

**Project: “The social construction of border zones: A comparison of two geopolitical cases”**

**Research reports on our final field trips to Spain, Morocco, Uganda and Ethiopia**

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After four years of intensive field research in the border zones between Morocco and Spain (in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla) and between Egypt and Israel, the team in Germany undertook two final field trips at the beginning of 2018 in order to collect additional empirical data that would enable us to further elaborate our conclusions. In spring 2018, Eva Bahl and Lucas Cé Sangalli worked in Melilla and Ceuta with the aim of supplementing our findings with regard to changing figurations in the Spanish enclaves between different groupings in the local population (especially Muslims and Christians, or people of Iberian and people of Moroccan origin). Also in spring 2018, Gabriele Rosenthal and Lukas Hofmann traveled to Kampala (Uganda) in order to interview Eritrean refugees there who had been deported from Israel. In September 2017, our colleague Efrat Ben-Ze’ev did a field study of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia with the same aim of extending our research on the migration courses and experiences of Eritreans who had migrated to Israel via the “Sinai route”.

We will begin with a few remarks on the project as a whole, before proceeding to a detailed discussion of these field trips. Our empirical research project is concerned with the social construction of border zones and border activities in the context of their short-term and long-term transformation processes. Based on participant observations, ethnographic interviews, group discussions and (biographical-) narrative interviews, we focused on the experiences of members of different groupings involved in border practices and daily interactions at the border, the genesis of their perspectives, and the figurations formed by the different groupings with their unequal power chances. In the course of our fieldwork between 2014 and 2018, we not only worked on (transit) migrants, but also on the people who live in these border regions, people who regularly cross the borders, members of police units (in Spain the Guardia Civil, i.e. the Spanish paramilitary police who are responsible, among other things, for “border controls”; in Israel soldiers from the Israeli Defense Forces<sup>1</sup>), and other authorities or NGOs who are regularly involved with

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<sup>1</sup> On the IDF security forces and the Guardia Civil, see Ben-Ze’ev/Gazit 2017, 2018; Bahl/Worm (forthcoming).

illegalized migrants. In our specific research contexts, the power balances between different groupings in respect of the power of definition and control over the national borders, or opportunities to profit from them, were and still are obviously very unequal. Using a combination of perspectives from biographical research and figurational sociology, we wanted to find out how these power balances are specifically experienced, enacted (and thereby created) and practiced, through a study of the (changing) figurations between different groupings.

Our reconstructions of the (changing) border practices, the different patterns of action and interpretation, and the power balances between the different groupings in these two geopolitical contexts clearly show that the social reality of and at borders is not (only) constituted by a set of more or less fixed administrative and legal procedures. Rather, the processes of maintaining, enforcing, negotiating or contesting borders on an everyday level is a complex interplay of social interactions and relations between different groupings that fundamentally operates within and through constructions of belonging to “we” and “they” groups. Understanding the social realities in these border zones in the past and present is not possible without taking into account the dynamics of we- and they-images as a way of presenting, interpreting and experiencing one’s own belonging to a certain group (and the belonging of others to different groupings).

In the local population in Melilla and Ceuta, the figurations between people of Iberian origin and people of Moroccan origin are a permanent topic of negotiation. References to (local) history are often used to legitimize one’s own presence in the disputed cities (officially, Morocco wants to re-Moroccanize them) and to underline one’s belonging to a certain we- or they-group. Power balances are shifting slowly because the Muslim population (of Moroccan descent) is becoming the majority (in Ceuta), or has already become the majority (in Melilla). The fear of “Moroccanization” was frequently expressed by our interviewees of Iberian origin who are unsettled by the slow loss of their dominant position in the city society. In this context of shifting power balances, unaccompanied minor migrants from Morocco who live in care institutions or on the streets (while trying to get to the Spanish mainland as stowaways) are constructed by members of different groupings as “the paradigmatic Other” in Ceuta and Melilla (Bahl 2017).

Our study of border guards in both cities shows that they tend to deny their own powerful position in respect of the way they enforce “border security”, use (massive) violence, or carry out illegal immediate deportations (“hot returns”), and that they have highly stereotyped they-images of the people who constitute their “clientele” at the border. They consistently present their own work as a careful balancing of “securitization” and “humanitarian support”. But their concrete everyday practice and interactions with members of other groupings is much more contradictory and ambivalent (Ben-Ze’ev/Gazit 2017, 2018; Bahl/Worm forthcoming). In the case of the Guardia Civil, our reconstruction shows that their presentation of themselves as “humanitarian helpers” at the border is part of a firmly established organizational we-

image and fulfills important biographical functions for the integration of its members in the organization (Bahl/Worm forthcoming).

(Illegalized) migrants who enter the European Union through Ceuta or Melilla usually consider these cities as transit points and are not interested in staying there. In our biographical-narrative interviews, we always asked for the person's whole life story and didn't just focus on the recent border crossing. In this way, we could see that self-presentations and constructions of belonging had (necessarily) changed constantly during the journey. In some cases, we managed to stay in touch with our interviewees, and were able to carry out several follow-up interviews which helped us to extend our long-term perspective on processes of illegalized migration, how they are experienced, and how they are correlated with (changing) constructions of belonging (Rosenthal/Bahl/Worm 2017; Worm 2017<sup>2</sup>).

At each national or regional border on a migration route, the chances of being able to cross the border differ, depending on one's collective belonging. This gives rise to questions such as who, with which national or other collective belonging, finds it easier to cross the different borders on the migration route, what knowledge is required and is accessible concerning ways of crossing the border "illegally", what economic, social and cultural capital, in the sense proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) – and we might add physical capital – is necessary in order to be able to cross, and which groupings are met on the way with which one is in a favorable or unfavorable power balance. In our reconstruction of the different migration routes, we thus try to show which figurations the migrants have been part of in the past in their country of origin, in the different regions along their migration route, and in the present, after crossing the border to the European Union, or to Israel, or to a sub-Saharan African country (for instance en route from Israel to Rwanda or Uganda).

The migrants we interviewed in Israel formed a fairly homogeneous grouping of women and men who had fled to Israel via Sudan and the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt because they feared indefinite national service in Eritrea; most of them had been living in Israel for several years. By contrast, our interviewees in North Africa formed a heterogeneous grouping of migrants who differed in respect of their collective pasts and their present individual situations, as well as in respect of the situation of their families in their countries of origin. They had decided to flee or migrate for different reasons, which also affected their choice of route. Moreover, we quickly became aware of the conflicts that existed between different groupings of migrants (Rosenthal/Bahl/Worm 2017). These considerable differences in personal situation, migration constellations and experiences during migration, including in the different contexts of origin, as we were able to reconstruct for instance in the case of refugees from Syria, were not the only important finding (Worm 2017). We also found that the migrants' ("strategic") self-positioning and presentation of themselves in terms of their migration, including their present situation in the refugee camp, tended to prevent

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<sup>2</sup> See also our brochure with seven portraits of refugees from Asia and Africa presented at the exhibition "Changing Vistas of Europe" (2017). The portraits reveal seven very different life courses and experiences before, during and after migration, and different concepts of Europe. Available online: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/new+exhibition+brochure+%22changing+vistas+of+europe%22/567344.html>

them from thematizing and attempting to make sense of these (often conflict-charged) differences and divergent biographical realities, which, especially in the case of the Syrian refugees, disappeared behind a generalized “we-image”.

We were able to observe considerable differences between the two regions, not only in respect of the “successful” closing of the borders between Egypt and Israel in 2014 and the (highly selective) permeability of the Spanish-Moroccan border. More importantly, our empirical findings show that the border zones around Melilla and Ceuta, in contrast to the Israeli-Egyptian border zones, are characterized by social intercourse between people on different sides of the border, as has been described in the literature (Driessen 1992; McMurray 2001; Ferrer-Gallardo 2008; Castan Pinos 2009). In this regard, it is clear that the status of the area as a border region, and the processes of change affecting it, which have speeded up in recent years, have very different meanings for the different people living there.

At the **Spanish-Moroccan border**, the close contacts between people on both sides of the border means there is heavy local border traffic. As a result, migrants from Syria, Algeria and other Arab countries regularly succeed in crossing the border because they are perceived by the border guards as Moroccans. In this, they differ substantially from black migrants from south of the Sahara, for whom crossing the border is made impossible by racializing ascriptions. But despite all attempts by Spain and the European Union to seal the border efficiently, it repeatedly happens that large groups of migrants succeed in getting over the high fences, or single individuals manage to cross the border “illegally” using different methods. The refugee groupings, their migration courses, and the way they present their collective belongings, changed considerably over the period in which we conducted our research, due in part to changes in Europe’s asylum policy.

Here it is especially residents on the Moroccan side who try to profit financially from the situation in which illegalized migrants are faced with stricter border controls. The residents of Melilla and Ceuta have remained relatively indifferent to the changing groupings of refugees, but the changing demographic relationship between Christians and Muslims is a constant source of conflict, even if this is often denied. A last field trip in April 2018 (see below) helped us to deepen our understanding of the changing power figurations in the local population of Ceuta and Melilla (Bahl 2017).

At the **Israeli-Egyptian border**, by contrast, it is scarcely possible to cross “illegally”, and the number of migrants who manage to cross the border has dropped dramatically since 2013. (Although the fence along the Egyptian border was only completed in 2014, most of it was already in existence by late 2012, which led to a dramatic decrease in arrivals.) The Israeli government has imposed more measures to “encourage” asylum seekers to leave, first and foremost by defining them as infiltrators. In addition to their incarceration at Holot<sup>3</sup> detention center, a new law

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<sup>3</sup> Holot Detention Center has closed down since 14 March, 2018. In December 2017, one month after the declaration that all Eritreans and Sudanese would be deported, the Israeli government had decided that Holot would be closed (Surkes 2017).

says that roughly 20% of their income must be deposited, and released only upon their departure. The practice of forcing people to sign that they consent to being deported to an allegedly “safe” African country has the result that those who have escaped from Eritrea and Sudan now increasingly choose to cross the Mediterranean in order to get to Europe.

Among those who are still living in Israel, clear changes can be observed in their perspectives on migration routes and on Israel, as well as changes in their daily practices that are intended to increase their chances of staying in Israel. In order to study this phenomenon more closely, we not only conducted more interviews with refugees in Israel, but also interviewed Eritreans who have been deported from Israel to Rwanda or Uganda (Jan. 2015, Jan. 2016 and Feb.-March 2018). In these interviews, we observed that the deported migrants speak about Israel in more negative terms, that they regret having chosen the route they did, that they are seeking information about routes to Europe or Canada, and that they have actually started following these routes (see below). In order to learn more about changing migration routes, and in order to investigate the first leg of Eritrean escape routes, we also conducted fieldwork in northern Ethiopia in September 2017 (see below).

The tensions that evolved in the Israeli-Egyptian border zone, where the State tried to stop irregular migration by deploying more forces and building a fence, led to a further deterioration in relations between two local groupings: Jewish Israelis and Bedouin Israelis. This process is connected to a renewed focus on the Bedouins' age-old “smuggling” activities; as the border heated up, there were more crackdowns on the smugglers, often of a violent nature.

## Research Report on the field trip to the Moroccan-Spanish border zone around Ceuta and Melilla (North Africa)

Eva Bahl and Lucas Cé Sangalli

Between March 23<sup>rd</sup> and April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018, we went on our fifth and last field trip<sup>4</sup> for this research project. We visited the cities of Málaga (Spain), Ceuta (Spain), Fnideq (Morocco), Tanger (Morocco), Fès (Morocco), Nador (Morocco), and Melilla (Spain).

The main focus was to meet people Eva Bahl had interviewed or accompanied during former field trips to Ceuta and Melilla and to gain more empirical proof for our findings regarding the way different groupings live together, namely people with Moroccan or Spanish citizenship (and the latter of either Moroccan or Iberian origin), their constructions of belonging, and the figurations of different groupings in the border zone.

**Málaga.** We started in Málaga (Spain) where we had a glimpse of local collective practices during Holy Week (*Semana Santa*), an important celebration for the Christian part of the Spanish population. Daily life is very much affected by this holiday week: families come together and participate in the processions; most public institutions are closed, and many people are on holiday. In this region, it is also the starting point for the tourist season.

From Málaga, we went to Algeciras (Spain) and crossed the Strait of Gibraltar to reach Ceuta, a Spanish enclave in North Africa. We spent one week in Ceuta, then went on to spend one week in each of the Moroccan cities Tanger and Fès, before proceeding to the last stop of our trip, Melilla, where we spent around two weeks. Here we will present some impressions from each place we visited.

**Ceuta.** During the week we spent in Ceuta, the city was filled with tourists – as in Málaga – mainly due to the Holy Week celebrations. This Catholic celebration pays homage to the Passion of Jesus Christ (the final days of his life) and is organized by different religious brotherhoods (*Cofradías*) that took to the streets of the city of Ceuta alongside groups of soldiers from the Spanish Legion (*Legión Española*) and the Regulars (*Regulares*), two units that were created in the colonial context to defend Spanish interests in North Africa. The Spanish Legion was formed in 1920 as an elite unit of the Spanish Army, and the Regulars were created in 1911 as an indigenous unit (following protests against Spanish soldiers being sent to fight in the protectorate). The military presence is strongly felt in both cities to this day. Thus, the celebration of Holy Week in Ceuta has many characteristics of a conservative

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<sup>4</sup> Our other field work trips were in April/May 2014, September-November 2014, October/November 2015, and March 2017. The first empirical observations at the border between Morocco and Melilla were presented by Eva Bahl, Gabriele Rosenthal, and Arne Worm in the Newsletter of the Research Committee in June 2014.

celebration that brings together religious, military, and civil interests, and creates a joint “we-image” of the more established<sup>5</sup>, Spanish part of the city's population.

Regarding the construction of belonging and the collective memory, the Holy Week period gave us very interesting insights. Thus, during this period, we observed many established Spanish families on the streets of the city. The festivities usually took place in the late hours of the day and only a few Muslim Spanish citizens were seen on the streets during the celebrations. We argue that this strong presentation of “We Christians” in the public space needs to be seen and analyzed in the context of changing power figurations and contested power balances between people of Iberian and Moroccan (Arab or Imazighen) origin in the enclaves.

Security seemed to be a high priority at the event; the anti-terrorism warning was set at level 4 (out of 5), and we saw heavily armed police on the streets during the days of Holy Week. Although it was not explicitly expressed, a Christian event (with military participation) in a city in North Africa that is officially being claimed by the Moroccan government as part of Morocco and has been considered a “hotbed of radicalization” (Kenney 2011) is very sensitive from a security point of view. During this period, cross-border trade was suspended. Because of this very exceptional situation, the border seemed to be very calm and orderly. We were assured by local residents that the border would be crowded and chaotic again immediately after the end of Holy Week.



Soldiers of the Spanish Legion in a Holy Week procession in Ceuta

<sup>5</sup> Here, we refer to Norbert Elias' theory of changing power balances that he presented as introduction to the book “The Established and the Outsiders” (Elias/Scotson 1994).

While in Ceuta, we had the opportunity to visit the neighborhood of *El Príncipe* (*Barrio del Príncipe Alfonso*) with one of our former interviewees who was born in that area. The Spanish newspaper *El País* once described *El Príncipe* as “the most dangerous neighborhood of Spain”<sup>6</sup>. The population of the neighborhood nowadays consists mainly of Muslim Spaniards (of Moroccan origin).<sup>7</sup> The city’s policy during the 1980s was to help the Christian population to move out of the (formerly multi-cultural) neighborhood and into public housing projects, while the Muslim population stayed in the (increasingly neglected) neighborhood. Thereby, *El Príncipe*, which traditionally was inhabited by working class people, became increasingly stigmatized and marginalized as a “Muslim neighborhood”.

This process was described to us by our interviewee’s family whom we had the opportunity to visit in their home in the *Príncipe* neighborhood – a Spanish Muslim family that has lived in the city for several generations. Their overall impression is that the neighborhood is not as dangerous as it used to be, even though one of the older interviewees thinks that the people who live in the neighborhood look sadder than before. She says that “a lot of blood” had been shed because of drug-related crime and the radicalization that had led many young men to go and fight with the terrorist organization “Islamic State” in Syria in the past decade.

Furthermore, they talk about their situation “falling between two stools”: They say that they are treated differently by both Moroccans and (Christian) Spaniards. Moroccan Muslims consider them as “renegades” and envy them for their Spanish citizenship, while Spanish Christians consider them “less” Spanish and discriminate against them for being Muslim.

The overall impression we had was that the city authorities – both in Ceuta and Melilla – are reluctant to acknowledge the economic dependency of the two cities on the Moroccan economy. On weekdays many people cross the border to buy goods (that easily can be shipped to Ceuta’s and Melilla’s freeports) on the Spanish side. Goods are bought for personal use and for resale in Morocco. The whole economic activity of Ceuta and Melilla is strongly related to trade with Morocco. But this is not reflected in the treatment of the Moroccan clients and the situation of the border infrastructure. This can be seen, for example, in the very precarious conditions in which Moroccan porters (most of them elderly women) have to cross the border. These women and men face a very precarious daily crossing of the border to earn between 5 and 10 euros a day. They usually cross the border with packages weighing more than 80 kg on their backs. This crossing takes hours as we observed in the city of Melilla.

<sup>6</sup> Bárbulo, Tomás (2003) El barrio más peligroso de España. EL PAÍS, 28. April [http://elpais.com/diario/2003/04/28/ultima/1051480801\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/2003/04/28/ultima/1051480801_850215.html) [01.06.2018]

<sup>7</sup> The neighborhood has been widely discussed in Spanish and international media. See, for example: <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/6/28/in-tough-el-principe-joblessness-leaves-youth-vulnerable-to-radicalization.html>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/10/muslims-spain-151004085759468.html>

[https://elpais.com/diario/2003/04/28/ultima/1051480801\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/2003/04/28/ultima/1051480801_850215.html)

[https://elpais.com/elpais/2014/10/23/eps/1414089026\\_035725.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2014/10/23/eps/1414089026_035725.html)

**Tanger.** After Ceuta, we went to Tanger (Morocco), where we got in touch with several members of the Senegalese community. Senegalese migrants benefit from diplomatic treaties between the governments of Morocco and Senegal and are allowed to enter the country without visas. Many of them work as street vendors or run small restaurants. For many it seems to be just a transit point (where a stay can extend over a period of several years) on their way to Europe, while others travel back and forth between Senegal and Morocco and profit from the tourist season in Moroccan cities.

**Fès.** After Tanger, we went to Fès, where we observed the results of the repression that *Black*<sup>8</sup> migrants experience in Morocco (and which has intensified since the beginning of our project in 2014 (Bahl 2015a,b)). We visited the settlement known as “La Gare de Fès”<sup>9</sup> (Fès Train Station). Here, several thousand migrants from West Africa and central Africa live in very precarious conditions in huts made of plastic and corrugated metal. Most of them had been living in similar camps in the border regions near Ceuta and Melilla, trying to get over the fences to enter the European Union. The men we talked to (from Mali and Cameroon) told us that they had come to Fès to “recover” because the repression by Moroccan security personnel was so brutal in the direct proximity of the border, where they had lived for a long time. They are still waiting for a chance to get cross the border fences at Ceuta or Melilla.

Morocco receives money and cooperates in many ways with the European Union to prevent illegalized migration from their territory to Ceuta and Melilla and Andalucía (see Carrera et al. 2016).

**Melilla.** Our last and longest stay was in Melilla (Spain). In Melilla, we observed the trans-border commerce that had restarted with full intensity after the Holy Week break. Some things have changed during our research process (since 2014): now there is a bus service that takes the porters from the Beni Enzar border point (international border) to the *Barrio Chino* border point (only for local inhabitants and mainly for porters) in order to “organize” the crossing of the border. Porters have to wait in long queues, often for hours in the midday sun. The Spanish authorities hire Moroccan assistants to help them control these groups. The official justification is the difficulty of communicating with the porters in their own language (Tamazight or – in the case of people from other parts of Morocco – Arabic). More than once, we saw Spanish officers from the National Police or the Civil Guard (Guardia Civil) using their police batons to menace and “control” this population. One of the elderly ladies stumbled and fell to the ground in the middle of the road because of the heavy weight she was carrying, something that did not seem to be unusual for the people working at the border.

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<sup>8</sup> We write the word in italics to underline the social constructedness of the category blackness and to recognize that it has also become a political self-denomination.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.rfi.fr/hebdo/20160520-maroc-melilla-camp-migrants-africains-fes-gare>



Porters at the Barrio Chino border crossing in Melilla

Our overall impression is that the use of violence and threats seems to be widespread in enforcing control of the porters, who are highly dependent on their ability to cross the border. For many families, this precarious work is the only source of income.

Also, the use of violence against migrants who want to cross the border remains an issue.<sup>10</sup> Since the beginning of the project in 2014, it has been striking to us that the border controls are strictly racialized (Rosenthal/Bahl/Worm 2017).<sup>11</sup> In general, the populations most affected by the border violence (exercised by police and military forces on both sides of the border) come from regions in West Africa and Central Africa and are *Black*. While migrants from Syria or Algeria can make themselves pass as Moroccans and have other advantages, such as a knowledge of Arabic, *Black* people suffer from racism by security forces and the local population (see Norman 2013). And they do not have the opportunity to even come close to the border crossing – let alone to approach the asylum offices that were opened in Ceuta and Melilla in 2014, but never really useable for illegalized migrants.<sup>12</sup> The only alternative that remains for them is to cross the 6-metres-high border fence, to use boats, or to hide in trucks and cars. All of these options involve danger to their lives, and physical

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/may/10/melilla-refugees-spain-africa-gateway-europe>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.dw.com/en/melilla-no-asylum-for-black-men/a-41404179>

<sup>12</sup> <https://elfarodeceuta.es/la-oficina-de-asilo-del-tarajal-no-ha-recibido-solicitudes-desde-su-creacion/>

violence by border security personnel (police and military forces on both sides of the border) is common (Amnesty 2015b).

Those migrants who are successful in crossing the border are sent to the Center for Temporary Stay of Immigrants (*Centro de Estancia Temporal de Inmigrantes*) in Melilla. Once again, we visited the Center to find it had been expanded to accommodate more migrants (up to 1,000 but it is still overcrowded). According to press reports, migrants from Syria, Algeria, Guinea-Conakry and Morocco are the biggest groupings in the Center nowadays<sup>13</sup>.

The (transit) migrants in and around the CETI find themselves in very precarious and heteronomous situations. Because of their unequal treatment in administrative and asylum law practice, their future perspectives are very different. It was a result of our research that this contributes to tensions among the different migrant groupings and (partly) explains a lot of stigmatization<sup>14</sup>. The frustration and hopelessness of young men from Morocco and Algeria (whose chances of being accepted in the asylum procedure are very limited) are channeled into racism and blame-gossip against *Black* migrants, and against Moroccans who apply for asylum because of their sexual orientation or self-definition.

We can give an example of the homogenizing bullying we observed towards *Black* African migrants. One young Moroccan man shouted at two *Black* migrants walking by: "Mama Africa! Didier Drogba<sup>15</sup>". The two men tried to ignore the bully and obviously felt uncomfortable with the situation.

Another example of stigmatization and power inequalities between different groupings inside the CETI was the interaction between a group of young cis-men<sup>16</sup> and a group of transgender women – labelled as "homosexuals" by the cis-men. When the transgender women walked by, the cis-men shouted sexualized comments in their direction and whistled. After they had passed, they cursed them (one, who had been deported from Germany, used the German word for "Asshole") and explained to us that "they were not real homosexuals". These cis-men argued that the transgender persons just used this as an argument for their asylum application. When we asked them how they knew that "they were not homosexuals", they told us that it was "visible".

These strong stigmatizations can also be observed in other reception countries. They are interdependent with the (possible) advantages of people who ask for asylum because of their sexual orientation or gender self-definition. This phenomenon and, in general, the performance and construction of masculinity in the very heterogeneous and multi-lingual communities of refugees (who are often forced to live together in

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.elindependiente.com/politica/2018/03/07/ceti-melilla-abarrotado-por-llegada-inmigrantes/>

<sup>14</sup> In the case of Syrian refugees, it is mainly the stigmatization of one Syrian grouping as "Nawar" by other Syrians (see Worm 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Didier Drogba is a professional football player from Ivory Coast who played for many years in the London club Chelsea.

<sup>16</sup> Cisgender (often simply abbreviated to cis) is a term for people whose gender self-definition matches the sex that they were assigned at birth. It is the opposite of the term transgender.

very limited spaces) should be an object of further empirical study. We are planning to address these issues in our further research.

**Resumé.** After 4 years doing research in the regions of Ceuta and Melilla, the main issues for the study of these borders can be identified as:

- the interaction between members of different groupings,
- the changing groupings of migrants who live there for a (relatively) short period of time, or who remain there (usually, of necessity, because of the lack of alternatives) for a long time,
- the changing figurations in the local population, and
- the changing methods of border "security".

No simple explanation can adequately address the complexity of the ongoing social construction of the border (that is negotiated interactively and is changing permanently) and of the dynamics between groupings in these regions. It could be seen over the years that relations and figurations between different groupings change constantly, whether between Muslims and Christians, Spaniards and Moroccans or between the different migrant and refugee groupings. As border "security" becomes more repressive and the situation of the migrants becomes more precarious, their group relations become more conflict-laden.

## Report on the field trip to Uganda (Kampala) and our interviews with Eritreans

**Gabriele Rosenthal and Lukas Hofmann**

In spring 2015 and spring 2016, in the context of a research project on former child soldiers in northern Uganda (Bogner/Rosenthal 2017; and in this newsletter), Gabriele Rosenthal had an opportunity to interview four Eritreans in Uganda who had been 'voluntarily deported' from Israel to Rwanda, were then forced to leave Rwanda, and had become stranded in Uganda. A few months after the interview, three of them succeeded in reaching Europe via Libya and the Mediterranean Sea. Here, we will discuss in detail the case of the high-ranking Eritrean officer (formerly a member of the Eritrean secret service) who is still stranded in Kampala to this day.

These interviews turned out to be extremely useful for understanding and explaining the interviews conducted in Israel, not least because the interviewees had changed their mind with regard to their first choice of migration route. Consequently, G. Rosenthal and Lukas Hofmann traveled to Kampala (Uganda) to carry out further interviews in spring 2018. This field trip thus took place against the backdrop of developments in Israel at the end of 2017 that made life increasingly precarious for African migrants (especially those from Sudan and Eritrea), developments which reached a dramatic climax in spring 2018. In November 2017 the Israeli government had decided that all single men out of a current total of around 40,000 Sudanese and Eritreans in the country should be forcefully deported to an allegedly "safe" African country by March 2018, and this decision was now being increasingly enforced. Such deportations have been taking place since 2013, and have involved 4,000 Eritrean and Sudanese refugees to date (Weiss 2018).

The Eritreans and Sudanese in Israel were pressurized into signing declarations saying they would leave "voluntarily" and in return they were promised 3500 dollars and an air ticket (Muhumuza 2018). In November 2017 the Israeli government and authorities issued a clear ultimatum: if the migrants did not agree to be flown out by March 2018, they would go to jail<sup>17</sup>. Those who were flown out knew which country they had arrived in only after the plane had landed. In most cases it was Kigali (Rwanda) or Entebbe (Uganda); we also heard of deportations to Khartoum (Republic of Sudan). To this day, both Uganda and Rwanda deny having signed an agreement to this effect with Israel. In Rwanda, the migrants are given tourist visas for a very short period (about three weeks), and are very quickly informed by smugglers about "illegal" ways to reach Uganda, which will cost them several thousand dollars. The money they are given in Israel is soon gone.

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<sup>17</sup> Instead of extending the visas of Eritreans and Sudanese, the authorities issued deportation notes (Alon 2018).

In spring 2018, unlike in previous years, access to the field in Kampala was difficult due to the migrants' great fear of Israeli, Ugandan, and Eritrean secret service agents, as well as a negative attitude towards 'white' journalists. We were repeatedly told that they felt exploited by people from NGOs and by journalists who constantly came asking Eritreans and Sudanese in Israel and in Kampala to talk about their plight: they all wanted to use the migrants for their own purposes and had no intention of helping them. We had to admit that we could not help them either, except by giving them a small amount for granting us an interview (and paying for a meal in the restaurant<sup>18</sup> which they had chosen as the setting for the interview). During the three weeks we spent in Kampala, besides a number of ethnographic interviews and group interviews, and participant observation in cafés and bars that were frequented by Eritreans, we succeeded in conducting and recording only three biographical interviews with Eritreans who had been deported from Israel. The fear of talking and of the interview being recorded is materially connected with asylum practices and the secret service in Uganda. The fact that the Ugandan government officially denies having agreed with Israel to accept the deportees forces the latter to keep quiet about their time in Israel and their deportation. Furthermore, people told us that Eritrean passengers arriving by air from Israel had all papers which would prove they had lived in Israel taken away from them immediately after arrival. Anyone wanting to apply for asylum is expected by the authorities to say that they traveled to Uganda via Sudan. This means that the "deportees" are required to invent a new life history, and to deny the time (often over six years) they spent in Israel, their experiences in Sinai which often involved torture and were extremely traumatizing (Mitchell 2014), their acquisition of Hebrew, their experiences with different kinds of paid work, the friends they have left behind in Israel, and in some cases their wives and children who were born in Israel. To this day the Ugandan government denies being party to any agreement to take in Eritrean refugees from Israel.

In order to gain a better understanding of the extremely precarious situation of this grouping in Uganda, we conducted – contrary to our plan – not only several ethnographic interviews and three group discussions, but also interviews with Eritreans (one woman and one man) who had traveled via Sudan and Ethiopia to Uganda. In contrast to those Eritreans who have been forced to leave Israel, they have better access to documents which allow them to establish themselves in Uganda. This "legality" is possible because in Kenya, the Republic of Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda – but not Ethiopia – the necessary papers can be obtained from the Eritrean embassy. Moreover, after arriving in another country, all Eritreans must go to the embassy and pay a certain amount for their departure (otherwise relatives in Eritrea will be arrested and detained). They – like all Eritreans in the Diaspora – are also required to pay a tax amounting to 2% of their income, the so-called "Recovery

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<sup>18</sup> We usually stayed for at least an hour after the interview, which was usually ended rather abruptly by the interviewee, because they were either too tired or too hungry to continue. This gave us a chance to engage in small talk and thus bring them back into the here and now, instead of remaining sunk in painful memories of the past. We were also able to talk about their hopes and possible options for the future.

Tax".<sup>19</sup> The important difference is that refugee status in Uganda is granted only to those deportees from Israel whose life history fits the Ugandan discourse, meaning they must have come to Uganda via Sudan (Lidman 2018).

We will now present the cases of two Eritreans who were deported from Israel, and a group discussion between Eritreans living in Kampala with different statuses.

### 1. Abraham Girmay

In 2015/2016 in Kampala, Gabriele Rosenthal interviewed four Eritreans who had been deported from Israel (besides Eritreans who had migrated legally from Eritrea to Uganda). Among them was a man (we will call him Abraham Girmay) whose history, position in the Eritrean community, and present situation made him stand out from all our other interviewees, whether in Israel or Uganda. In contrast to most of the Eritreans we interviewed, he had not fled from conditions in the Eritrean army, but was a high-ranking officer who identified himself with the president and the government system, and had for some time been an active member of the secret service. Even after his migration, he was well networked with Eritreans established in Uganda and enjoyed their support. As we learned after five interviews with him<sup>20</sup>, he had been condemned to death because he and other officers had requested a pay rise during a discussion with the Eritrean president, Isayas Afewerki. Unlike other Eritreans, he cannot leave Uganda, because this would be too dangerous for him since he is known as a secret service officer, especially in South Sudan.

Abraham's reasons for leaving Eritrea are thus very different from those given in the other interviews we conducted with Eritrean men and women. They mentioned conscription for compulsory national service between the ages of 18 and 47, in some cases even up to 59<sup>21</sup> (Bartolucci 2017), or the extremely difficult and dangerous conditions of life in the army and during its various operations. Contrasting the cases of Eritreans who escaped from national service with the case of a man who was a high-ranking officer, whose self-image was characterized by 'military pride' and the knowledge of having been a successful 'freedom fighter' for many years,<sup>22</sup> and who identified himself with the government and the social system of Eritrea, enables us to show to what extent a person's political positioning before leaving Eritrea constitutes their present self-thematization. In particular, his case reveals the extent to which the

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<sup>19</sup> For further information see the Human Rights Concern Eritrea, available at <http://hrc-eritrea.org/eritrean-government-demands-ransoms-from-refugees-for-detained-family-members>.

<sup>20</sup> His high position in the army and his political persecution – not due to desertion from the army – began to become clear after the first two interviews in which he did not reveal much about himself. This led to the decision to conduct more interviews with him at intervals of several months up to a year. Two of the later interviews were conducted by G. Rosenthal's field assistant, "Tom", whose real name we cannot give for reasons of data protection. All interviews were conducted in Tigrinya and translated by Tom.

<sup>21</sup> National service was introduced in 1995. All men and women between the age of 18 and 50 had to complete 18 months of service. In 2002 the period of service was extended to "indefinite" (Amnesty 2015a).

<sup>22</sup> He begins the interview by stating his name (as recorded in his Israeli documents), followed by: "I fought for the liberation of Eritrea for twenty-five years". To borrow the terms of Erving Goffman, this sounds like an "identity peg" and this reading is confirmed in the subsequent course of the interview.

prestige a person had in Eritrea still affects the way other Eritreans treat them today. Moreover, the interviews with Abraham Girmay tell us something about the effective 'operating range' of the Eritrean secret service which extends beyond the national borders, and how this influences the way migrants speak about their own life. For instance, Abraham Girmay was at first reluctant to tell us the name of the prison where he was held, because this would show that he was a high-ranking political prisoner. In the first three interviews he also avoided saying that it was President Afewerki personally who ordered him to be detained, together with the other officers present at the meeting, because they had requested a pay increase. Abraham Girmay succeeded in escaping with the aid of the prison director.

The case of Abraham Girmay also allows us to make assumptions with regard to figurations within the grouping of Eritrean migrants in Uganda and in Israel. Abraham Girmay comes from an established social and political position, and, as we were able to observe during the time we spent with him and other Eritreans in Uganda, he can rely on being treated with respect within the grouping of Eritrean migrants, and on receiving help from them even in Uganda (for example in the form of a free hotel room)<sup>23</sup>. He can rely on this even though the other migrants are deserters from the Eritrean army, the organization of which he is proud, and in former times he probably approved, or even ordered, the incarceration of deserters in Eritrea. Abraham Girmay is still in touch with members of the political elite in Eritrea, and knows how to use secret service interrogation methods (as shown in his interaction with Tom, our Eritrean field assistant).

The case of Abraham Girmay thus allows us insights into the powerful effect of two components, a career in the secret service and the army, and status in Eritrea, on a person's established position within the grouping of Eritreans, which maintains even after migration.

## 2. Robel

Following an ethnographic interview<sup>24</sup> with both of us, in which Robel (born around 1980) described his tireless struggle in Kampala to be given a chance to prove in court that he had been deported from Israel, he was interviewed by L. Hofmann on two further occasions in February 2018, and was asked to narrate his whole life story. Robel deserted national service in Eritrea in 2005 and was condemned to spend

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<sup>23</sup> G. Rosenthal met Abraham together with other Eritreans on various occasions when she was invited to take part in an Eritrean coffee ritual, and through participant observation she was able to confirm the assumption based on the interviews.

<sup>24</sup> In 2018, in contrast to 2015/2016, at least one preliminary meeting, first talks and repeated requests were necessary in all cases before the Eritreans agreed to take part in life-history interviews. They needed to meet us face-to-face before they could decide how far we could be trusted.

many years in prison. He managed to escape from the prison and reached Khartoum, in the Republic of Sudan. There he met a woman who had also run away from national service in Eritrea. She later became his wife. In Sudan, they heard about the possibility of migrating to Israel. When Robel's wife became pregnant, they decided to travel to Israel via the Sinai Peninsula in order to ensure a better future for their child. Robel's wife left in the fifth month of pregnancy in 2007 and Robel followed some month later. His wife arrived in Israel at the end of 2007 and Robel in 2008<sup>25</sup>. The baby was born there, followed by a second child two years later. At the end of 2015, Robel decided to agree – at least that is how he puts it – to leave the country, because he hoped that in another country he would find a legal way to migrate to America for himself and his wife and children, who stayed behind in Israel. He refers to the situation when he decided to leave Israel in the following terms:

"... now also me with two kids when I go there what can I do, so better you go somewhere and you arrange a place, you call us this is better than I mean if to go with two kids, so: we agree (...) when I come here I got be legal and then //mhm// this is what I was send here I come but when I come here things becomes broken".

Before he made the decision to leave his family in Israel, they made several failed attempts to migrate from Israel to the US or Canada. He decided to take the "chance" and got deported to an unknown African country in the hope of laying legal foundations for his family there. Taking about his experiences in Israel in the interview, he shows annoyance at the conditions in which Eritreans live in Israel in terms of legal acceptance and racism. Underlining his critique, he speaks harshly about the Jews and Israel as a state, and uses clear anti-Semitic stereotypes.

In Uganda "things becomes broken", he says. He sees two possibilities: he can either apply for asylum, and accept the need to rewrite his life history by claiming that he came from Sudan and not from Israel (which was recommended to him by a Ugandan official), or open a legal case in court and apply for asylum as an Eritrean deported from Israel. He says he knew that Eritreans and Sudanese had to submit their papers to the authorities when they entered Uganda at the airport. But he had already photographed his documents and sent them by WhatsApp to his wife and friends in Israel; and by a lucky chance he was able to keep his Israeli ID. He can thus take his case to court because, unlike the other Eritreans and Sudanese who were deported with him, he succeeded in securing his documents from Israel. With these documents, he can open a legal case, a course of action he is currently pursuing.

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<sup>25</sup> Here we can see how those who arrived later in Israel faced life-threatening situations on their route. Robel told us that he realized that Eritreans and Sudanese who came after 2009 to Israel were "different", because they went through kidnapping, torture and rape.

Immediately after their arrival at the airport in Uganda, he and the six other deportees were told that they must not say anything about their deportation from Israel. Several of his friends, like many others in this situation, therefore see Uganda only as a transit point before continuing their migration. Many of them, like the Eritreans interviewed in Kampala by G. Rosenthal in 2015/2016, set out on the extremely dangerous route through South Sudan and the Republic of Sudan to Libya, and attempt to cross the Mediterranean to Europe. They do so even though the Eritrean community is aware of the risks, especially from the Islamic State (IS), a jihadi militia. It is known, and was posted by IS on Facebook, for instance, that several Eritreans were publicly executed by IS in Libya (Lidman 2018; Muhumuza 2018). Robel himself wants to avoid this dangerous route:

"... they see this country is not comfort they pass across Sudan again through Libya, they go Europe a lot of peoples also die, ah peoples I know like, three four, guys what I know coming from there, they are dying in the desert, I don't want to get in this kind of risk, because I know the risk (...) I have kids now at that time okay I am free at now I have kids (for me) to meet them, how can I try to go to through Libya it is dangerous for me, I don't need it also, to stay here also, on the same side, on the other side it is dangerous too, because I am not legal, just I can leave okay, I can walk, I can go freely but I can't work I can't survive my life here".

Therefore, he is currently fighting with immigration officials over documents confirming that he was deported from Israel, which will enable him to apply for political asylum.

### **A group discussion between Eritreans who followed different migration routes to Kampala**

At the end of our stay, we invited Robel and three other Eritreans with whom we had also conducted biographical interviews to a group discussion in the garden of our hotel, and to a farewell dinner with us in the hotel afterwards. Two of the participants were our field assistant, Tom, and his friend, whom we will call Fred. Tom and Fred have been friends since their childhood and both come from very respected families in Eritrea. Tom was exempted from national service on health grounds and is living legally in Uganda. Fred went to Ethiopia to avoid being conscripted for national service, and studied at a Christian university there. After obtaining his first degree, he traveled to Kampala legally with the hope of being able to continue his route to a country in the West where he could pursue a master's degree. In Ethiopia, Fred was, and still is, in an established position; he therefore has the option to continue his studies there, and after his bachelor degree he had been offered a job at the

university. This is connected with the fact that he is related to a member of the so-called "Group of 15", a group of high-ranking officers who had struggled for a democratic opening of Eritrea after the war with Ethiopia in 2001. They had been arrested and the regime in Eritrea became increasingly repressive (Scheen 2015). The third participant in the group discussion was Ella who had to leave her country due to the political persecution of her husband (who had migrated to Germany), and who had traveled to Uganda through South Sudan. Her family had forbidden her to take the risk of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, as she told us in an individual interview. She has been stuck in Uganda for several years now and is hoping that her husband will be able to arrange for her to come to Germany. Even after conducting a biographical interview with her, we are unable to explain her apparently hopeless situation. The fourth participant was Robel, the only one of the four who had lived in Israel.

One particular finding from this group discussion helped us to understand why the Eritreans were willing to meet us for a cup of coffee, but not for an interview. On the one hand, they want to talk about their situation, which can be described as "stranded in Kampala with no secure future perspective", and they enjoy spending a pleasant time with us "Westerners". On the other hand, they cannot trust us, they cannot trust anybody, but they also need help to get out of their "stranded" situation. And so every meeting oscillates between feelings of trust and fear, and between great caution in speaking and the need to talk about their painful experiences and asking for support. All the participants in the group discussion confirmed very explicitly – in answer to a question by G. Rosenthal – that they didn't trust each other. Fred goes as far as to say that he doesn't even trust his friend Tom. Robel confirms this and says, with the clear non-verbal agreement of all the other participants, that one cannot even trust members of one's own family: not only is the Eritrean secret service extremely active all over the world, but no one knows who might be working for it, and this distrust was instilled deeply within them when they were still in Eritrea. They learned that nobody can be trusted. It is something they cannot give up, regardless of what country they are in, for they know that if they argue or organize anything critical in public about Eritrea, their relatives at home will suffer for it. Nevertheless, as Robel says, in Uganda – in a symbolic sense – they can breathe more freely and he would not want to spend another day in Eritrea.

At this point it is important to remember that contact with the Eritrean authorities, and in particular repeated visits to the Eritrean embassy in Kampala, are practically unavoidable for the Eritreans. It is the embassy that issues and renews the passports they need in order to apply for asylum in other countries. Thus, they are still dependent on the Eritrean authorities, and accompanied constantly by the fear not only that their relatives may be persecuted by the secret service in Eritrea, but even that they may be working for it themselves.

**Preliminary Summary of Fieldwork in Northern Ethiopia, 8-22 September 2017****Efrat Ben-Ze'ev**

The goal of my visit to the north of Ethiopia was to meet refugees from Eritrea who have crossed this single border. I had wanted to focus on this first leg of the journey, and specifically, on the agency available to those escaping. My interviews clarified that most of the stories on escape were rather sparse on details. This crossing, from the south of Eritrea to the north of Ethiopia, entails a few hours of walking. Most people undertook the short journey through the mountains at night time, often under bad weather conditions, which they had hoped would protect them. While the initial focus on the single crossing expanded my understanding of the hospitable acceptance by the Ethiopian army, the operations of the Dabaguna reception center, and the distribution of those arriving to the camps, many other topics also surfaced during the interviews.

Prior to departure, I had tried to arrange a plan for interviews, with little success. The one important contact that I had was with a young man, in his late twenties, whom I shall call Amanuel. He was recommended by his university professor, whose article about the refugee camps in Ethiopia I had read, and whom I had contacted via email. Amanuel was completing his first degree at the University of Axum, and was himself a refugee from Eritrea. We met on the first day of my arrival and made some general plans for the days to follow. I then travelled to Gondar for meetings at the university. The land trip from Axum to Gondar and back, which crossed from the Tigray region to the Amhara Region of Ethiopia, was important since I could witness some of the refugee camps on the way – Adi Harush and Mai Aini (I had no official permit to enter them). Moreover, as I travelled by public transportation, I witnessed the application of the refugees' permit regime. On my way back from Gondar, I stopped at Mai Tsabri, located near Mai Aini, for an interview with a staff member working with one of the foreign NGOs.

During my trip, I conducted interviews with seven men. A key informant was Amanuel, who offered overviews on different topics such as history and politics, as well as a narrative of his own life story. He also drew some pictures for me, demonstrating through them how prisoners are transferred within Eritrea and showing torture methods used at Eritrean prisons. An exceptional interview was conducted with an Ethiopian psychologist who worked in the refugee camps. He described how the camps are organized and the division of responsibilities between different NGOs. He also dwelled on the worldview of his own NGO and its approach to treating trauma and victims of torture. The methods were developed in the USA, and

“exported” worldwide. There are, of course, some questions regarding cross cultural differences, which he was well aware of. The other five interviews were with young men who resided in Hitsats, a refugee camp located near the border with Eritrea.

The latter interviews were conducted in Axum, at my hotel lobby. The language of conversation was either English (some interviewees spoke good English) or Tigrinya, translated into English by my research assistant, with some use of Arabic. Since all these interviewees arrived from Afar to meet me, I gave each 400 Ethiopian birrs (ca. 16 US dollars), to cover travel costs and loss of time. I also brought along some clothes, soaps and children’s games, which I had given to them to distribute in the camp.

Before I move on to some of the themes that come up from the interviews, let me describe some of my general impressions. The refugees I met did not feel safe in Ethiopia. It seemed that when walking on the street, some of them tried to pass as invisible, avoiding eye contact, and not too enthusiastic to walk with me alongside them. They testified that they had fear due to their precarious position. They were also a little suspicious towards me. I had given them the option not to disclose their real names to me; some did and some did not. One of them, Meron, asked me to contact his brother who resides in Israel and is married to a Jewish woman of Ethiopian Tigray origin. (I did, and the brother’s wife called me some weeks later asking for legal assistance. The Tel Aviv Refugee Rights Law Clinic is now handling their matter). Despite the suspicion, all interviewees were willing to be recorded, as Amanuel had prepared them in advance. Amanuel was committed all along and ended one of our talks by making the following declaration: “Thank you for caring about the Eritrean story.” He is currently resettled in Canada and we keep in touch.

During my trip from Axum to Gonder, I heard a little about the internal tensions in Ethiopia between Amhara and Tigray. The Amhara people accused the Tigrays of maintaining their arms since the time of the border wars with Eritrea, and preserving political prominence. This is a sensitive topic and people were careful when they explained their opinions. I could also witness the tension when crossing with Tigrinya speaking people into the Amhara province. I also met a man who told me about a new political vision – to erase the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea again in order to create a joint Tigray entity. And so ethnic tensions pertaining to these areas of Ethiopia are evident, in addition to the unrest in the Oromo region.

Let me now outline in rough strokes some of the issues that emanated from the interviews. First was the level of persecution endured by youngsters in Eritrea. Interviewees described the difficult conditions when being on the National Service,

often verging on slavery, and its indefinite length. Abiel summarized the situation by noting that: “We can say that living in Eritrea is forbidden. We are not allowed to live.” He noted that he left behind his entire family and keeps in touch through a relative in Sudan. He recently learnt that two of his brothers are imprisoned because they dared to leave their army posts to visit their home.

Tedros, an exceptionally eloquent interviewee, completed a first degree at a technical college in Eritrea, and landed a highly respectable job at one of the Ministries. He noted that even so, he could never earn enough money to be able to send some to his family. This method of keeping people so poor contributed to weakening family ties. This structural poverty, in addition to the effective network of informants (including within families), were major factors fostering suspicion, pervading Eritreans’ most personal relationships, including in the Diaspora.

The topic of torture by the authorities was a recurrent one. Eritreans are placed in prison for any minor reason and torture is part and parcel of the prison experience. Amanuel completed his year in Sawa and was heading to a farm for summer work, when he was stopped at a roadblock, accused of trying to escape the country and sent to prison. When interrogated, he first insisted that he had no intention to escape, but when he could no longer bare the pain of torture, he “admitted to the crime.” “When I said yes,” he noted, “he punished me again for having said no before. We passed that. It was very hard and painful. When I returned back to the underground [cell] I was falling down. I was using four limbs to go there. Then I entered the underground and asked for water. The person on the way would not give me [any] and so did the prisoners – “If you drink water you may have a stroke. Stay a moment.” The prisoners helped me by massaging me -- In the back, in the knee, in the neck. Even the fingernails, even in the leg, they were pealed. It was painful. For three days I was very sick. If I stood up I could lose myself.”

Semir was caught twice when trying to escape the country. He mentioned the torture he had endured following his second failed attempt: “Interrogation on the second time lasted only a week. It was like a year for me. No night or day. They would just beat me all the time. They hit me so much.” Semir had a long scar across his cheek; his past “spoke up” through his face and expression. This was so for many of the men I met – some had hidden scars, and would sometimes show them in relation to a story they were telling. Their sad histories were imprinted on their bodies.

Yet the most shocking story was told to me by Meron, who was captured by traffickers when trying to cross from Eritrea to Sudan, and was “delivered” like goods to a torture camp in the Sinai. These camps were run by criminals who raised ransom

in return for the release of their “prisoners”. Meron’s story was hardly discernable, a chaotic narrative with many missing pieces. He was tortured badly in an underground cell, including with pieces of plastic burnt and dripped on his back. Organ harvesting was also practiced on his cellmate, by a man he described as a “Turkish doctor.” Finally, his “prison” was bombed from the sky, he was released, spent some time in Al-Arish hospital recuperating, and then sent with UNHCR money to Ethiopia. His mental state did not seem stable at the time that we met.

Abiel, who managed to avoid being drafted into the army for four years, mainly through hiding in the mountains, was finally caught, and then managed to escape. He described how he entered Ethiopia: “Then we went towards Ethiopia and we were shot by border guards. But it was evening and we got an opportunity to escape. By night we could run. When we arrived in Ethiopia the government received us well. Even the soldiers took us in. Then they sent us to camp – Hitsats.” He then opened his pocket zipper, pulled out a plastic bag, and showed me his pass permit. We spoke about the document regime in Ethiopia and I learnt that refugees need a permit to leave camp. When they do, they leave behind their refugee status document and receive it upon their return.

On the way from Mai Tsabri to Shire, in a service taxi, we were stopped twice at roadblocks. Those do not stand out much – a single person often stands at the “checkpoint.” But drivers always stop and wait, well aware of the authorities’ presence. It was evident that these checkpoints were meant to monitor refugees’ movements (possibly in addition to other purposes). The two refugees who were with me in the service taxi were quick to present their documents. One of them had his laminated, and his shirt stood out as exceptionally white, as if to prove a point.

Although some of my interviewees were permitted to travel out of their camps for studying, they highlighted the fact that camp life was still very difficult: “It is crowded. It is hot. In the camp you need money. It is not enough to survive by donations from the UNHCR. If there is no one to help you, it can be a difficult life. It looks like that until now. Life in the camp is not good.” However, while the Eritrean secret police operates within refugee camps in the Sudan, they cannot do so in Ethiopia. Therefore, in comparison, camps in Ethiopia are considered safe.

Boredom is another problem in the camp. Many of those who arrive have a profession, they are young and eager to be active, but are not permitted to work in Ethiopia: “With all our power and profession, we are passing our time in the camp, without any way to do something. I would like to learn in college if I get the chance,”

said Banyam. He could not even get a driver's license since the Ethiopian government does not permit it.

**Resumé.** My interviews talked about life in Eritrea and the very difficult circumstances which its citizens must endure. Interviewing them at their first stop outside of their country teaches us much about the circumstances that lead them to escape, both in terms of long term conditions as well as immediate concerns. The internal permit regime imposed on movement within Eritrea was also prominent in the narratives. Finally, life in the refugee camps in Ethiopia was also described in detail. When I write up my findings, it would be worthwhile to dwell on the different foci in the interviews conducted in Israel and Eritrea.



A checkpoint near the Takeze River at dusk, Tigray. Another section of this river flows along the Ethiopian-Eritrean Border and refugees must cross it.



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