Conclusion
Looking beyond individual responsibility towards a structural approach

As was indicated in the introductory chapter of this study, my efforts have been geared towards understanding the way that soldiers ‘engaged in a-symmetrical conflict deal with moral issues emerging from confrontations with diverse and externally unrecognizable opponents – civilians, suspected terrorists, or unorganized combat groups’.

By answering this question I hoped to reach a better understanding of the behaviour of soldiers, an understanding that would go beyond simply seeing their often aggressive and harassing behaviour as immoral ‘anomalies’ and leaving it at that. Too many factors seemed at play to reach this conclusion and it was, therefore, my goal to investigate these factors in detail. I have tried to show the reader the manifold facets at work when soldiers engage in military operations in a-symmetrical conflict. Because of the specific nature of their activities, which can be seen as principally constabulary actions, soldiers find themselves in situations within which their senses are numbed, their stress levels are high and their moral abilities are compromised.

In July 2008, when the completion of this work was in its final stages, news came out of an Israeli infantry soldier who had shot a bound Palestinian arrestee in the foot. This incident was filmed by a Palestinian girl living in the village where the incident took place. This being a crystal clear example of immoral and illegal behaviour on the part of a soldier, military officials were quick to condemn the incident and stated that ‘this serious incident negates army values’ while Minister of Defence Ehud Barak said that ‘this is an unusual and unacceptable incident and it doesn’t represent the IDF or its values’, after which he added that, ‘warriors do not behave like this’.93

This incident received a lot of media attention and officials from all sides made an effort to react to the questions that were posed, explaining, for example, why the incident was not reported until after the video footage came into the hands of the media. Other questions concerned the issue of responsibility. In all official discourse the event was denounced and efforts were made to emphasize that the military would try those implicated, either the soldier who fired the shot or his commander who the soldier said had given him an order to shoot the

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bound man. Responsibility was, thus, placed with the individual soldier and not with the military system itself.

For me this incident, and especially the discourse around it, was a very sad but at the same time very informative example of one of the points I have tried to make in this work. Once again the Israeli military and political establishment chose to solely look at the incident as something detached from its wider context; it tried to present the suspect as a ‘rotten apple’ whose behaviour was despicable and from whom it distanced itself. It did not take a more structural perspective, one which would incorporate a more complete picture of Israeli soldiers as an occupying force within the OPT and the implications such work has on their (moral) behaviour.

This event was, I believe, not an exceptional one. Its exceptional feature was that it was captured on film and was therefore made public. As I have tried to show in this study, instances of violence, harassment and aggressive behaviour by soldiers towards Palestinian civilians take place on a daily basis and are often triggered by the circumstances soldiers serve in and their manifold implications, such as mental and physical attrition, fear, frustration and boredom.

Although it has not been the direct goal of this research to bring practical solutions to the fore, when speaking about the misbehaviour of soldiers and the possibility of combating this, I do want to argue the following. We should look, in the Israeli context and also outside of this, from a more structural perspective at the circumstances soldiers are placed in during such conflicts and critically investigate the background of their presence in these situations and surroundings. Taking this presence as a given does not suffice here. One should critically investigate and possibly reassess its necessity.

For example, I believe that moral training and ethical codes will not make a great difference if the circumstances soldiers are placed in, which are shaping their misconduct, stay the same. Many values, as has been shown in this study, will evaporate when processes of numbing reduce the ability of soldiers to make moral deliberations. As has been shown for the case of Israeli soldiers, the ‘Spirit of the IDF’ did not have great meaning for them within their daily operations in the field.

An overview

Let me now give a short overview of this work. In this study I tried first of all to analyse the above mentioned circumstances that Israeli soldiers work in on a daily basis in detail, beginning

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94 Both the officer and the soldier were charged with ‘unworthy conduct’. The officer was not reassigned to another post; see [http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1009176.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1009176.html) as accessed on 18-08-2008.
95 See also an op-ed about this incident by M. Manekin [http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3571292,00.html](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3571292,00.html) as accessed on 24-07-2008.
with the spatial surroundings of the soldiers and their work arenas, which I have also called moral regions, in Chapter 3. In these arenas, such as the checkpoint, arrests, ‘straw widows’ and patrols, soldiers were seen to be influenced by weather conditions, power relations, issues of proximity and distance in relation to Palestinian civilians and the routine they experienced during their work.

In Chapter 4 I analysed the implications of the work in these moral arenas on the behaviour of Israeli soldiers. In order to do this, the implications were divided into three dimensions: the emotional, the physical and the cognitive. I tried to show how processes of numbing within these different dimensions, processes which were triggered by the effects of heat, coldness, uncertainty, tension and, for example, fear, could have consequences for the behaviour and actions of soldiers.

Within the emotional dimension soldiers talked about feelings of boredom, frustration, anger, tension and fear. Within the physical dimension weather conditions were recognized as being influential with respect to the behaviour of soldiers. Furthermore, their bodies and body language were found to be important in their relations and communication with Palestinians within the setting of the OPT. Finally, within the cognitive dimension, the blurred categories of ‘friend and foe’, the difficulties of distinguishing between these and the effect of this on the work at the checkpoint were discussed as factors with implications for soldiers’ behaviour and decision-making.

In Chapter 5 these processes of numbing were brought together when another dimension of the experiences of Israeli soldiers was discussed: the moral one. The mental and physical numbing that had been described before was found to have a profound effect on the moral competence or moral professionalism of soldiers. In addition, numbing enhanced a state of cognitive blurring, a state in which soldiers’ actions were not perceived as problematic and moral dimensions of certain situations were not recognized. The power bestowed on soldiers, furthermore, was shown as something giving them the opportunity to act upon such states of numbness by sometimes committing random acts of violence.

After having analysed the experiences of Israeli soldiers in the field, the implications of their surroundings and the characteristics of their specific work on their behaviour and their moral decision-making, I went on in Part 3 of this study to discuss the discourse of soldiers and, specifically, the moral strategies that they used. I furthermore outlined a specific kind of morality that I encountered which I called ‘instrumental morality’.

I then continued in Chapter 6 with the discussion of several of the dominant discursive strategies used by Israeli soldiers when giving accounts of their experiences. Strategies of
passivity, professionalism and ideology were found being used in order to explain, justify and legitimize actions and decision-making in the field. While most strategies involved acknowledgment of the suffering of the ‘other’, in certain instances the victims of actions by soldiers were not recognized as such. Moral strategies that were uncovered showed aspects of moral disengagement, such as moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison and displacement of responsibility (Bandura 2002). Furthermore, the two types of denial distinguished by Cohen were also found: implicatory and interpretative denial (2001).

In the final analytical chapter, Chapter 7, I tried to achieve an understanding of a specific kind of morality that I found Israeli soldiers using when relating their experiences as combat soldiers in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. I defined instrumental morality as seemingly ‘right’ or moral behaviour that was motivated by goals which were directed at serving the good of the self or the in-group. This moral behaviour and reasoning was then divided into three different levels, since the motivation of soldiers was not only geared towards an ego-centred goal, but was often also triggered by feelings of solidarity towards comrades or a desire to defend the state. These three levels were, then, the personal, the group and, finally, the state. On all levels a type of instrumental morality and reasoning was used by both soldiers and their commanders. Especially the (disciplinary) gaze of others, such as that coming from superiors but also those of the press or human rights organizations, was found to be an important factor shaping the moral reasoning of soldiers in the field.

Taking the Israeli case outside its borders: questions of responsibility

While focusing mainly on the main research question posed, another, broader, question has been present during this research, albeit somewhat in the background. While the main question has been explicitly addressed throughout the study, the ‘answer’ to the other one seems somewhat more complicated and has been dealt with more implicitly. This other question could be phrased as: ‘What can a case study of Israeli soldiers confronted with the Palestinian ‘Al Aqsa Intifada’ tell us about the more general moral features of such a-symmetrical conflict in other international settings?’ I believe that, specific as the Israeli case may be, it can also teach us about other instances of a-symmetrical conflict outside the Israeli context. Not only do American or Dutch soldiers, for example, find themselves in morally ambiguous situations in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq. And they are also, just like Israeli soldiers, part of a more structural process in which the immoral behaviour of soldiers is made possible by the situational circumstances they find themselves in.
I do realize that there are differences between the Israeli case and the cases of other militaries involved in a-symmetrical conflict. First of all, Israeli soldiers fight ‘close to home’ and are ideologically closer to the objectives of their military mission as this directly involves their own country. American or Dutch soldiers serving in Iraq or Afghanistan will, I expect, have fewer ideological ideas concerning their service in those countries or will at least be less personally involved with the aims of these operations. However, as I have shown, Israeli soldiers also, when in the field, do not have many ideological aspirations and instead busy themselves with their daily activities. All soldiers, Israeli or of other nationalities, become much more involved when it comes to the safety of their comrades than when they are confronted with issues on a state level.

A second difference between Israeli and other soldiers is the fact that Israeli soldiers are conscripts, while most soldiers of other nationalities are part of a professional army. However, from material written by US soldiers in Iraq, for example (see, for example, Buzzell 2005; Hartley 2006), it seems that the experiences of soldiers in the field and emotions that arise are very similar. Israeli and American or Dutch soldiers alike find themselves at checkpoints or on patrols for hours or days at a time, they have to conquer the heat and the cold, and they have to engage in contact with a population that is often not very sympathetic to their presence. They are afraid for their own and their comrades’ safety and they feel numbed and frustrated.

If we look at the similarities between the Israeli case and other national contexts, we see that the type of tasks that have to be performed by either Israeli or Dutch or American soldiers are very similar. All have to perform constabulary tasks during which they increasingly come into contact with civilians. Such tasks involve the patrolling of cities, villages and roads, the performance of nightly arrests and the manning of checkpoints.

These tasks are all part of the practices of occupation, may this be in the OPT, Iraq or Afghanistan. Such practices characterize a policy designed to control the movements of another people through checking identity papers and setting up roadblocks, for example. Not only the complexity of the tasks and the situation on the ground are comparable, the processes of power that are present in all cases are also similar. Young, armed soldiers stand in front of civilians who are culturally very different from them and over whom they have a lot of control. The threat of attacks from out of the midst of these civilians is always present, leading to the appearance of the emotions of fear and frustration on the part of the soldiers.

These similar circumstances lead to similar behaviour on the part of the soldiers and to a similar effect on their moral professionalism. Soldiers face emotional, physical and cognitive...
challenges that are very much comparable. I am, therefore, convinced that we can learn from the Israeli case when looking at other, asymmetrical conflicts in which other militaries are involved.

A systemic approach

The main point that I propose should be taken up is, as mentioned before, the necessity to take a more structural or systemic approach when looking at the misconduct of soldiers; here the issue of collective moral responsibility appears, which takes us beyond the picture of the lone soldier as ‘rotten apple’.

This study has tried to show how circumstances, such as cold, heat, fear, stress and frustration, can numb soldiers’ bodies and minds and, with that, their moral competency. Placing soldiers in such conditioning circumstances is not the result of a lack of choice but is, rather, a conscious decision made by policymakers at the level of the state. The question of responsibility then arises. I adhere to an approach that looks beyond the individual responsibility of soldiers and which takes into consideration other factors that bring soldiers into the situations they find themselves in, especially in the Israeli case of compulsory conscription, without losing individual responsibility from sight.

N. Crawford (2007) has looked into the issue of atrocities carried out by soldiers and the question of responsibility taken for it. She speaks about ‘systemic atrocity’ when, for instance, actions taken by soldiers result in many civilian victims. ‘Systemic’ here refers to the fact that responsibility for the deaths of innocents should be seen in light of a bigger system which has placed the soldiers in a situation that made such (often illegal, but sometimes calculated) behaviour possible. This situation can, furthermore, hamper the moral competence of soldiers and thus responsibility should not only be allocated to them or their direct commanders. Crawford separates out three different levels of collective responsibility besides the individual responsibility of the soldiers themselves. The first level she distinguishes as the organizational level within which military organizations can be grouped; then there is a collective moral responsibility on a state level; and finally we can find collective moral responsibility on the political and public level. Responsibility for the acts of soldiers can, then, depending on its specifics, be attributed to several different parties, while not losing from sight the fact that soldiers are moral agents themselves and should be able to distinguish right from wrong at a basic level.

Crawford thus claims that responsibility for violent acts committed by soldiers should not only be sought at the individual level of the soldiers. Because ‘war is a social activity [and] not the result of uncoordinated acts of isolated individuals’ (2007: 196), responsibility for acts within war
should be looked for from several different parties, such as the military, the state and also the public that supports the policymakers who decide to go to war.

As stated before, Crawford also shows that the moral capabilities of soldiers are often compromised by the situation they are put in by the military and the state. While I have shown in this study that the circumstances soldiers find themselves in produce processes of numbing and affect the moral competence of soldiers, Crawford emphasizes the external factors that put soldiers in these circumstances in the first place.

In an article on the massacre of civilians by American soldiers in Haditha, Iraq, Lifton calls the situations soldiers are put in within such conflict ‘atrocity-producing situations’ (2006). He writes, ‘[t]o be sure, individual soldiers and civilians who participated in it are accountable for their behaviour, even under such pressured condition. But the greater responsibility lies with those who planned and executed the war in Iraq and the “war on terrorism” of which it is part’ (ibid.).

Most of the instances of misconduct by Israeli soldiers encountered in this study were part of a daily form of harassment and were not full-blown atrocities such as those that Crawford and Lifton speak of. This behaviour, which is not seen to fall under real war crimes or even as illegitimate or illegal activity, should, however, be looked at as it paves the road for more serious abuses of power. The everyday nature of this behaviour, furthermore, makes it ‘normal’ and almost ‘invisible’; thus, when a more serious act or an atrocity takes place, it becomes easier to determine the latter as such, the daily acts of misbehaviour simply being ignored as irrelevant in comparison. For minor acts this is a cloudy issue; many actions are seen as legitimate and are condoned by commanders and thus soldiers do not have the sense that they are doing ‘something wrong’. Their moral awareness can become blurred or numbed by the situation that they are in and because of the normalization of harassing or violent acts, which are not understood as such and for which no responsibility is, therefore, taken. I, thus, believe that this behaviour should be taken seriously as well and should also be seen in the light of a systemic approach with regard to who is responsible for it.

Both Crawford’s and Lifton’s ideas, then, support my claim that in the Israeli case, but certainly also in other contexts, we are in dire need of a broader, outward vision when trying to understand and possibly prevent the misconduct of soldiers. We should start by avoiding ‘putting people in situations where they are more likely to commit atrocities’ (Crawford 2007: 197). Militaries should, furthermore, also look further than the ethical training of soldiers or the jailing of individual soldiers as ‘extreme’ cases and see the problems that their soldiers face within a
wider context and as a structural problem. Moral agency, it should be recognized, has structural features that we should seriously consider (ibid: 211).

The Israeli soldier in the above mentioned case was, indeed, jailed and the case as such was therefore closed for the military. However, if no responsibility is taken for the ‘atrocities-producing’ situation that these soldiers find themselves in, the harassing and illegal behaviour of soldiers will never come to an end. Without legitimizing such behaviour, we should look closely at the factors at play when (moral) behaviour is shaped and then subsequently take a step back to look at the forces and structures that are really responsible.