Performing states of crisis: exploring migration detention in Israel and Denmark

Ilan Amit & Annika Lindberg

Published online: 01 Sep 2020.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Performing states of crisis: exploring migration detention in Israel and Denmark

ILAN AMIT AND ANNIKA LINDBERG ⓘ

ABSTRACT   Deportation regimes are increasingly studied from the perspective of the anthropology of bureaucracy and the governing techniques used to detain, exclude and deport 'unwanted' migrants. Such approaches force us to 'think with the other side', to include the experiences and dilemmas of street-level officials in our analysis that may challenge our positionality as researchers, as well as our wish to produce 'evidence' of deportation practices. Amit and Lindberg's paper sheds light on the performance of state power and the techniques of controlling non-citizens by presenting ethnographies from two 'open' migration detention centres, very similar in function, but strikingly different in practice: the now-closed Holot detention centre for African asylum-seekers in Israel; and the Udrejsecenter Sjælsmark (Deportation Centre Sjælsmark) in Denmark. Migration detention, as a state-making mechanism, serves different functions. Ilan Amit and Annika Lindberg find that, while Holot was a manifestation of coercive power and an over-recording strategy on behalf of the Israeli state, Sjælsmark exemplifies a different governing technology that operates through deliberate state negligence and abandonment. Ethnographies of the performativity of these different power strategies offer insights into the intricacies of state control as it reconfigures sovereignties by declaring and enacting 'crises' of migration control.

KEYWORDS   asylum-seekers, crisis, Denmark, Israel, migration detention, state performativity, street-level bureaucracy

The detainment and deportation of undesired populations are long-standing instruments of statecraft. Today, the deportation of criminalized non-citizens is a declared political priority of states that anxiously seek to perform control over unwanted cross-border mobility.[1] Following Nathalie Peutz's call for anthropological accounts of deportation processes, a growing body of scholarship has used the daily life of deportation regimes and the street-level implementation of migration controls as a lens through

which to study encounters between 'the state' and the Other.[2] Building on this approach, this paper takes the performance of the Danish and Israeli states' declared 'crises' of control over undesired mobility that have justified the mobilization of repressive security apparatuses as an opportunity to study the underlying logics and functions of the state: that is, what do states perform when practising migration control? The approach enables us to move beyond political declarations of 'crises' of migration control, which have repeatedly been used to induce an impression of nation-states under threat, while downplaying the historical and ongoing enforcement of state-induced violence against migrants.[3] Rather than studying the deportable migrants subjected to these practices, in this paper we have redirected our gaze to the state apparatus itself, and explored and compared the enactment of two very different deportation regimes: those of Israel and Denmark, respectively. The paper is based on the authors' ethnographic research on the street-level actors enforcing the two regimes. While located in very different historical and political contexts, Denmark's and Israel's deportation regimes have been shaped by political policy declarations on deterrence and securitization, and criminalizing discourses surrounding migration and asylum. By exploring and comparing the daily operation of their respective deportation apparatuses, we were able to map the different governing techniques used to exclude and expel unwanted Others, and the different roles deportation serves in enacting state power. The paper focuses on the role of migration detention in performing and reconfiguring state power. It builds on ethnographic research and interview studies conducted in two strikingly similar migration detention centres in two very different political contexts: the now-closed Holot detention centre in Israel; and the Udrejsecenter Sjælsmark (Deportation Centre Sjælsmark) in Denmark. For the purpose of this paper, we have chosen to provide brief analyses of the centres' set-ups and functions,

2   Nathalie Peutz, 'Embarking on an anthropology of removal', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2006, 217–41; Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz (eds), *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2010); Heike Drotbohm and Ines Hasselberg, 'Deportation, anxiety, justice: new ethnographic perspectives', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2015, 551–62; William Walters, 'Aviation as deportation infrastructure: airports, planes, and expulsion', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 44, no. 16, 2017, 2796–817.

3   Peter Andreas, 'A tale of two borders: the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada lines after 9/11', *UC-San Diego Centre for Comparative Immigration Studies*, Working Paper no. 77, May 2003, available on the *CCIS* website at https://ccis.ucsd.edu/_files/wp77.pdf (viewed 25 June 2020); Simon Behrman, 'Refugees and crises of law', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 52, no. 2/3, 2018, 107–20; Nancy Hiemstra, 'Performing homeland security within the US immigrant detention system', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 32, 2014, 571–88; New Keywords Collective, 'Europe/Crisis: new keywords of "the Crisis" in and of "Europe"', March 2016, available on the *Near Futures Online* website at http://nearfuturesonline.org/europecrisis-new-keywords-of-crisis-in-and-of-europe (viewed 24 June 2020); William Walters, 'Secure borders, safe haven, domopolitics', *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2004, 237–60.

and focus the analysis on the reflections offered by senior staff directing the centres, in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the governing logics underpinning them. The comparative approach enables us to trace continuities as well as discrepancies between political representations of alleged 'crises' of control, on the one hand, and their daily enforcement, on the other. Moreover, we have used the directors' reflections to enquire into the performative role of deportation regimes for state power.

The paper finds that the two detention centres represented diametrically different governing technologies, although both served as 'spectacular' manifestations of a state's power to enforce the exclusion and expulsion of unwanted migrants.[4] The Israeli detention centre represented an implementation *surplus*, that is, a deportation regime that gains traction by excluding and removing people of various official categorical identities (refused asylum-seekers, undocumented labour migrants, criminalized foreigners and others), which is an outcome of the cohesiveness of the ethnonational apparatus. In contrast, the Danish deportation centre produced an implementation *deficit* in terms of its observed effect on deportation statistics, although this should not be read as a mere 'failure' of the migration policy. Instead, it exemplifies a de-recording governing technology that enables the Danish government effectively to renounce and pass on responsibility for migrants whom the authorities for various reasons can not forcibly deport, and to consolidate their deterrence regime against unwanted migration.[5] This paper suggests that the detention centres fulfilled important symbolic political purposes for both states, as they served to reify imaginaries of the 'nation' by positing the detainment and deportation of unwanted Others as a practice deeply related to issues perceived as existential for the nation-state. On a material level, they also fuelled the expansion of the states' security powers. Comparing the enactment and performative power of these two different detention and deportation regimes enables us to trace continuities in the role of deportation in configuring state power across different political and geographical contexts, while also highlighting how the historical and political context of the respective sites of enforcement shape how deportation regimes operate. Finally, we suggest that scrutinizing the often-invisibilized infrastructures and enforcement agents of deportation is an important step towards deconstructing what Nicholas De Genova has called the 'border spectacle', and also sheds light on and calls into question the violence of deportation regimes.[6]

4   Nicholas De Genova, 'Spectacles of migrant "illegality": the scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 36, 2013, no. 7, 1180–98.
5   Barak Kalir and Willem van Schendel, 'Introduction: nonrecording states between legibility and looking away', *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, no. 77, 2017, 1–7; Martin Lemberg-Pedersen, 'European deterrence politics and the end of humanitarianism', 27 July 2016, available on the *Refugees.DK* website at http://refugees.dk/en/focus/2016/july/european-deterrence-politics-and-the-end-of-humanitarianism (viewed 24 June 2020).
6   De Genova, 'Spectacles of migrant "illegality"', 1180.

Exploring the 'implementation interface' of states' deportation regimes

Deportation studies are considered to be a subdiscipline of migration and security studies.[7] A growing body of research has observed the increasing political importance of deportation, and documented the lived experiences of deportability and deportation, including post-deportation outcomes.[8] Much of this literature emphasizes the inefficacy of detention and deportation as tools for regulating unwanted mobility, and the always only partial success of states' control endeavours.[9] The systemic discrepancies between state 'fantasies' of controlling migration and the actual outcome of these efforts reveal structural inconsistencies and dysfunctionalities inherent in the state body as well as its capacity for violence.[10] Explaining this alleged implementation deficit and understanding the logics behind it necessitate a research approach that goes beyond political declarations of intent, and focuses on the processes and actors involved in the street-level enforcement of deportation policies. In scholarship exploring these processes, the most commonly stated reasons for the 'implementation gaps' between policy and practice include the complexity of migration policies,[11] the nature of bureaucracy, notably the discretionary practices of street-level bureaucrats,[12] and the

7   Susan Bibier Coutin, 'Deportation studies: origins, themes and directions', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2015, 671–81.

8   Matthew J. Gibney, 'Asylum and the expansion of deportation in the United Kingdom', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2008, 146–67; Shahram Khosravi (ed.), *After Deportation: Ethnographic Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

9   Godfried Engbersen and Dennis Broeders, 'The state versus the alien: immigration control and strategies of irregular immigrants', *West European Politics*, vol. 32, no. 5, 2009, 867–85; Mary Bosworth, Katja Franko Aas and Sharon Pickering, 'Punishment, globalization and migration control: "Get them the hell out of here!"', *Punishment & Society*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2018, 34–53; Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd edn (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1991).

10   Ruben Andersson, 'Europe's failed "fight" against irregular migration: ethnographic notes on a counterproductive industry', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 42, no. 7, 2016, 105–75; Leonidas K. Cheliotis, 'How iron is the iron cage of penology? The role of human agency in the implementation of criminal justice policy', *Punishment and Society*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2009, 313–40; Coutin, 'Deportation studies', 671.

11   Christina Boswell and Andrew Geddes, *Migration and Mobility in the European Union* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2011); Christian Joppke, 'Why liberal states accept unwanted immigration', *World Politics*, no. 50, vol. 2, 1998, 266–93; Giuseppe Sciortino, 'Between phantoms and necessary evils: some critical points in the study of irregular migration to Western Europe', *IMIS-Beiträge* (a special issue on *Migration and the Regulation of Social Integration*, ed. Anita Böcker, Betty de Hartand and Ines Michalowski), no. 24, 2004, 17–43.

12   Gregory Feldman, '"With my head on the pillow": sovereignty, ethics, and evil among undercover police investigators', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2016, 491–518; Michel Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Democracy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1993); Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation 2010).

'many hands' involved in operating the state system.[13] Other studies have emphasized the disciplinary function of incomplete and unpredictable deportation enforcement.[14] Such cracks in states' implementation capacity are regularly assumed to be universal yet, as we will show in this paper, this does not hold true for all deportation regimes, notably the case of Israel. Indeed, local variations in the configurations of deportation regimes call for a grounded, comparative approach to deportation enforcement that can shed light on the different symbolic and material manifestations of deportation regimes and their underlying logics. By adopting such an approach, we are able to shed light on the 'surplus' functions that deportation serves in state- and nation-building projects,[15] and the implications it has for the people affected.

This paper thus contributes to the growing field of deportation studies with a comparative account of deportation regimes. Following the tradition of implementation scholars,[16] we shift focus from migrants' experiences of expulsion and its political framing to the 'social life' of deportation regimes and street-level migration control. The interface can be understood as a 'contact zone' in which the power of the state to exclude and expel is visible and contested. Here, we approach deportation as a process that extends through time and encompasses various actors, agents and sites of enforcement,[17] and focus in particular on pre-removal detention and deportation centres, where people whose presence has been criminalized are held under administrative legal requirements to deter them from remaining in the country and to enforce their deportation. We situate these centres within the two countries' respective migration control regimes and current politics of migration.

Contextualizing migration detention in Israel and Denmark

Different configurations of migration detention are by now well-established technologies used by states to exclude and expel unwanted migrants.[18] The

13 Dennis Thompson, 'Moral responsibility of public officials: the problem of many hands', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 74, no. 4, 1980, 905–16.

14 Nicholas De Genova, 'Migrant "illegality" and deportability in everyday life', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2002, 419–47; Zachary Whyte, 'Enter the myopticon: uncertain surveillance in the Danish asylum system', *Anthropology Today*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2011, 18–21.

15 William Walters, 'Deportation, expulsion, and the international police of aliens', *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2002, 265–92.

16 Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*.

17 Peutz, 'Embarking on an anthropology of removal'.

18 Bridget Anderson, Matthew Gibney and Emanuela Paoletti, 'Citizenship, deportation and the boundaries of belonging', *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2011, 547–63; Nicholas De Genova, 'Detention, deportation, and waiting: toward a theory of migrant detainability', *Global Detention Project*, Working Paper no. 18, November 2016, available

Global Detention Project, which maps the use of migration-related detention worldwide, has noted a steady increase in states' adoption of this coercive—and notoriously ineffective and harmful—practice across the globe in recent years.[19] While, in principle, migration detention falls under administrative rather than punitive legal regimes, its lived reality mimics the symbolic and material violence of penal power.[20] Detention centres have thus come to be understood as important sites for states' assertion of sovereignty over unwanted populations, but also as sites where sovereignty is constantly contested and reconfigured.[21] Detention thereby offers an opportunity to study how the state configures and enforces its symbolic and material power in times of alleged contestation.

In the case of Israel, the state's militarization and securitization operates at maximum capacity. The remote Holot immigration detention centre was part of the state's response to the arrival of African asylum-seekers who travelled to Israel by foot through the Sinai in the mid-2000s. At Holot, where detention was intended to coerce asylum-seekers to leave Israel 'voluntarily', African asylum-seekers were detained not upon arrival but after residing in the country for years. Detainees were not allowed to learn Hebrew, and detention centre wardens looked for and removed any materials for the study of Hebrew. A one-year detention was mandated under administrative law, according to which asylum-seekers were not accused of any crime and not required to stand trial. In addition, Israel adopted a policy of not examining most asylum requests while rejecting 99.9 per cent of cases it did examine.[22] In Israel, the terms 'refugee' and 'asylum-seeker' are seldom used. African asylum-seekers have been known as 'infiltrators', a term that was coined in the early 1950s to refer to expelled Palestinians attempting to re-enter the

---

on the *Global Detention Project* website at www.globaldetentionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/De-Genova-GDP-Paper-2016.pdf (viewed 25 June 2020).

19 Michael J. Flynn and Matthew B. Flynn, *Challenging Immigration Detention: Academics, Activists and Policy-makers* (Cheltenham and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar 2017).

20 Vanessa Barker, 'Penal power at the border: realigning state and nation', *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2017, 441–57; Bosworth, Aas and Pickering, 'Punishment, globalization and migration control'.

21 Giuseppe Campesi, 'Hindering the deportation machine: an ethnography of power and resistance in immigration detention', *Punishment & Society*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2015, 427–53; Didier Fassin, 'The biopolitics of Otherness', *Anthropology Today*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2001, 3–7; Shahram Khosravi, 'Deportation as a way of life for young Afghan men', in Rich Furman, Douglas Epps and Greg Lamphear (eds), *Detaining the Immigrant Other: Global and Transnational Issues* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2016), 169–81; Peter Nyers, 'In solitary, in solidarity: detainees, hostages, and contesting the anti-policy of detention', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2008, 333–49.

22 'Asylum-seekers from Sudan and Eritrea in Israel', June 2016, available on the *Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel* website at http://assaf.org.il/en/sites/default/files/u8/Asylum%20seekers%20Eritrea%20Sudan%20in%20Israel%20June%202016_0.pdf (viewed 25 June 2020).

newly formed Israeli state in order to salvage their belongings or cultivate their agricultural lands.[23] The arrival of African asylum-seekers had revived the term and expanded its meaning to embrace practically any non-Jew attempting to enter the state 'illegally', regardless of their identity or the reason for their entry. Today, the number of African asylum-seekers in Israel continues to drop due to the effectiveness of Israeli deterrence strategy, and the building of a 245-kilometre-long 'anti-infiltration' barrier along the border of the Sinai at a cost of US$450 million, which brought about a nearly complete stop to further arrivals.

African asylum-seekers are seen by the Israeli state, in Judith Butler's words, through a 'racial and ethnic frame' that deems them either eligible or ineligible for human rights and/or recognition.[24] Accordingly, they are portrayed by the government as 'invaders', 'enemies', 'infiltrators', 'cancer', a 'national calamity', 'transmitters of disease' and an 'existential threat'. The anti-asylum discourse—stemming from the ethnicized securitization of asylum—rests on the fundamental argument that no asylum-seeker in Israel is a refugee. On this basis, Israeli politicians and state agents frame asylum-seekers as criminals, a security threat, disease transmitters and a demographic danger.[25]

In Israel, migration enforcement differs from the Danish case in one central aspect: irregular migrants arriving in Israel are 'stuck' within state borders. Israel's hyper-militarized state borders prevent African asylum-seekers from wandering into neighbouring states, as their counterparts might do in Denmark, crossing further national borders. This Israeli reality creates a unique condition in that the only way for asylum-seekers to cross the state's borders is by state mechanisms. This enables the state to assert near full control over border crossings and prompts its use of excessive recording techniques.

By contrast, Denmark, despite its reservations about fully joining the European project, is geographically and legally integrated into European border and migration regimes.[26] In terms of European comparison, Denmark is a country with relatively strong regulatory capacity and 'gatekeeping' mechanisms, especially in comparison to Southern European states.[27] Since the

23 Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 'Criminalizing pain and the political work of suffering: the case of Palestinian "infiltrators"', *Borderlands* (ejournal), vol. 14, no. 1, 2015, available at www.borderlands.net.au/vol14no1_2015/shalhoub-kevorkian_pain.pdf (viewed 25 June 2020).

24 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso 2006).

25 Hotline for Migrant Workers, *'Cancer in Our Body': On Racial Incitement, Discrimination and Hate Crimes against African Asylum Seekers in Israel January–June 2012* (Tel Aviv: Hotline for Refugees and Migrants 2012), available on the *HRM* website at https://hotline.org.il/wp-content/uploads/IncitementReport_English.pdf (viewed 25 June 2020).

26 Denmark is a member state of the European Union (EU) and of the Schengen Area and the Dublin Regulations; however, a parallel arrangement allows them to opt in and out of EU legislation with regard to asylum and migration policy, including the Return Directive.

27 Anna Triandafyllidou and Maurizio Ambrosini, 'Irregular immigration control in Italy and Greece: strong fencing and weak gate-keeping serving the labour market', *European Journal of Migration and Law*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2011, 251–73.

codification of its first 1983 Aliens Act, which was considered among the most liberal in Europe, Denmark has introduced more restrictive admission policies and interventionist integration measures, and moved towards a deterrence-based asylum regime that aims to discourage and isolate 'unwanted' asylum-seekers from society and 'motivate' rejected individuals to leave the territory.[28] In political discourse, asylum immigration in particular has been posited as a threat to social cohesion and the economic welfare of Danish society, a debate that was only intensified in the wake of the increase in arrivals of people seeking protection in 2015. The fact that Denmark's refugee reception was modest, in comparison to its neighbouring countries Germany and Sweden,[29] did not prevent the Danish government from using the 'crisis' as a pretext for stepping up its rhetorical and material investments in the deterrence, detainment and deportation of unwanted migrants.[30] Denmark's two semi-open 'departure' or deportation centres, Sjælsmark and Kærshovedgård, are part of these invest-ments. Inaugurated in 2013, they are supposed to house the around 1,000 rejected asylum-seekers, criminalized foreign nationals and others who await deporta-tion, and facilitate their speedy removal, in the words of the former Minister for Immigration and Integration (Udlændinge- og Integrationsministeriet), by making their lives so 'intolerable' that they leave Denmark 'voluntarily'.[31] The centres house single persons as well as families with children, some of whom only stay for a short time while their deportation is prepared or until they abscond. Yet others remain in the centres for longer periods of time, sometimes for years. This is only possible because the centres are not legally classified as

28 Lemberg-Pedersen, 'European deterrence politics and the end of humanitarianism'; Kathrine Vitus, 'Zones of indistinction: family life in Danish asylum centres', *Distink-tion: Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2011, 95–112; Katrine Syppli-Kohl, 'Asylakti-vering og Ambivalens: Forvaltningen af Asylansøgere på Asylcentre', Ph.D. thesis, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen, 2015; Whyte, 'Enter the myopticon'.

29 With an 'exceptional' 21,316 asylum applicants in 2015, and an average of 5,000–7,000 asylum applicants per year in the preceding years. See 'Quarterly number of asylum appli-cations in Denmark from Q1 2015 to Q2 2019', available on the *Statista* website at www.statista.com/statistics/575213/quarterly-number-of-asylum-applications-in-denmark (viewed 18 August 2020).

30 Lemberg-Pedersen, 'European deterrence politics and the end of humanitarianism'; Martin Lemberg-Pedersen, 'The "imaginary world" of nationalistic ethics: feasibility constraints on Nordic deportation corridors targeting unaccompanied Afghan minors', *Etikk i praksis: Nordic Journal in Applied Ethics*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2018, 47–68.

31 Morten Skærbæk, 'Derfor vil Støjberg gøre livet utåleligt for folk på tålt ophold', *Poli-tiken*, 7 June 2016, available at https://politiken.dk/indland/politik/art5624990/Derfor-vil-St%C3%B8jberg-g%C3%B8re-livet-ut%C3%A5leligt-for-folk-p%C3%A5-t%C3%A5l t-ophold (viewed 25 June 2020). For more information on the set-up of the deportation centres and the background of people residing there, see Freedom of Movement Research Collective, *Stop Killing Us Slowly: A Report on the Motivation Enhancement Measures and the Criminalisation of Rejected Asylum Seekers in Denmark* (Copenhagen: Freedom of Movement 2018).

closed facilities: decisions on residency are administrative, and residents are, in theory, free to leave at any time.

The official purpose of the deportation centres was to increase the speed and rate of the deportations of rejected asylum-seekers from Denmark. However, four years after their inauguration, the departure centres seem rather to have pushed more people into illegality, pressing them to move on to other European countries or rendering them stuck in the departure centres for an extended period of time.[32] Rather than considering this as a mere policy 'failure', however, we argue in this paper that the departure centres should be seen as an example of a de-recording technique, which enables the Danish state tacitly to 'look away' and refuse responsibility for those unwanted migrants it cannot forcibly detain or deport.[33] The remainder of the paper details how the Israeli 'over-recording' and the Danish 'de-recording' governing techniques have been translated into practice in the two respective detention centres.

Holot: performing the security state through migration detention in Israel

Holot detention centre, built especially for African asylum-seekers and intended to contain 8,000 detainees, was at the time of research operating at low capacity, with its 'only' 3,360 African detainees still making it, at the time, the largest active migration detention centre in the world.[34] The centre is located in a remote spot in the heart of the Israeli desert, near the border with the Sinai. Getting to the centre requires a long drive through the desert's scorching heat, passing by military training areas. The journey is itself a physical manifestation of the ethnonational endeavour to keep 'infiltrators' isolated and excluded.

The interview with the commander of Israel's migration detention centre takes place in his office, where he is dressed in his official uniform, decorated with rank insignia, honorary badges and shiny unit pins.[35] For the commander, a chief warden and a veteran of the Israeli prison service, this is a dream

32   Freedom of Movement Research Collective, *Stop Killing Us Slowly*, 16.

33   De Genova and Peutz (eds), *The Deportation Regime*; Antje Ellermann, *States against Migrants: Deportation in Germany and the United States* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009); Gibney, 'Asylum and the expansion of deportation in the United Kingdom'; Barak Kalir, 'State desertion and "out-of-procedure" asylum seekers in the Netherlands', *Focal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, no. 77, 2017, 63–75; Sieglinde Rosenberger and Carla Küffner, 'After the deportation gap: non-removed persons and their pathways to social rights', in Roland Hsu and Christoph Reinprecht (eds), *Migration and Integration: New Models for Mobility and Coexistence* (Vienna: Vienna University Press 2016), 137–50.

34   'Holot: operational characteristics', 2016, available on the *Global Detention Project* website at www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/middle-east/israel/detention-centres/1651/holot (viewed 2 July 2020).

35   Ilan Amit interview with Deputy Commander Shalom Ya'akov, director of Holot detention centre for African asylum-seekers, 7 August 2016, conducted at Holot detention centre, by approval of the Israeli prison service.

position as he is approaching his retirement. The state of Israel distinguishes between the incarceration of criminal offenders and those who committed 'security' related crimes. Palestinians found guilty of acts of terror against the state or awaiting trial under procedural arrest are held in highly secure prison compounds, separate from ordinary prisons for criminal offenders. Holot's commander has been in charge of both kinds of prisons for several decades. During his long career, he was also sent by the state to supervise exceptional cases of imprisonment, such as those of the international activists on the Gaza freedom flotilla in 2010. He doesn't attempt to hide his approbation for his position and his long-lasting commitment to the service and the state.

> On an organizational level, I believe that the prison service has learned something new here. A new line of work that is entirely civilian. And we've done it well, we've learned, and it will help all the wardens here down the road. It's an added value that will follow them to all the other prisons. It added to my value as a commander in the Israeli prison service. But for the detainees … they are on a different track, it's a different world for them.

The commander, an enthusiastic state servant, is representative of the unique Israeli fusion between the conditions of a settler colonial society and the requirements of the state's deportation regime. As our conversation indicates, he is able to design and shape the regime at Holot by using his decades-long experience of the incarceration of Palestinian 'security' prisoners and criminal offenders. What is intriguing in the case of the centre's commander is the duality of his perception with regard to his task of processing the African asylum-seekers under detention. While repeatedly referring to his significant contribution in setting up the detention centre down to its finest detail, he also continually refers to 'the state' as the designer of this new form of detention in Israel. Here he reflects on his duties and the extent of the authority he is given by the state:

> My job, when I'm at a prison, is to put them [prisoners] under legal incarceration. My job here is to provide them [African asylum-seekers] with adequate living standards and enforce order and discipline. Do as you're told. After all, the minute I take this [uniform] shirt off, and the second I take these ranks off, I have no authority. The authority is given to me by the state. So, if I was given that authority, I should do things the way I'm asked to. I think that's the way to go. And, eventually, I live well with myself for doing so.

During the interview the commander repeatedly refers to himself as 'the commander', while at the same time continually correcting himself, stating that he is not a commander, but a director, as Holot is not a prison but an open centre. 'They call me commander. Workers at the centre, they call me commander. It's important for me to make sure they preserve their prison service DNA because they will go back there [to serve in criminal or 'security' prisons]. But they know how to make the distinction.' While the Israeli authorities insist on using the term 'open detention centre' in reference to Holot, it is operated

exclusively by Israel's prison service. This matter hasn't gone unnoticed by the Israeli Supreme Court of Justice, as indicated by the centre's commander:

> The Supreme Court judge didn't like the fact that the Israeli prison service is here: he wrote it and commented about it. He wrote about how the prison service DNA still exists in us while we have different legal duties to fulfil here … but, he also said, I'm not interfering with governmental policies. If the state decides that the prison service will operate Holot, then so be it. The prison service DNA, that's what disturbed him, the fact that we know how to manage prisoners and these are not prisoners.

Holot detention centre was planned and built by the Israeli Ministry of Defence in a modular form, enabling a future expansion in the case of additional mass arrivals of asylum-seekers into Israel. During our conversation, the commander calls the centre 'his pizza'. Referring to the fact that the centre was at the time operating at under a third of its full capacity, he said: 'We've only got one slice of the pizza. Maybe one day they'll decide to give us the whole thing.'
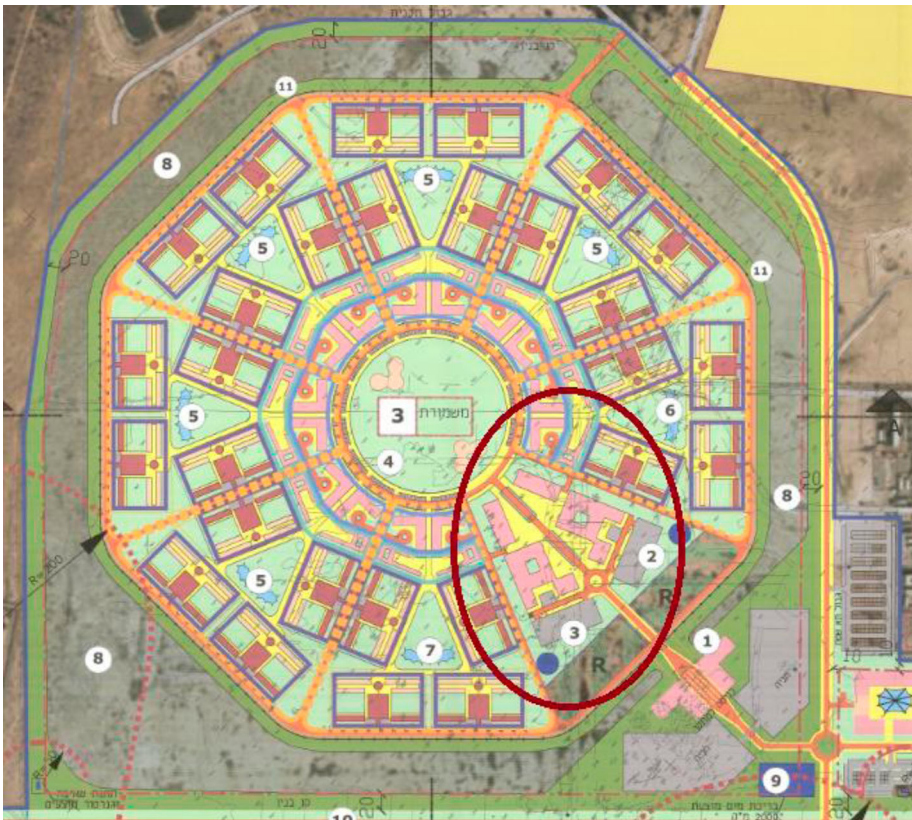
Figure 1   A detail from a plan of the Holot detention centre. The circled 'slices' (2, 3) were the only sections in operation; others were reserved for future expansion. The two active sections held 3,650 African asylum-seekers, with the centre's maximum capacity being 8,000 detainees.

Holot proved its effectiveness. African asylum-seekers left Israel not only directly from the centre itself, but also soon after receiving the order to come to the centre for their detention period, a phenomenon described by state officials as the 'Holot effect'.

Israeli technologies of over-recording

Holot detention centre runs a finely tuned biometric tracking system operating in a very specific way, as if not simply to register the whereabouts of the asylum-seekers but also to perform the presence of the state around the clock. Each detainee is biometrically registered and obliged to carry a magnetic card constantly that verifies his personal attributes. Entry and exit from the centre demand biometric identification, via verification with the magnetic card, as well as face recognition by a warden observing the computer screens next to the metal carousel gates at the moment of identification. Additional biometric gates operate between the entrance to the residential sections and between the residential sections themselves. The result of this architecture of micro-surveillance is that asylum-seekers experience dozens of daily biometric identifications. In addition, each residential section has an additional independent biometric identification system, contained in a metal box that is opened for both an early morning and a late evening headcount. Not showing up for a headcount incurs a punishment, starting with a reduction of the detainee's pocket money and building up to incarceration in a state prison. This disciplinary headcount procedure is entirely performative: by the time detainees have signed up through the system, which is in the residential area, they have already affirmed their location via three additional registration points. The commander states: 'The main story here is order and discipline. You can't run a place like this, in which the residents, according to law, from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., don't owe you anything, and are free to move, leave and come back.'

The centre's biometric readers are connected to metal cattle gates between residential areas and blocks, and between residential areas and the dining room (or the sports court) and the entry compound. Carrying out two daily headcounts of some 3,400 detainees would be nearly impossible without a large number of prison service staff but, with the existence of the biometric system, it is done almost automatically. The commander explains:

> I can get 150 of them in and out in one minute, and they will all be biometrically documented. There's a bit of a problem with it. We are not authorized to hold a biometric database here. So their fingerprints are on the card, and only the connection between their card to the thumb [on the thumb reader] approves their identity.

The commander's lifelong commitment to the Israeli prison service provided him with rich experience regarding the control of various populations. He

reflects on the effectiveness of the mechanism he designed as well as on the state's entire enforcement effort:

> In my opinion, ten years from now there will be no Holot because of a simple reason. I think that Israel is slowly creating a balance of deterrence … I think that the balance will be found. The balance will be achieved. But we will keep on processing them in the same way because we are just one state, a small one, not big. We have to guard it, don't you think?

During the interview, the commander repeatedly distances himself from the outcomes of the detention mechanisms he has designed and facilitates on a daily basis. He notes that *they* will find the balance or *they* will create a deterrent, as if he was not the director of Israel's strongest instrument in its exclusion of African asylum-seekers. The practice of over-recording in the Israeli case, by means of various technologies, significantly contributes to the implementation surplus whereby the Israeli state performs meticulous control of unwanted migrants. The primary purpose of this regime is to consolidate the framing of asylum-seekers as a security threat and to demonstrate the state's capacity to control and confine unwanted populations.

Sjælsmark: performing symbolic control in Denmark's deportation centres

Deportation Centre Sjælsmark opened in 2015. It was intended to house up to 600 rejected asylum-seekers and criminalized non-citizens awaiting deportation either to another European country (under the Dublin Regulation) or to their assumed country of origin.[36] The 'intolerable' conditions of the centre, as envisioned by the former Minister for Immigration and Integration, were supposed to be achieved by confining deportable migrants in geographically isolated institutions with minimal living standards and welfare provisions.[37] The centre is located in what used to be a set of military barracks in a military training zone, an hour's drive north of the capital city. The loud noise of shooting exercises and military tanks passing by regularly disrupt the quiet of the open fields. The centre is surrounded by non-secure fences and can be accessed through an electronic gate; beyond the gate are rows of yellow and red-brick military barracks where residents live, and the cafeteria where they are obliged to have their meals, three times a day at given hours. Apart from the cafeteria, there was, at the time of research in 2016, hardly any other activity going on in the centre, as residents were not allowed to

36 The Dublin III Regulation (2013) determines which country (among the EU+ states) is responsible for examining an application for asylum that has been lodged in one of the member states by a third country national or a stateless person, in order to prevent the double handling of applications made in different member states.
37 Skærbæk, 'Derfor vil Støjberg gøre livet utåleligt for folk på tålt ophold'.

work or study (nor did they receive any daily allowance). Sjælsmark is run by the prison and probation service yet the Red Cross is subcontracted to offer limited activities, such as English lessons (residents are not allowed to learn Danish). Since 2017, the centre has also housed families with children although they are due to be moved to another centre run by the Red Cross as a result of public pressure.[38]

Figure 2 Satellite image of the Deportation Centre Sjælsmark. The facility has the capacity to house 6,000–7,000 rejected asylum-seekers but today only accommodates 400 people who have received a final rejection on their application for asylum

If the Holot detention centre is characterized by an abundance of biometric control technologies, amounting to a 'panopticon' prison model designed to monitor every act or movement of detainees, what is striking about Sjælsmark is rather the *absence* of tangible control technologies. Zachary Whyte's term 'myopticon', which he uses to describe a system that only partially and selectively records asylum-seekers' whereabouts and behaviours, seems more suitable for capturing the governing logic that prevails at the centre.[39] Whyte suggests that myoptic governance generates significant uncertainty for the people it is designed to govern; to this can be added a sense of puzzlement among governing agents who struggle to make sense of their role.

38 Following widespread public criticism and reports of the detrimental effect Sjælsmark has had on the children residing at the centre, the incumbent Social Democratic government, voted into power in June 2019, promised to move families out of the centre.
39 Whyte, 'Enter the myopticon'.

The fences surrounding the facilities serve a symbolic or at most administrative function: staff explained that they are put in place to 'section and order' the living space, and not to control residents. Sjælsmark does have some control technologies in place: CCTV is installed to monitor the mostly abandoned streets connecting the barracks, and the district police patrol the centre once a day, although prison officers admitted that incidents were rare, leaving them little, if anything, to monitor. Residents are obliged to spend every night in the centre, and to report to authorities regularly. However, the technologies required to ensure compliance were not yet in place at the time of our research, and staff lacked both the means and the mandate to do headcounts. Officers speculated that electronic gates with biometric keys would be installed in the near future but were not yet underway.[40] The curious lack of control stands in sharp contrast with the Danish government's declared purpose of using the centres as a means to enhance control and coerce rejected asylum-seekers to leave the country, begging the question of what functions the centres are actually supposed to serve.

This was also a question that puzzled the director of Sjælsmark, interviewed approximately one year after the centre's inauguration.[41] The director wears a prison officer's uniform, complete with shirt and tie, and a jacket with the text *Kriminalforsorgen* (the prison and probation service) printed across the back. Like his employees, the director worked for many years as a prison officer in Danish prisons. He then moved on to the country's only locked migration detention centre, located a few kilometres away from Sjælsmark. Although the prison and probation service has been involved in the migration control business since 1989, migration-related jobs carry low status: according to the director, the branch of the prison service working with migration is 'marginalized' within the agency. In contrast to their Israeli colleagues in Holot, most prison officers in Sjælsmark did not assume their new role with any particular pride or enthusiasm. When asked why the prison service had been put in charge of Sjælsmark, the director confessed: 'We were given this task for a reason. We are just not really sure what that reason is. And we still don't know.'

At first glance, the prison-like set-up of the departure centres seems to be a prime example of 'crimmigration' logic,[42] whereby the material and symbolic violence invested in penal power is used for the purpose of migration control. Yet, on closer investigation, the absence of coercive power is more tangible

---

40 For further details of the set-up of the centre, see Freedom of Movement Research Collective, *Stop Killing Us Slowly*.

41 Annika Lindberg interview with the director of Udrejsecenter Sjælsmark, Danish prison and probation service, 15 May 2016. The interview transcripts have all been translated into English by Lindberg.

42 Juliet Stumpf, 'The crimmigration crisis: immigrants, crime, and sovereign power', *American University Law Review*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2006, 367–419; David Alan Sklansky, 'Crime, immigration, and ad hoc instrumentalism', *New Criminal Law Review*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2012, 157–223.

than its presence. Indeed, the only remnant of state authority—or of 'prison DNA', to use the Holot director's term—granted to the prison officers in Sjæls-mark is their prison uniform. Stripped of their mandate to use coercive force to control residents' whereabouts, and also of the 'rehabilitating' functions they perform in regular prisons, the tasks of prison officers are reduced to an unclear monitoring role. As residents are not, in strictly legal terms, detained, they are in principle 'free to leave at any time'; in the absence of a clear mandate or function, the everyday work of prison officers consists of enacting a form of symbolic power, while watching residents' comings and goings. The director explained:

> The idea is that they should live here continually but most of them leave often. If they leave, they are registered as absconded and the foreigners' police and immigration service are notified. Their room is cleaned out and luggage col-lected, although nothing happens. Most of them reappear and are re-inscribed into the system. And so it goes on. We have no option to sanction this, although politicians may make a fuss out of it. … People do have a life around here. One lady shows up with a new haircut every time we see her: turns out she has a sister who's a hairdresser in Copenhagen. People have lives of their own, they're not dependent on us or the centre.

Prison officers were unused to this idleness: were they in prison, they would at least have had the opportunity to create a 'good atmosphere' for residents:

> To better people or give them something to earn money from … if it wasn't for the fact that the purpose of this place is to remove any purpose of life from the residents. They are only to be accommodated here until the day when they leave the country. And the sooner the better. This is also why we don't have a party every Friday. That would make people think, OK, I'll stay another week, I'll wait until Friday because Fridays, they are good days …

The lack of a mandate to perform either control, caretaking or support in the centre left staff puzzled. In contrast to their Israeli counterparts, they do not seem to have fulfilled their intended function of enhancing deportation rates. While there are limited statistical accounts of the effects of the depar-ture centres, observations by prison officers and police working with depor-tations as well as reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), suggest that the main effect of the centres is to push a growing number of people into illegality: they either remain in Denmark or try their chances elsewhere in Europe.[43] Others remain stuck in the deportation centres for long periods of time. The primarily symbolic character of the

43 See, for instance, Helsinki-Komitén for Menneskerettigheder, 'Notat vedr. udlændinge-og udrejsecentre i Danmark', May 2017, available on the *Folketinget* (Danish parliament) website at www.ft.dk/samling/20161/almdel/UUI/bilag/218/1774547/index.htm (viewed 3 July 2020).

set-up at Sjælsmark gives staff a sense that they are part of a political 'masquerade'. The director reflected:

> There is a political will to put these people behind bars; but there is no political will to defend this or be responsible for it. Therefore, they try to find other solutions that they believe will have a similar effect, that they think can obtain the same thing. … If it were not for international rules and obligations, and if it weren't so expensive. A place in a closed institution is very expensive compared to a place in an open asylum centre, right? So they figured out something else. … But politicians say they believe in this, and therefore it has to be right. Their opinion is that this has an effect. It is not documented and no research has been done and there's no documentation supporting it … but they believe in it, they believe it is right, and they want it to be right, so they can sell it to their electorate. But, if it has an effect, I don't know.

He then offers some suggestions on how to understand the seeming paradox that deportation centres remain in use despite not having fulfilled their declared function: namely, to provide the state with an economic and legal alternative to detention, and offer a temporary solution to deportation orders that cannot be enforced, either due to international obligations under human rights law or to the lack of enforcement capacity. Under such terms, many residents are trapped in a situation in which they are banned from Denmark yet unable to return to their countries of origin.

> At one meeting with the management I asked them, when do we hire a funeral director for the centre? We will need one when people start dying here. You see, I'm always the annoying one … but it's true. … Take the old man, or the Asian guy who stayed twelve years in a Red Cross camp. He never makes any trouble but he has been here for a year now. He obviously thinks this place is better than going back home—so I could only imagine what it is like for him there —it must be something way worse than this.

What is described here is a very different governing technique than the Israeli 'over-recording' outlined above, which is similar to the rule-through-uncertainty regime captured in Whyte's depiction of the myopticon. We can understand the Danish deportation centres as an attempt to 'de-record' unwanted migrants whose deportation cannot be carried out. Indeed, the deterrence effect of Sjælsmark is that more people are pushed into illegality—what Barak Kalir calls 'surrogate deportations'—but not an increase in deportation numbers.[44] Meanwhile, invested with the symbolic and material violence inherent in state institutions of criminal justice, Sjælsmark becomes a spectacular manifestation of government intention to control, exclude and expel undesired Others by symbolically and legally criminalizing them.[45] Sjælsmark, then, demonstrates how sovereign

44 Kalir, 'State desertion and "out-of-procedure" asylum seekers in the Netherlands'.
45 De Genova, 'Spectacles of migrant "illegality"'.

power is reconstituted not only through repressive control but also through governance by uncertainty and practices of de-recording, whereby the state demarcates its boundary *vis-à-vis* those excluded to the puzzlement of those tasked with enforcing such state inaction. Hence, the ostensible lack of control does not simply demonstrate a 'failure' of recording efforts but is a governing technique in its own right.

The performative power of migration detention

Across the world, migration detention has expanded as a governing technique to contain unwanted mobility or, at the very least, as a spectacular performance of such control.[46] The study of Holot and Sjælsmark detention centres offers insights into the formal and informal roles of migration detention centres and the 'surplus' functions they serve for states' deportation regimes. We find significant similarities in the way that these centres have become spectacularized performances of repressive, sovereign power, despite the considerable differences in their set-ups and daily operation. The Israeli state mobilizes its full coercive capacity following a logic of extreme securitization, while the Danish government assigns the task of managing unwanted migrants to symbolically empowered yet effectively demobilized prison officers. As ethnographic materials from Holot demonstrate in the Israeli case, the hyper-securitized, biometrically governed panopticon-like detention centre and the past experience of detention centre staff in criminal and securitized prisons generate a confluence between migration enforcement and securitization at the migration enforcement implementation interface. The technologies of over-recording in Holot assume their 'surplus' effects in how they demonstrate the state's cohesiveness in times of proclaimed 'crisis' *vis-à-vis* a constructed 'security threat'.

In Denmark, Deportation Centre Sjælsmark can be understood as part of a government strategy to criminalize migration and frame unwanted mobility as a social threat to the (welfare) state and nation. Vanessa Barker has elaborated on how such 'penal nationalism' merges welfare chauvinism with anti-migrant nativism and serves to reconstitute and reify the role of 'the state' as a moral authority and guardian of the social order.[47] Despite their ostensible 'failure' to fulfil their declared function in terms of enhancing deportation rates, the Danish deportation centres thus serve important symbolic functions for the Danish immigration regime at large, as they manifest the definitive boundaries between citizens whom the welfare state is set up to tend and care for, and Others who may be confined to intolerable conditions at the margins of the state and society. The seeming implementation deficit in Denmark can thus also be read as an 'actively inactive' governing strategy that enables the state to refuse to take responsibility for those individuals it has lost interest in

46 Ibid.
47 Barker, 'Penal power at the border'.

recording. As Barak Kalir and Willem van Schendel remind us, state power oper-
ates as much through deliberate ignorance and 'derecording' as through coer-
cion and control.[48]

By tracing how state agents make sense of migration detention, we can con-
clude that the main function of the politically spectacularized centres is to
demonstrate symbolically the state's ability to discount and exclude unwanted
migrants: physically, socially and existentially. Rather than simply being 'excep-
tional' spaces,[49] however, the two detention centres are the result of a continu-
ous process of racialized hierarchization and exclusion, and form part of state-
and nation-building projects.[50] By studying the street-level enactments of these
spectacles of dehumanization, we come to better understand their performative
as well as real effects, for the asylum-seekers targeted, and for the state agents
and societies enforcing them. Moreover, our analysis highlights the discrepan-
cies between the spectacular function of the detention centres in the eyes of pol-
itical decision-makers, on the one hand, and the surplus meanings and
puzzlement that these spectacles evoke at the level of enforcement. Studying
the street-level operation of deportation regimes shows how states' control pro-
jects are never complete, and how they are ridden with contradictions, and
characterized by counter-productive, sometimes absurd, outcomes. Against
their performance of cohesiveness and order, we suggest that research on the
state in practice can help us deconstruct 'the state' as a unitary actor, as well
as the purported legitimacy of deportation regimes.

Coda: the closure of Holot

Shortly after completion of the fieldwork for this research, the Holot detention
centre was closed, and all of its over 3,000 African asylum-seeking detainees
were released. Two other small-scale centres are still in operation using the
same *modus operandi* (Saharonim, Ketsiot), both of which are located only a
few kilometres away from Holot (now a military base) in the Negev desert.
The centre's closure was a result of public protest from both sides of the pol-
itical spectrum. Right-wing groups called for Holot's termination in order to
pressure the government into deporting all detainees. Left-wing organizations
called for its termination on the grounds that it acted in contravention of
humanitarian values. Eventually, the high maintenance costs of the remote
facility led to the closure.

Since completing this research, the state of Israel has adopted additional
measures to step up its exclusionary efforts. Nowadays, the government
focuses on strategies that are cheaper and more passive than detention in

48 Kalir and van Schendel, 'Introduction: nonrecording states between legibility and
   looking away', 1.
49 Cf. Vitus, 'Zones of indistinction'.
50 Walters, 'Deportation, expulsion, and the international police of aliens'.

order to deter immigration. These include, among others, attempts to expand Israel's target destinations for deportees by signing third-state agreements with African states, placing further restrictions on the employment of African asylum-seekers, the expansion of Israel's 'voluntary leave' programme, and bans on driving and restrictions on movement. At present, the 35,000 African asylum-seekers who reside in the country, without refugee status, are enduring all these various exclusionary processes.

Ilan Amit is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR), University of Amsterdam. His doctoral project explores the Israeli deportation regime's implementation interface by conducting ethnographic work among Israeli immigration enforcement authorities. He teaches at Amsterdam University College. For the past decade, he has been involved in human rights work in Israel–Palestine. Email: i.amit@uva.nl

Annika Lindberg is a visiting postdoctoral research fellow at the SAXO Institute, University of Copenhagen. Her work focuses on migration enforcement, notably migration-related detention and deportation, and on street-level bureaucracy. She teaches on bureaucracy, migration and racism at the University of Bern, and is co-author of *Migrants before the Law: Contested Migration Control in Europe* (2019). Email: annika.lindberg@soz.unibe.ch. ORCID ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0161-0893