

University of Goettingen

Center of Methods in Social Sciences

Summary:

The social construction of border zones: A comparison of two geopolitical cases

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This project was devoted to examining the social construction of border zones and border activities in the context of their socio historic – short term and long term – transformation. Our research was focused specifically on the border region between Morocco and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, and on the border region between Israel and Egypt. Our aim was to reconstruct the way the social reality of borders is created by the practices of members of different groupings, and the biographical genesis, significance and consequences of these practices. We were interested mainly in the experiences of long-time local inhabitants, (illegalized) migrants from different regions (Syria and African countries), and the security forces employed at the border.

At the time we began our fieldwork, there were signs in both border regions of attempts to close or at least to “manage” the border crossings more strictly. This tendency became very clear as the project progressed. We observed similarities and differences between the two regions. They have in common that the increasingly frequent closing of the border was in stark contrast to the long-standing patterns of interaction and mobility practices in these border regions. Our interviews and observations also showed that the transformation processes, which have accelerated in recent years, have very different meanings for the everyday lives of people living in the regions concerned. In the border region between Israel and

Egypt, cross-border relations and activities are mainly shaped by the grouping of the Beduins. At the borders between Morocco and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, the social reality of the everyday life at the border is shaped by a variety of groupings interacting on a daily basis: many Moroccans come to work in the enclaves, while the people in the enclaves cross the border for leisure activities or on business. The local border regime and the daily border traffic increase the chance for people who are labeled as Moroccans by the border guards to mix with the crowd and not be noticed. For refugees from Syria, Algeria and other Arab countries this is more or less the only way to cross the border – illegalized, and sometimes with the help of bought or forged documents. This is very different from the realities of Black migrants, mostly from West African countries, who are forced to choose very dangerous mobility strategies due to the racialized logic of the same regime. Despite the existential dangers of an illegalized border crossing, quite a number of refugees succeeded in getting over the border fences during the project period. In comparison, the border between Israel and Egypt is rarely crossed by illegalized migrants. With the exception of official crossings, this border zone was almost completely closed by military guards. In addition to the construction of a fence along the border in 2014, the highly dangerous route across the Sinai Peninsula and the extremely low chances of getting permission to stay in Israel account for the low number of migrants at the border.

A comparison of the biographical courses of the refugees we interviewed reveals big differences in the “individual” and collective constellations which cause people to leave their home region and to follow certain migration routes. We have also been able to show that people’s self-presentations in respect of their migration are considerably framed by the need to negotiate their position in the host country. Here, the dominant discourses in respect of refugees, and interrelationships and power balances with the local population and with other migrants play an important role. As a result, there is a tendency among migrants not to thematize the complex biographical genesis of their migration, especially when this is bound up with political persecution, collective violence and/or discrimination. Thus, the self-presentations of refugees often reflect discourses in the host country on poverty or war or desertion from the army, rather than experiences of violence in their home region. This finding was confirmed by supplementary interviews with refugees in Ethiopia (from Eritrea), in Uganda (with Eritreans who had been deported from Israel) and in Germany (with people who had come to Europe via Melilla or Ceuta).