations they are part of, the relationship with their comrades and commanders and the ways this context influences them physically or emotionally (Grassiani, 2013). Back home, in the context of the familiar, these same soldiers may act and reason in a very different manner. Importantly, in the Israeli context, switching from the battlefield or any other military context to one's family's home is often a weekly endeavour.

This chapter's findings are based on fieldwork I conducted for my PhD between 2004 and 2009. The approach I use for the analysis of the materials I present is based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997), which means the results presented here are developed 'ground up' from the empirical materials I have collected. I collected these through semi-structured interviews with a few dozen (former) combat soldiers of the IDF and through participant observations at checkpoints. All the research participants were male, and as such I will address them as 'him/his' here. I also used

testimonies collected by the organization Breaking the Silence, an Israeli organization of Israeli veterans who share their stories and collect those of others about their experiences during their military service, often involving narratives of violence used against Palestinian civilians. Whilst some time has passed, I believe the narratives I collected are still relevant today, as Israeli soldiers continue to serve in the Occupied Territories and still face similar circumstances as they did then. Soldiers still man checkpoints, they still arrest people in the middle of the night and they still carry out patrols. As demonstrated in the quotes at the beginning of this chapter, the reasoning given by military personnel concerning violence by soldiers is still very similar to the reasoning I encountered then.

Some Background

All Jewish men and women in Israel are conscripted into the military and must serve from their 18th birthday; men for two and a half to three years, women for a period of 21–24 months (this has varied over the years). The soldiers who feature in this chapter and who I interviewed were all combat soldiers who served in the Second Intifada in the early 2000s. During their service, most of the work they performed resembled constabulary work, such as manning checkpoints, patrolling and carrying out arrest operations during which they interacted intensively with Palestinian civilians (Grassiani, 2013; Hammami, 2019).

Conscription is only one aspect of Israel's militarist culture, which is, for example, characterized by militarized education (Gor, 2010; Levy & Sasson-Levy, 2008, Levy et al. 2007) and which is brimming with ideas about in and out groups; who belongs to 'us' (the nation, Israel) and who does not (Ben-Eliezer, 1998; Kimmerling, 1993; Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 1999, 2007, p. 7, Kunstman and Stein 2020). The 'other' or 'them', especially for soldiers, are the Palestinians, whom they perceive as being different on almost all levels. The preservation of the self becomes critical. Instrumental moral behaviour should then be seen within the context of these in and out group dynamics.

Instrumental Morality: A Contradiction in Terms?

In order to understand the use of the concept instrumental morality in the analysis of soldiers' narratives and behaviour, we first need to grasp in more detail how a person comes to a moral act. Different theories about the role of reason and emotion within such deliberations have been developed. One example comes from Vetlesen, whose research on doing 'evil' and moral acts (1994) emphasizes the importance of emotions as opposed to seeing morality as purely rational (Vetlesen, 1994). He writes: 'moral action is logically preceded by moral judgement, that moral judgement is logically preceded by moral perception, …and the emotional faculty of empathy

are equally indispensable of the exercise of moral perception and moral judgement' (1994, p. 350). Vetlesen also writes that 'emotions anchor us to the *particular* moral circumstance … to the *here and now*' (Ibid., p. 4, italics in original). He thus explains that before we make a moral judgement and perform moral actions, our emotions lead us to assess the situation we find ourselves in (moral perception).

Whilst it is important to take the role of emotions into account when speaking about morality and when looking at moral behaviour and moral judgement, it is equally important to consider the processes of reasoning and subsequent acts that accompany these emotions. Important for the case at hand, such processes of *thinking about* or reflecting on one's actions can sometimes take place during the actions, but mostly happen after these actions have been carried out. In theories on ethics, reasoning means using ratio and being conscious and detached about one's decisions and actions. This would exclude intuitive, unconscious moral behaviour and activities (Haidt, 2001). Thus, as both Vetlesen and Haidt propagate, we also need to take into account intuition and feelings that influence behaviour in a split second without elaborate reasoning taking place at that very time. I will demonstrate the importance of considering the circumstances our research participants are in at the time of the events and acts they describe to us and the feelings they mention. Further, the reasoning that takes place should also be contextualized.

Reasoning, from this perspective, does not necessarily mean that a very long process of detached thought precedes every activity described. By the time a research participant gave me his answer during my fieldwork, there is a chance he had in fact thought and reasoned about it. However, not all actions taken by soldiers are the result of *extended* reasoning; the physical and especially emotional state the soldiers are in and the relationship they do or do not have with the persons in front of them strongly influences their ad-hoc decision-making as well (Grassiani, 2013). Most of my research participants shared with me their reasoning as it was at the time of the events they were describing, without whitewashing their behaviour after the fact. As such, I accept their explanations, even post-hoc, as the way they interpreted their behaviour at the time. The terms 'reasoning' and 'action' or 'behaviour' are used here and are part of morality, depending on the context within which an action took place and the way the actor speaks about it.

What Is Instrumental Morality?

The 'instrumental' in 'instrumental morality' means that acts and reasoning about those acts is geared towards an end goal that is beneficial to the self (or the group). What can make such an act 'moral' in the eyes of the self (or the group) is the fact that the result of the act falls within the socially or institutionally agreed upon 'doing good' within the specific context the act falls in. In order to analytically categorize an act or reasoning as instrumental morality it is of importance to establish the motivation for the act, its end goal and the context of the act. In their work on business policy, for example, Quinn and Jones look at the moral obligations of managers (1995) and

differentiate between different motivations such managers have for their actions. In the case of managers who act in an instrumentally ethical way, they 'might do what is morally proper, but they do so to increase shareholder wealth' (Quinn & Jones, 1995, p. 23).

In my previous work (Grassiani, 2013), I argued that a similar point can be made for Israeli soldiers serving in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Their actions vis-à-vis the Palestinians they encounter can appear to be moral or 'right' in the eyes of the (international) public or according to military ethics; however, often the motivations that triggered them are not 'principled' but serve to achieve a goal or agenda that is directed to the good of the self or the in-group. Here the primary consideration is not the ethics of the act itself, but what could be achieved by it in favour of the actor or the in-group. This, however, does not mean that motivations are always egocentric or unjust.

Importantly, the 'other' who is necessarily present when we speak of moral acts, is not or hardly considered here, although he or she is affected, sometimes even positively, by such instrumental moral behaviour. From the outside, such behaviour seems to be on a par with moral values; people are given help and seemingly treated with respect. The reasoning behind such behaviour, however, can make it instrumental if it is self-centred and general universal rights are not taken into consideration.

Scrutinizing instrumental morality gives us the chance to understand more about actual motivations for actions and lets us look beyond the surface of mere observation. Furthermore, behaving morally out of instrumental considerations means that in instances where no one is watching, immoral behaviour is more easily displayed. The importance of a 'gaze' when talking about instrumental ethics is considerable (Grassiani & Verweij, 2014). Without a watchful (external) eye, one's performance will be different (depending on who is present, and thus who is possibly an 'internal' eye) and motivations for acting in specific ways change.

What Is in It for Me: The Personal Level

When an actor acts on the basis of the consideration of what is in it for him or her, actions become instrumental on a personal level. To accomplish maximum personal gain through action, the concept of obedience is important for soldiers. In this case, the fear that is linked to disobedience is a motivating force, for if one does not obey his superiors one could be punished. Soldiers will try to avoid this punishment and 'save themselves' at all times. In other words, obedience becomes instrumental to them.

This could also be linked to the issue of discipline within the military. Soldiers are taught to behave according to strict rules and their behaviour is 'on display' and under scrutiny almost at all times. This 'disciplinary gaze' (Grassiani & Verweij, 2014) of the military, then, is an important and powerful factor that influences soldiers' behaviour. Below I will also discuss another goal soldiers seek to achieve on the

personal level, which is the desire to stay human, or, as soldiers put it, 'to keep their human dignity'.

Avoiding Punishment

Many soldiers stated that avoiding being reprimanded by a superior, or worse, receiving actual punishment for one's deed, is a motive for action. This is closely related to the issue of obedience within the military and the power it has over soldiers. The fear of being caught disobeying a superior can be a strong motivator. This becomes clear from the answer Barak gives when asked about the code of ethics and the way he as a soldier was informed about it:

> Only in basic training, it's bullshit, you don't use it. Like purity of arms, you know that if you forget your gun your officer will leave you on Saturday in the base so you take your weapon. You know that if you act to the Arab with too much violence the officer will tell you, they don't say do whatever you want. Me and my friends, we never hit a person at a check post or something, just like that. Never happened. One time when we found that bomb, the guy started to be wild and we had to keep him quiet.[4]

What immediately stands out—besides Barak's dismissal of the code of ethics as 'bullshit'—is the motivation he gives for behaving in a correct way: he wants to avoid criticism or punishment by his superiors. The fear of being reprimanded by one's superiors is one of the dominant motivators for soldiers' actions; behaving according to the books or strictly following the orders of commanders is then often instrumentally motivated.

Furthermore, such behaviour is performed to impress the commander and thus needs to be *seen* and is usually displayed when the commander is present. This makes the behaviour instrumental, I pose, as it is not performed out of a belief that it is the only right or just thing to do or because a code of ethics prescribes it, but to impress others or to avoid their disapproval. In a way, soldiers present an 'ideal', humane soldier to their commanders. Adam, a company commander himself, emphasizes the extent of the commander's influence:

> I think that what interests the soldiers is not doing it [hitting] in front of the company commander, more than not to hurt Arabs. He will prefer that the Arab will sit another hour in the heat or cold and wait for the company commander then that he would decide himself. At the end of the day he stands in front of the commander, he takes care of the promotions, if he goes home. It's his mother and father. Like in school, don't tell my father.

In this case not hurting a Palestinian, which seems like morally just behaviour, is motivated by fear of the scrutiny of the commander, not by the realization that it is (morally) wrong. We could say that this soldier has internalized the disciplinary gaze of the military mentioned earlier. What Adam also conveys here is the fact that soldiers, at times, find it hard to decide and prefer for a Palestinian to suffer for a

---

[4] All interviews were carried out in Hebrew and translated by the author.

bit longer than to make a wrong decision for which they could be punished. The company commander has a great deal of power over the soldiers, he is their 'mother and father' and hence his influence on the behaviour of soldiers and their decision-making is great. Such understanding should ideally result in proper moral behaviour in the eyes of these commanders. However, the reasons given by commanders for behaving in a particular way, not only to avoid punishment, are often instrumental by nature as well, as we shall see shortly. The understanding instilled in soldiers does not guarantee a less instrumental approach.

Keeping My Human Dignity

A different motivation to act morally is related to an idea many soldiers mentioned, namely to keep 'our own humanity' and 'our own human dignity'. Within such discourse, the soldiers were not so much concerned with the wellbeing of the other, in this case the Palestinian, but instead with their own 'saneness', the saneness of the soldiers themselves, the preservation of their intrinsic human properties i.e. being a moral human being. Eviatar, in a fragment of the interview that was quoted earlier, puts this very 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 does not interest the person if you do it in a polite way, but it's more to keep our *tselem enosh* (human dignity).

This preoccupation with the moral wellbeing of the self, the effort to keep the moral characteristics of oneself intact, I argue, is a case of instrumental morality. Soldiers who reason in this fashion have a clear goal in mind, a goal that is related to their own feelings of worth and not to the wellbeing of others. In this case, Eviatar wants to act 'correctly', one could say ethically, not because the person in front of him is a human being and deserves to be treated well, but because he wants to continue to feel he himself (Eviatar) is still a human being. Golan told me a striking story of an arrest operation after which he found himself in the back of the military vehicle with an arrestee. He noticed they were both 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 from naivety, 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 for Golan to feel like a human being and not become 'a machine'. This conversation was not initiated to understand the arrestee, for example, but for the soldier to feel he was doing a good thing as a human being.

Protecting Your Brothers

In the case of an instrumental discourse on the level of the group or institution soldiers are part of, their reasons for making decisions or behaving in a certain way (or for refraining from certain behaviour) take the best interest of the group into consideration. On this level, the motivation behind the behaviour of soldiers could for example be to avoid 'giving the military a bad name' or to hide certain activities from public scrutiny.

Protecting Your Soldiers or Comrades

> The soldiers must want his Regiment, his comrades and those around him to survive. The Regiment is his family, where he is not alone…the Regiment provides the opportunity for him to become the best soldier in the world; he fights for something more than himself; he fights for his comrades and the regiment; and indirectly, for his home and his family. (From a Canadian military document in Winslow, 1997: 74)

Feelings of solidarity and comradeship are deeply interconnected with military life and the motivations of soldiers to go into combat. Grossman quotes Dyer who writes that this strong feeling of accountability towards your comrades is 'a special kind of love that has nothing to do with sex or idealism' (1995, p. 150). Whilst some argue that this comradeship does border on sexual desires (Kaplan, 2002; Sasson-Levy, 2008), Dyer rightly states that feelings between soldiers could be called a special kind of love, which goes very deep and is immensely important for soldiers.

Many works on the military have emphasized such strong feelings and most authors have found that the motivation to fight first of all comes from the will not to let down your buddies (Grossman, 1995; Holmes, 1985). Having a group around you makes the meta-motivations as ideological ideas less important, because what you do, you do for the comrades you share your direct experiences with.

An important motivation for the action or inaction of soldiers is the fear that they or their comrades will get hurt. When assessing an operation, it is often not judged by its moral standards, but by how dangerous it is for the force, thus for the soldiers themselves. The ways in which the behaviour of soldiers or commanders can be geared towards their own group, their soldiers' or their comrades' safety, can be made out from Dror's words. Here is a commander who clearly draws the line when it comes to the safety of his soldiers:

> In the reserves what I always say; don't know if it's more or less important, do me a favour: take care of yourself. That's the most important, you have to do the job but … and here I'm ready to pay the price of warmth and humanity, I'd rather have my soldier in one piece than a Palestinian that's crying. This cold decision like I told you before.

When any kind of group is very close-knit, its behaviour and reactions towards the outside world can become very harsh in an effort to protect their in-group, whilst disregarding the safety of the 'other'. As Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari write 'the Arab

is the enemy against which one is fighting, and the "other" through which Jewish Israeli identity in general and that of the warrior in particular are defined' (2007, p. 7). Importantly, situations as described above are most often not life or death situations, but daily interactions with Palestinians that are, from the point of view of the soldiers, fraught with uncertainty.

Protecting the Image of the IDF

'He [the soldier] won't shoot in the mass, if besides this Arab with a M16 he shoots another 10 Arabs, we would look very bad. The soldier wouldn't want that as his responsibility' (citation from interview).

Another issue I came across in my interviews with Israeli soldiers was a strong awareness of the image of the IDF. It seems that they are very conscious of how the world sees the IDF and, by extension, sees them. As already touched upon before, soldiers would behave 'properly' when in sight of others not connected to the IDF. Not only for their own good, but also for the good of the IDF. They made an effort to protect the IDF from external criticism, avoiding the staining of its name. Snir gives a good example of how easily the military and its soldiers can get a bad name through misunderstandings on the side of the outsiders, undeserved in his opinion:

> You can't always tell what you are doing. There is a big fear in the IDF today to talk to the media. You are not allowed to talk to the media, in any case. They can can also hurt their company. For example the papers write about a soldier of Givati in Gaza, just the soldier started laughing or something, they take it out of proportion, so they protect their own company. For example a soldier can say to his Ethiopian friend that he has been sleeping in the same room with for 3 years, "*Ya kushi*"[5] as a joke. A journalist hears that, immediately sensation. So it's not only fear of the military, but also it's about practical things. …. "they call Ethiopians "*kushim*" the battalion commander comes and takes the company apart, sends this guy to jail.

The point Snir is making here is the fact that the outsider, the media in this case, can hurt the soldiers because they misinterpret their 'joking' and alert the public, which can lead to a reaction by the higher commanders, such as isolating the soldiers from their comrades or even arresting them. This is the reason soldiers, in his opinion, should refrain from speaking to the media, as this could 'hurt their company'. I argue that these soldiers have internalized the power of the disciplinary gaze of the media. Nir, a commander from the *Nahal* battalion explains that he and his comrades would be careful when searching Palestinian houses and give their motivation for being careful: they learned '…not to break anything, so they won't accuse us later that we destroyed things. We would never touch, that's it'. Nir emphasizes that he and his comrades would be careful not to break anything so 'they', which could be their superiors or external observers such as human rights organizations, would not criticize or punish them for it.

---

[5] *Kushi* is a derogatory name for blacks in Israel, usually Ethiopians, comparable to the N-word in English.

Another motivation for soldiers' actions related to the protection of the good name of the military, is to avoid looking 'weak' in the eyes of the Palestinians, in line with military strategy. Looking weak could mean risking attacks or losing the upper hand in the power dynamics that are present between Palestinian civilians and Israeli soldiers. Dror, who was a commander with the paratroops and who was very motivated whilst serving in the IDF, talks about a dilemma he faced, which will further clarify this point:

> One of my dilemmas was, and that's why I didn't like to do checkpoints, because it's a case…you really meet the population, not the terrorist. Now go and be selective, on the colour of eyes, if he has a beard, he's aggressive, he's not, he is thin, he is fat. The dilemma that I had was, you think about the slap that the commander gave or the soldiers gave, not that it happened to me but I heard it from stories. You wonder if this slap came to the person who deserved it…or you slapped someone who believed in the checkpoint or in the IDF, he didn't like it but somehow he believed and no…think about the little boy that saw his father being slapped…. it's done, you can't work on that anymore. And there are those commanders, they keep children close to the soldiers, they know they don't like the field food (*khamgashiot*) and they would pass it to the children. Now go figure if you give it to a child that thinks these soldiers are "sissies" (*freierim*) or maybe you gave it to a child that will grow up and would respect, most or a lot of the Palestinian population has respect for the IDF. I don't know if this is because of the media or because they met the IDF and saw a person that treated them with respect.

The dilemma described here can be summed up as follows; once you hit someone or give a kid some extra food, for that matter, you do not know what the effect of this action will be, what the consequences of your actions are. You could appear to be weak, for example, when treating the population with a soft hand. On the other hand, if you treat the population harshly and aggressively, you might generate more hatred. The intention behind both behavioural patterns, 'soft' or aggressive is, however, the same: to gain a strong, good image of the IDF in the eyes of the Palestinian population and to reduce feelings of hatred and thus possibilities of attacks.

Guy found himself in a difficult situation as a commander with the paratroops, in which he had to make a swift decision that could have led to an innocent person's death, but could also have saved the lives of others. He observed a Palestinian man with a donkey and a large gas canister. His initial thought was that it could be the attacker they were on the lookout for and that this was a bomb the man was carrying. When he looked more closely, he saw an old man walking along with a young boy, probably his grandson, taking a gas canister to his home:

> So this thing about making the decision, it's crazy….we saved our good name, he got away…and lucky that I got so much balance to decide here is this old man with the gas balloon that could be a bomb, if I would have shot him, his grandchild would…I, from my point of view, see it as a circle; the grandfather falls next to the grandchild, he'll be a terrorist, terrorist, he'll be my enemy. That was the dilemma that was post trauma as I call it now. That was one of the things that influenced me most.

The way he reasoned about the situation is interesting and very telling; the fact that he made the right decision and did not kill the old man 'saved our good name' protected the good name of the unit. Furthermore, if he had killed the innocent man, his grandson, in Guy's opinion, would have become a terrorist. Thus, he does not

only think about the good name of his unit, but also about the creation of hate and possible terrorists.

Do Not Get the State Involved

'The orders are first of all to take care of yourself. To take care not to hurt, not to make a mistake… and get the state involved' (quote from interview).

Concerning the final level that I want to discuss here, the reasoning and acts of the soldiers and commanders are characterized at a more macro level, for the good of the state; the security of the state and its image in the eyes of outsiders, particularly the international community. An example of such reasoning is, for example, a soldier who is careful about shooting into a crowd in the event of riots, because the death of innocent people is bound to have political consequences. More important than not killing an innocent person is the political implications such an action could have for the state. Yossi, a commander who was active in combat during Operation Defensive Shield gives a good example:

> This was actually the complication of the combat in all the refugee camps. I think that apart from Bethlehem and Jericho and Gaza, I was in all the cities and this was actually the motto of the combat; to know that you are fighting among civilians, and to think a thousand times before you shoot for the first time. Because the first shot can lead to a catastrophe. A catastrophe, if you take down (*morid*) a child or if you take down a mother, it can be such a chaos that it is not in your league.

Whilst I do not wish to say here that this commander does not care about killing a child or a mother, his first concern is the chaos it would create, a situation that is 'out of the league' of a soldier. Another example of such reasoning comes from Adam, also a commander:

> It has to go to the lower level. In my time, the IDF used to say that what one soldier does, can influence a whole country. Because if one soldier, for example, just shoots for no reason, or would make a mistake it can go to the state. If someone innocent gets killed, we know where it will be tomorrow. It does not stay with the soldier. That's why it's important that everything gets down to the level of the soldier.

In this quote, Adam explains why, in his eyes, it is important to forward operational information down to the 'normal' soldiers in the field and not to leave them in the dark about what is happening around them and about why this is happening. The reason he gives, and which as he says was the message of the IDF as a whole during the time he served, is that the consequences of the actions of a soldier can influence something bigger, a whole country. In other words, if a soldier makes a wrong move, this could, for example, severely impair political negotiations or ties with neighbouring countries. In recent years, the IDF has seen several of such cases in which the media got a hold of footage of soldiers mistreating or even killing people in violation of its code of conduct.

The military's incentive for easing the life of Palestinians is ultimately, according to this example, the greater security of the region and thus the state of Israel. Hence, I argue it has an instrumental character. Offer explains the decision-making processes during Operation Defensive Shield and the way in which a bad image of Israel was created in the eyes of the world:

> So afterwards…there were discussions. To blow up, not to blow up (*lefotets*) [houses]. On the other side if you blow up (*mefotets*) the whole world shout, "what, you blew it up". Also in Jenin, even though I wasn't there but our unit took part in the refugee camp there, and I believe every word they tell me…afterwards, an Arab director made a film about it, that we did there, I don't know what.[6] In Europe they said we…it was the case that they [soldiers] surrounded from all direction and they closed in. The terrorists didn't flee, they couldn't flee, there is a ring. They closed in all the time, until there were 10 houses, in a refugee camp, everything is closely built, what are you going to do with that ... go in with soldiers and have a face-to-face fight? So that you will have 30 killed and they will have 30 killed, that's not …with all respect to them, our lives are more important than theirs. Not more important, but from our point of view more important. From the point of view of the Heaven it's the same human being. If I'm in a war, I prefer him to get killed then that I would get killed or my friend. That's the way it is, he also prefers that an Israeli get killed then a Palestinian. So, they [IDF] went in with bulldozers, D9, and they destroyed all the houses. What can you do, they told them [Palestinian militia] to surrender, 2 days, 3, 4 days, [and they stayed inside]. So the state of Israel did a massacre and killed poor children and there were snipers, and 6 years old kids came out and they hit their heads. There is no such thing; it's not in the education of the military. But that's what the world sees, for some reason.

Offer's analysis is very telling. It is clear to him that through the media and, for example, through documentaries, the international community gets the wrong picture about the activities of the IDF and therefore Israel gets a bad name. By explaining how the IDF worked and showing the lack of choice the militants gave the military (it's them or us), he tries to show how this negative image, which is a fabrication according to him, was created. Such a negative image of the IDF, but also of the state as a whole, is something soldiers are taught to avoid, hence a ban on speaking to journalists and other outsiders who could potentially cause harm through their 'twisting of the story', as we also saw before. Great care is thus taken by soldiers to avoid misunderstandings about their activities and their behaviour is adjusted accordingly.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the instrumental morality that resonates in Israeli soldiers' discourses. I defined instrumental morality as seemingly moral behaviour towards the 'other', motivated by goals directed to the good of the self or the in-group.

---

[6] The film Offer mentions here is the documentary 'Jenin, Jenin' by Muhammad Bakri, a Palestinian-Israeli filmmaker. This film caused a lot of commotion in Israel because of its critical stance towards the activities of the IDF. The film was banned from Israeli cinemas and Bakri was even taken to court by a group of reservists who served during ODS.

I divided the moral behaviour and reasoning I encountered in my research into three different levels, as the motivation of soldiers was not only geared towards an ego-centric goal, but was often also triggered by feelings of solidarity with comrades or the defence of the state.

On the personal level, these soldiers tried to avoid punishment from superiors, to stay human beings, to avoid becoming 'machines' and most of all to try to keep safe. On this level the reasoning and actions of soldiers within the OPT were directed towards their own good, their own wellbeing.

On a group level, soldiers felt they needed to protect their comrades, just as commanders have strong feelings of responsibility for the wellbeing of their soldiers. Action was then taken for the benefit of the safety of the in-group. Furthermore, efforts were made to protect the image of the IDF. Good behaviour is displayed when outsiders such as human rights organizations and reporters are present to avoid giving the IDF a bad name.

On the more abstract level of the state, both soldiers and commanders made the same efforts. The realization is that if a soldier makes a mistake, this can become a political scandal and influence the precarious political position of Israel within the Middle East. 'Good' or 'just' behaviour by soldiers and commanders is therefore often displayed to avoid scrutiny and repercussions on different levels. The other, the Palestinian citizen, however, is hardly considered.

Crucial to the instrumental morality I have described is that it exists when it is observed by someone. The gaze of the superior in the military setting proved to be very influential for the way soldiers behaved, as they wanted to behave according to what they thought their superiors expected. Another disciplinary gaze that proved to be important was that of the international community or the press, which disciplined the soldiers into behaving as they thought they should (morally speaking) in order to avoid the above-mentioned consequences.

References

Ben-Eliezer, U. (1998). *The Making of Israeli Militarism.* Indiana University Press.

Gor, H. (2010). Education for war in Israel: Preparing children to accept war as a natural factor of life. In K. Saltman & D. A. Gabbard (Eds.), *Education as enforcement: The militarization and corporatization of schools.* Routledge.

Grassiani, E. (2013). *Soldiering under occupation: Processes of numbing among Israeli soldiers in the Al-Aqsa Intifada.* Berghahn books.

Grassiani, E., & Verweij, D. (2014). The disciplinary gaze of the camera's eye: Soldiers' conscience and moral responsibility. *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies, 15*(3), online.

Grossman, D. (1995). *On killing: The psychological cost of learning to kill in war and society.* Back Bay Books/Little.

Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review, 108*(4), 814–834.

Hammami, R. (2019). Destabilizing mastery and the machine: Palestinian agency and gendered embodiment at Israeli military checkpoints. *Current Anthropology, 60*(S19), S87–S97.

Holmes, R. (1985). *Acts of war: The behaviour of men in battle.* Cassell.

Kaplan, D. (2002). *Brothers and others in arms: The making of love and war in Israeli combat units.* Harrington Town Press.

Kimmerling, B. (1993). Patterns of militarism in Israel. *European Journal of Sociology*, *34*(2) 196–223. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975600006640

Kuntsman, A., & Stein, R. L. (2020). *Digital militarism.* Stanford University Press.

Levy, G., & Sasson-Levy, O. (2008). Militarized socialization, military service, and class reproduction: The experiences of Israeli soldiers. *Sociological Perspectives, 51*(2), 349–374.

Levy, Y., Lomsky-Feder, E., & Harel, N. (2007). From "obligatory militarism" to "contractual militarism"—Competing models of citizenship. *Israel Studies, 12*(1), 127–148.

Lomsky-Feder, E., & Ben-Ari, E. (Eds.). (1999). *Military and militarism in Israeli Society.* SUNY Press.

Lomsky-Feder, E., & Ben-Ari, E. (2007). *Identity, politics and the military in contemporary Israel* (Unpublished manuscript), Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

Ochs, E., & Kremer-Sadlik, T. (2007). Introduction: Morality as family practice. *Discourse & Society, 18*(1), 5–10.

Quinn, D., & Jones, T. (1995). An agent morality view of business policy. *Academy of Management Review, 20*(1), 22–42.

Sasson-Levy, O. (2008). Individual bodies, collective state interests: The case of Israeli combat soldiers. *Men and Masculinities, 10*(3), 296–321.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1997). *Grounded theory in practice.* Sage.

Vetlesen, A. (1994). *Perception, empathy, and judgement: An inquiry into the preconditions of moral performance.* Penn University Press.

Winslow, D. (1997). *The Canadian airborne in Somalia: A socio-cultural inquiry.* Canadian Government Publishing.

Erella Grassiani is Associate Professor at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. Her work traces the flows of the (Israeli) security worldwide and looks at the way cultural ideas, technologies and consultants move around globally. In the past she has done extensive research on the Israeli military. She is the author of *Soldiering under Occupation processes of Numbing among Israeli soldiers in the Al-Aqsa Intifada* (2013 Berghahn Books).