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Grassiani, E.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Performing politics at the Israeli security fair

Erella Grassiani 

Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Fairs, markets and bazaars are primarily commercial activities. Historically, however, through the accumulation of wealth they enable and due to their often strategic locations, they have also been sites at which political alliances are made and empires founded. Surprisingly, most debates on the politics of markets are consumer-oriented and rarely focus on their geopolitical importance. In this article, I analyse the Israeli security fair as a political event. Israel's security industry is booming; its global export is worth billions, and it attracts thousands of potential international clients. To show how politics are conducted and constructed at the security fair, I will look beyond the neoliberal idea that gives 'the market' powers of its own and implies that market forces are neutral and non-political. By expanding the operationalisation of politics to include discursive, visual and material performances, I will not only argue that the fair is inherently political but also present a novel way in which to see such politics. Importantly, while exploring politics through the ways in which they are performed, I will emphasise the embeddedness of the fair and its politics in orientalist and colonialist logics.

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Introduction

When I walk into the conference hall at the Tel Aviv Fairgrounds, I receive a name tag on a lanyard as proof that I'm a registered visitor to the HLS & Cyber fair 2016. Outside, the Tel Aviv air is hot and humid, but inside, the air conditioning is working hard enough that even businessmen in suits seem comfortable. The exhibition hall is big, bright and noisy. Hundreds of people are walking around the booths, which are staffed by security professionals and salespeople ready to demonstrate their goods and answer any questions about them. There are armoured vehicles and anti-riot gear on display, and a large part of the hall is dedicated to cybersecurity. Most people in the hall are male; women are present mostly as salespeople or hostesses. Israel's security industry is intimately connected to the country's military. Security personnel nearly always have a military background, and while women do serve, their positions are generally much lower-ranking than men's, making it impossible for them to transfer military capital to the private security industry (see Diphooorn and Grassiani 2016 and also Sasson-Levy 2007). Decorated with the colours of the Israeli flag and numerous banners showcasing Israeli products, the space screams, 'Israeli security is the best!' – more than just a commercial slogan, as I will demonstrate below. Feigenbaum and Kanngiester (2015) have described such events as 'atmospheric' ones, 'in which infrastructures, people and events come

CONTACT Erella Grassiani  e.grassiani@uva.nl

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together in the production of particular affective environments and states' (Feigenbaum and Weissmann 2016, p. 8). Here, I want to emphasise the political aspect of such environments and states.

This description of one specific fair in Tel Aviv could be of any of the many fairs organised in the city. Tel Aviv and Israel as a whole can be considered the capital of homeland security – as Naomi Klein wrote, 'a kind of shopping mall for homeland security technologies' (2007, p. 551). Every year, state institutions and private parties organise a multitude of exhibitions and fairs for a national and international public. In addition to the private companies selling their products there, the Israeli military and police forces are also always present, in the form of high-profile speakers, booths presenting products manufactured by the military industry and the presence of uniformed soldiers and police officers.

It is not surprising, then, that events like these are highly political. However, what these politics and the processes of politicisation actually look like in practice is rather opaque. I argue here that one of the ways to analyse politics at the fair is to look at how they are performed. Through the inclusion of discursive, visual, embodied and material performances, I propose to expand and operationalise the way we look at politics. In this way, their embeddedness in the logics and legacies of colonialist and orientalist thought also becomes discernible.

The security industry

Since the late 1990s, the security industry has been studied with increasing intensity. At first, the industry was mostly limited to 'the solid-state technology of the criminal justice state' (Zedner 2006, p. 267). Soon enough, however, there was a clear shift, with private companies interested in a share of the growing profits taking on the sale of security products and knowledge (e.g. Avart 2004, 2005, Zedner 2006, Abrahamsen and Williams 2012). The important work of Abrahamsen and Williams (2012) analysed this enormous industry as organised within security assemblages that go far beyond the nation and should be investigated within their transnational networks.

With the growing privatisation and globalisation of security, its commercial aspects, the industry around it and its entanglement with capital became important objects of study (e.g. Neocleous 2007, Rigakos 2016, Loader and White 2018). An interesting debate arising from this literature concerns the basic characteristics of 'security'. Is a feeling of security something you simply buy? In other words, does security depend on capital? This debate between security as a public good and as the commodity it has increasingly become (Loader 1999, Krahmman 2008, Crawford 2009) shows how moral and commercial issues are deeply entangled in the industry (Loader and White 2018).

We thus know increasingly more about the private security industry itself, and more recent work has progressed to showing the entanglement between public and private security institutions and actors (e.g. Glück and Low 2017, Diphorn and Grassiani 2019). However, it seems that, as Baird aptly writes, 'very little work has gone into understanding the fair as a specific site where security practices and knowledges can be actively observed and theorized' (Baird 2017, p. 188). Important exceptions are the work of Baird himself on the border security fair (2017); Stockmarr (2016), who discursively analysed the products and technologies sold at fairs; and Feigenbaum (2011), who explored narratives around the sale of counterterrorism technologies. Hoijtink (2014), furthermore, studied civil security markets in the context of the European Union.

Many of these works have also commented on the way that security in both material and discursive forms (i.e. knowledge) can be bought and sold as a neutral commodity unburdened by the baggage of politics and political agendas (see also Loader 1999, Zedner 2006, Abrahamsen and Williams 2012). One could, in fact, say that security is political to its core. As Huysman (2006) argues, in what he calls the politics of protection, there are always three questions involved: who is protected, against whom and who does the protecting? In security marketing and security fairs, all these questions come together. To sell security products, one needs to convince the client there is an actual security threat and thus subjectively construct not only a person or group that represents that threat but also the individual or group that needs to be protected. Conveniently for the security

industry, the companies that do the convincing are also those selling the solution: a new security system for the home, drones, or cybersecurity technology (Neocleous 2007).

Politics can be identified by explicitly looking at the inherently political and diplomatic meetings and networking that are part of any security fair. However, here I will mostly focus on the politics implicit in certain performances, often as politicisation, depoliticisation or both. In the classic sense, this would mean the way issues – such as threats, safety, and the history of the development and use of security products and technologies – are actively included or excluded from political content or debate (see Flinders and Buller 2006, Mishra 2011 and de Nardis 2017). Yet, in an anthropological approach, it is more relevant to investigate how influential actors frame a discourse, narrative or event as ‘unburdened’ by political agendas, something anthropology icon Mary Douglas showed in her essay about risk (1990). What is shown and what is hidden in such framings is inherently political in an effort to *not* be so.

The works above demonstrate an awareness of the political significance of the fairs they describe. However, the question remains: what do such politics look like, and how do they come into being at the security fair? Here I will argue for looking at politics through the lens of performance. At the security fair, performances are both discursive and physical abounded, from opening speeches to clients ‘feeling’ the weapons in their hands. By doing so, I aim to expand the way we think about politics to include such diverse performances. I find the work of Feigenbaum (2011), who looks at the visual discourses accompanying the marketing of counterterrorism, helpful towards this end.

The relationship between security and embodiment and materiality is not a new one. Scholars have, for example, shown the importance of cameras (Jeursen 2021), drones (Walter 2014) and other technologies (Frossard and Jaffe 2018) within (private) security acts. The classic securitisation theory of the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al. 1998) perceived securitisation only as a speech act, the message of which had to be separated from ‘normal’ politics in order to become a matter of (national) urgency beyond the political sphere. However, we have moved far from that narrow perspective to see securitisation as both discursive and visual – achieved, for example, via education or law (Basaran 2008, Balzacq *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, security work, as soldiering, is a deeply embodied experience (Higate 2012, Grassiani 2013). Diphooorn, for one, has shown the relationship security actors have with their guns and protective gear (Diphooorn 2015, 2020). Such works demonstrate how the body is part and parcel of the way security and acts of war are carried out and how such acts are negotiated. This article’s contribution to these works is a focus on politics at the security fair as materially and visually embodied and performed.

Methods and overview

My research questions concerning Israeli security fairs arose from a position of critique towards the industry they are part of. To answer these questions, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork from 2015 to 2019, including participant observations, interviews and an analysis of secondary sources. Within this period, I visited numerous security fairs in Israel, interviewed security professionals and studied the promotional materials distributed by security companies. This article is based on the material I collected during that period.

While each fair was organised and sponsored by different parties and had a slightly different focus, there were many parallels between them. While I will mostly use the word ‘fair’ to describe the event in question, the organisers themselves used a range of descriptors, including ‘expo’ and ‘conference’. Organisers seemed especially keen to use the latter term when the display of goods was complimented by the presence of speakers, perhaps to lend the event a certain gravitas and suggest the presence of VIP speakers and specialists.

In the first part of this article, I will give a short historical overview of the security fair’s origins and the orientalist framework it is embedded in. I will also look at national branding as an important facet of this framework. In the second part of the article, I will analyse the way politics are performed by describing in more detail different aspects of the fair: actors, events, products and spaces. I will also

include acts of counter-politics, through which the security fair is resisted and cracks begin to appear in security actors' carefully constructed frame.

The colonialist logic of security fairs

Before I discuss the fairs themselves, it is important to acknowledge critical security studies' contributions regarding security in general as a colonialist construct. Neocleous, for example, asks us to defetishize the concept of security as something inherently good and to see it for what it is – namely, 'a mode of governing, a political technology that serves to "colonise" categories, places and spaces and through which individuals, groups, classes, and, ultimately, modern capital is reshaped and re-ordered' (Neocleous 2008, pp. 3–4). To make these violent underpinnings clear, he and George Rigakos (Neocleous and Rigakos 2011) coined the term 'pacification' to replace 'security'. Others, such as Machold and Charrett (2021) and Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015), rightly emphasise the racialized aspects of security, highlighting how security systems are developed and function in accordance with racist ideologies and demonise the (Black or brown) Other. This is certainly true for the security fair, as I will show.

Security fairs can be traced back to national fairs such as the world's fairs, which celebrated cultures and industries from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Most famous was the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, which was organised to celebrate modern technology. Over time, these world's fairs went from being cultural and industrial affairs to spaces of national branding, where efforts were made to improve the national image of the host country. Mitchell (1992) describes such historical fairs and especially the era they took place in as the 'exhibitory order'. He uses this term to show how the world, in his words, was 'being ordered up as an endless exhibition' (p. 290). Mitchell further emphasises how the artificiality of that which is shown in the exhibition deeply affects the 'real' world outside of it, creating categories of otherness and essentialism (ibid.). This supports the idea that (security) fairs and their organisers create a 'story' – a narrative (Grassiani 2019a) that is not representative of the world outside but meant to influence this world and the ideas within it.

In such nation-branding narratives, the nation becomes a brand that can be put on display and sold. While any characteristic or practice can serve to strengthen a national brand (cuisine, for example, or landscapes), it is important to note that security plays a particularly important role (Coaffee and van Ham 2008). I have shown elsewhere (Grassiani 2017, 2018, 2019b) how Israel's self-proclaimed expertise in all things security and military is an important part of its national brand. Labelling weaponry as 'combat-proven' at security fairs is a good example here; it testifies to the quality of the product as it has been used in real combat. Yet such a national brand, despite being founded on a history of violence and weapons manufacture, sanitises the country's image, cleansing it of the bloody details of that history. In this branding, the Palestinian Other is not only dehumanised as a terrorist; as a people, Palestinians are simply absent from the story.

Globally, fairs designed to sell defence and security items were first organised as national affairs in the 1970s. In his work on the 'arms bazaar' (1977), Sampson quotes salesmen from those years who describe their wares as 'well blooded' and 'combat-proven in South Asia' (referring to the Vietnam War), a sales strategy still seen at Israeli fairs today. Such fairs and exhibitions quickly became more international as weapons producers started to discover commercial opportunities in distant lands. In 1995, author Michael Dewar collected photos and descriptions of an immense amount of specialist weaponry in the catalogue *Weapons and Equipment of Counter-Terrorism*. As Stockmarr later noted, 'the internationalization of the defence trade also corresponds with the globalization of modes of violence and warfare through sharing and learning' (Stockmarr 2016, p. 122). In this sense, Dewar's compiling of such an encyclopaedic array of weaponry was, as Feigenbaum (2011, p. 78) says, a 'precursor of the mega-expos that were to come'.

In Israel, we can better understand the success and global tendencies of the security and homeland security (HLS) market by tracing its roots to the military industry. This industry goes back to

before Israel was founded, to the pre-state Zionist struggle of the 1920s and 30s and the production of weapons and ammunition in secret factories (Gordon 2009). In the 1950s, after Israel proclaimed its independence, privately-owned companies producing weapons were also founded (ibid.). In combination with a focus on R&D by the industry and high-tech developments in Israel (and its military), the homeland security industry began to boom.

This success is intimately connected to Israel's militarist character and the multiple wars and conflicts the country has been and continues to be part of, including the ongoing occupation of Palestinian land. As mentioned, weaponry and technologies developed to control the Palestinian people are subsequently touted as 'combat-proven' and sold to a very diverse international audience at fairs in Tel Aviv. Such weapons are then subsequently often used in civilian or urban settings. Importantly, many weapons deals and other commercial exchanges are part of diplomatic efforts; the official friendship between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, for example, resulted in the former signing weapons deals worth somewhere between millions and a billion US dollars.

An important aspect of past world's fairs and, as I will show, also the current Israeli security fairs is the unapologetic orientalist logic they promote (Mitchell 1992). The Imperial International Exhibition in England in 1909, for example, was colonialist in nature and 'showcased' other countries and people in a simplistic and orientalist manner. While the ideologies of security fairs are not as overt as those of these historical endeavours, the fairs are nationalist and even racialized events founded on colonialist and orientalist logics. Security actors emphasise the virtue of the so-called West and the dangers of the Other, whom we should fear. As I will show, through the fairs, Israel puts itself on the map as a modern, righteous, tech-savvy country. It paints, as Mitchell wrote about the first World Exhibitions, a picture of something that is bigger than everything but the fair itself (2004), and this essentialist picture includes orientalist views about the Other. This Other is, in Israel's view of itself, very clearly the 'Muslim Terrorist' first and foremost. However, it is also the 'anarchist protestor' (Grassiani 2021). Increasingly often, the latter construction finds its way into security discourse as a 'menace' that causes disorder – one, it is heavily implied, the state really should deal with. In contrast, the 'good guys' are Israel and its Western partners, mostly in the form of government and security elites. Israeli speakers at fairs have defined such partners as anyone who is on 'their side'; thus, any African or Asian country that fights Muslim terrorism can count itself as part of the 'West'. As Stockmarr notes (2013), this discourse replaces the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a more global 'us vs them' narrative. Just as a highly simplistic West is constructed in various ways at security fairs, so too is an East. An Israeli Export Institute brochure obtained at a fair, for instance, claims that 'we' need to protect 'our way of life' (emphasis added), the 'we' clearly encompassing good, Western people with a way of life and values that must be protected from actors and forces that do not share them. It is a message that every member of the intended audience will immediately understand.

The colonialist logic underpinning the Israeli security industry has been identified before, for example, by Graham (2010), who sees the Israeli occupation as a 'laboratory' for its military and security exports (see also Yotam Feldman's film *The Lab* for more on this idea). Laleh Khalili, furthermore, has written about the colonialist features of the security export market globally (2010). Expanding on this idea, she also takes a more historical look at the way colonial techniques of control were used in Palestine when it was part of the British mandate, as well as how these techniques were often 'borrowed' from other colonial contexts. Finally, she shows how Israel used – and still uses – knowledge acquired mostly from the British to control the Palestinian population, as well as how it sells such technologies to other places around the world, something my work has also dealt with (Grassiani 2017, 2019b, Grassiani and Müller 2019). These colonial ties and the deeply embedded orientalist ideology of the modern Israeli security fair form the framework for my analysis of the empirical data I present below.

Spaces, products and actors at the fair: politics as performance

Appadurai's (1994) work helps take our investigation of the security fair's politics beyond its commercial aspects and dynamics of exchange. In his work on the social life of things, he muses about bartering, gifts and the inherent sociability of all such exchanges. He traces things and sees how they can be commodities in different stages between production and consumption. In his words, politics 'is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities' (p. 89). Thus, one should look for the ideas and agreements that lie behind such exchanges, but also, as I will show here, at how these exchanges themselves are a way of politicking. This entails analysing the performance of ideas about who the enemy is, how security should work and who should be secure, as well as the primacy of issues of security over those of equality.

I will show how politics are performed as part of the atmospheric event of the fair through discourse, visuals and materials. In their work on atmospheric policing, Feigenbaum and Kanngiester (2015) show how the atmospheric – that is, the affect that is brought about by different actors, actants and acts – has 'bear[ing] on the geopolitical' (2015, p. 81); the tear gas that Israeli forces use against Palestinians exemplifies how manipulating the air people breathe becomes a form of governance and control. I find this idea useful to studying the security fair by looking at spaces, products, speech and actors as constructive of the fair as atmospheric, with an emphasis on the performance of the political.

Israeli security fairs

There are approximately a dozen security-related fairs and exhibitions annually in Israel, most of them in Tel Aviv. Private entities, such as Israel Defense or iHLS (Israel Homeland Security), or public offices, such as the Israel Export Institute and Sibat (the International Defense Cooperation Directorate of the Israel Ministry of Defense), organise these events, often collaborating to do so. The two biggest events are ISDEF, which claims to have attracted 15,000 visitors and featured 300 exhibitors in 2019, and HLS & Cyber, organised by the Israel Export Institute with a number of ministries, such as the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Public Security. The two are organised biannually on alternating years. Other events are smaller and focus on a specific theme, such as cybersecurity (Cybertech), intelligence (the Intelligence, Terror & Special Forces Conference organised by Israel Defense, the Ministry of Intelligence and the Israeli Intelligence Commemoration Centre) or future forecasting (Future Forces, organised by iHLS). Most of these events are geared towards an international audience, but some also try to interest Israeli companies, the military and police actors.¹

Space

As I mentioned in the introduction, security fairs are rather massive events that are organised in large conventional trade fair spaces. The air is usually air-conditioned, even cold, and the lights bright; the dominant colours are white and blue, incidentally (or not) the colours of the Israeli flag.² To enter the fair, visitors and participants alike first need an entrance card. As at any international conference, such cards are often essentially a large nametag hanging from a thick lanyard. To get one, visitors must line up at counters next to the exhibition hall entrance. Importantly, the cards are colour-coded, revealing a hierarchy ranging from 'visitor' to VIP or exhibitor. Thus, power dynamics are at play even in the conferences' entrance procedures; who gets in and who doesn't, along with individuals' places in the fair's hierarchy, is an important factor in the event's political dynamics.

In general, getting in only requires one to register online, sometimes pay a small fee, and pick up the tag at the desk. However, in one instance, I witnessed how in reality, not everyone is welcome. During a protest against the arms trade that was held next to a fair venue, the protestors wanted to



Figure 1. Israeli HLS & Cyber fair 2016.

enter a public space near the entrance. This area had been open earlier in the day, but once the protestors drew nearer, it was quickly closed off. This performance of exclusion shows how the intended public at such fairs thus comprises those that are sympathetic to the trade in weapons and security technology, not those critically questioning it (Figure 1).

Inside, expo spaces are divided up in ways that also reflect hierarchy. Access to a cordoned-off area for VIPs (important clients of businesses exhibiting at the fair) is restricted to those with certain colour badges. Furthermore, there are often small offices, closed off to visitors in general, where employees of different ministries (indicated by logos on the doors) hold discussions and make deals. One should, furthermore, not underestimate the coffee corner, where a great deal of networking takes place and where a quick glance at the colour of someone's badge is often enough to identify an interesting conversation partner.

All the fairs I attended additionally had a space for lectures and speeches. Sometimes, when a fair's focus was security hardware, this space was peripheral and hard to even find in the huge conference hall. At other events, however, it was central; often, the fair was then called a conference, giving it a more academic flair. The lecture space was usually open to all visitors, but at one fair I attended, only paying visitors were allowed behind the very low barriers that marked the area as 'exclusive'.

The most important space, however, was always the exhibition floor. This is the space where the booths are located and where visitors stroll around, making small talk with exhibitors and munching on the small snacks they offer. Actors meet each other and intensive networking – one of the most important goals at the fair, many exhibitors told me – takes place. After an initial round of talk, buyers and sellers can simply exchange contact info or retire to a more private space to negotiate.

I argue that the way the space is designed is a performance of politics, one that conveys a specific message. Expo spaces are clean and optimistic, their atmosphere one of business, excitement and learning about new technologies. And while it might sound strange for a space that is filled with lethal weaponry, nothing inside the fair is reminiscent of death and destruction. Visually and materially, as I will show below, the space is depoliticised and unbloodied.

Security demonstrations

In the middle of the very large fair space, there is often an empty area in which demonstrations of security gear, weaponry and other technology are held every hour or two. Some even take place outside, where there is more space and where, for example, drones can also be flown. Such demos are usually very popular, as they break the routine of milling around the different booths in the big hall. Such demos are strongly affective as they combine sound, visuals and even smells, making them important to a discussion of the fair's spatial and atmospheric features. Below, I give an ethnographic description of one such demo.

There is a small demonstration area in one corner of the fair. A small structure resembling a one-story house has been built there; outside it is an old car and some large wooden boxes. At set times announced over the PA system, demonstrations are held by young male security personnel who function as actors. An MC dressed in a formal black suit and speaking into a microphone explains to the audience what they are seeing. Interestingly, he often refers to the actors as 'soldiers'; in one instance, he even calls them 'beautiful soldiers', conveying the importance of military status and capital at such fairs and to the Israeli security industry in general, which I have discussed elsewhere (Grassiani 2017, 2018). Describing the scenario being played out in front of the audience, the MC tells us that three of the soldiers – the actors – need to secure the structure. They wear and use equipment from a number of different companies present at the exhibition, each of which the MC names. In the meantime, the soldiers perform their task of clearing the structure. They quietly walk towards the structure in what seems to be full military gear, using military hand signals to communicate; the Israeli flag is emblazoned on bands on their upper arms. We can feel dust fly around as they move, and the metallic odour of their weapons is perceptible. They successfully clear the structure, making sure it is empty, and the MC tells us – the potential buyers and 'good guys' – that 'it is

safe'. But then he reports, alarmingly, that 'there is fighting', meaning that an armed assailant is attacking the soldiers. Someone standing next to me in the audience exclaims, 'A terrorist!' Then the MC says the same. Fortunately, 'our soldiers' act swiftly and kill the terrorist on the spot. But one soldier is injured. Weapons are swapped out for different ones, and equipment is uncovered to – as the MC says – 'save the life of the soldier'. The soldiers need to hurry because 'more terrorists are on the way', and this is the perfect opportunity to showcase the portable stretcher one of the companies at the fair is selling.

The audience seems excited during this demo-cum-spectacle, which showcases the real-life use of equipment that otherwise is displayed on tables or on plastic mannequins. But it does much more, too; it strengthens the distinction between the 'good people' seeking safety and those who protect them vis-à-vis the 'bad terrorist', who is not otherwise identified. In this depoliticised performance, no context is given; the security personnel – the 'soldiers' – are unquestionably there to protect us from the murderous Other (Figure 2).

Such demonstrations embody the explicit ways in which soldiering and notions about enemies, threats and the 'correct' way to deal with them are linked to the sale of commodities. Furthermore, they show how this sale becomes a spectacle that appeals to the audience's senses. In Appadurai's (1994) words, such a performance shows how commodities have a social life, by which he means they have a belief system around them about their use and conditions of use and sale.

During another demonstration I observed, a group of men dressed in black demonstrated combat moves. They worked for a company called Shadow and used the slogan 'prevent conflict without violence', which was quite surprising given their very aggressive combat techniques and use of special knives. An MC explained the different methods they used and the different threats they were combatting; one was a protestor sitting on the ground, his arms interlinked with those of his comrades. The men were to remove this protestor, and they did so using their 'special' martial arts-based method. This performance included an important political narrative mentioned above: in the global context of growing social uprisings against states and their use of violence, not only the terrorist is framed as a threat, but also the protesting civilian. This political message is conveyed to the audience by performance in the form of not only speech but also smells, sound, and visuals.



Figure 2. Security demonstration at ISDEF 2015.

Products

Here I will attempt to show in more detail what kinds of products and technologies are sold at fairs and how their marketing and sale can be analysed as performances of politics. As Feigenbaum and Weissmann (2016) did in regard to policing products, I will look for politics in the stories that are used to frame products – in seller’s promotional materials, for example. Importantly, the industry itself makes a clear distinction between ‘defence’ products and technologies and those of homeland security (HLS). Defence includes military products, such as tanks, planes, rocket launchers, etc., while HLS is the umbrella term for products and technologies used in more civilian contexts. While some fairs are exclusively geared towards HLS, many exhibit both sorts of products. Of course, the line between the two often blurs when military-produced weaponry is used against protestors in an urban area, suggesting that the distinction is an artificial one.

Firstly, there are the actual weapons that are sold. While the industry has expanded widely into other avenues, weapons are still one of the most important items for sale at fairs, not least for the spectacle they provide. Sellers are aware of this. At one fair I attended, one booth not only allowed people to try out the CornerShot – an automatic weapon that allows its wielder to ‘look’ and shoot around corners – but also screened in a loop scenes from the Hollywood action film *Wanted*, in which a character played by Angelina Jolie uses the weapon. In this way, using and buying a gun becomes a festive and exciting event. For vendors at the fair, allowing attendees to hold and ‘try out’ different unloaded guns and weapons (often while being photographed by colleagues) was a central offering. In recent years, fairs have even hired special ‘weapon models’ – attractive young women with a military background – to walk around the fair and be photographed with heavy weapons and excited foreign clients.³ Politics are performed here through both display and engaging the customer with a specific, sanitised message about the weapons on sale and Israel as a world leader in security. The performance, which employs notions of masculinity, sexuality and celebrity, starkly demonstrates how the sale of weapons, the context within which they were developed and the suffering they create are completely neutralised in the fair’s surroundings. One could further say this is a way to ‘gamify’ war and security. All that is left are ‘exciting’ and ‘fun’ technologies and weapons one can try in a clean, safe and even sexy environment, with food, drinks and laughter afterwards (Figure 3).

In 2019, there was a special event the day before the biannual ISDEF expo began. Foreign guests and potential buyers were brought to a shooting range in a pleasant rural area, where they could try out weapons with live rounds. This was quite extraordinary as foreign nationals shooting guns inside Israel is a rare sight. While this event physically took place outside of the fair, it was a significant part of it, not only to sell weapons but also as a nation-branding tool. Interviewed about the event, the organiser proudly related how Israel was in a position to have amassed incredible experience in countering terror attacks, thus making its weapons and technology superior. Through such an event, the classic categories of us vs them are once again reproduced; the ‘us’ here is completely normalised as those under attack from ‘terrorists’ and in need of efficient tools to combat them.

Besides weapons, other important materials on sale at the fairs were security systems that would help establish parameter security – at national borders or around properties, for example. Feigenbaum conceptualises fences ‘as artefacts of globalization’ (2010, p. 119). She invites us to think about fences as materiality ‘through which communicative struggles are played out’ (p. 120) and ‘that shapes and mediates interpersonal and political communication’ (p. 123). This political communication can take place at sites where a multitude of actors/actants are present, such as a protest against those very fences (the focus of Feigenbaum’s article) or the places where fences are sold and marketed: the security fair. In the Palestinian territories, Israel has made itself *the* specialist in building walls and fences, and it aggressively markets that image and expertise to international actors. Following Feigenbaum, we could thus say that along with the audience present at the fair, the fences, their technologies and the actors selling them construct specific political messages concerning who and what is and is not a threat, who needs to be secured and how. In order to sell such



Figure 3. The CornerShot at the Gilboa booth. Scenes from *Wanted* playing in the background.

technologies, booths were often equipped with screens that showed the different fences, walls and detection systems in real time. Some bigger companies even set up actual walls at the fairground in order to demonstrate their technology, which supposedly could keep any intruder at bay. Wall-mounted security cameras clicked and whirred as they swivelled from side to side, and customers were invited to touch the technology on display. This appeal to the senses was, again, intended to generate interest in these products and communicate political messages about potential enemies and threats.

Another type of item for sale at the fairs is armoured vehicles, which are often very big and look immensely impressive. Often, vehicles themselves are showcased together with the different tools and weapons they can be outfitted with. For example, the company Beit Alpha, which is known for its riot-control technologies, often exhibits its huge trucks, which are often equipped with a system that sprays fluids such as water or Skunk.⁴ Visitors are keen to climb into the trucks, try them out and experience them in a 'fun' and harmless way, sanitising the destructive force they would bring to bear when used, for example, against non-violent protestors.

Allowing potential customers to try weapons, climb in military trucks and walk around heavy walls is one way sellers perform politics at fairs, not only on their own (as part of their marketing strategies) but also in cooperation with visitors to the fair, who are keen to accept the sanitised, depoliticised messages they are presented with.

Actors

To organise and understand the many different actors taking part in security fairs, I will divide them by role while also acknowledging that they cannot always be distinguished from one another. In fact, as Sheffer and Barak (2013) show in their work, security actors in Israel are part of an intricate network, and their functions often blur into each other. Through the mechanism of the 'revolving door', many former military actors smoothly enter the private sphere after their retirement while holding on to their networks and knowledge. During an event, such actors can therefore act as speakers, sellers and customers all at the same time.

As I have also shown elsewhere (Grassiani 2019b), many VIP speakers at Israeli security fairs are former military generals who founded private security companies after retiring. Some even attempted a political career at the same time. In line with the security network described by Sheffer and Barak (2013), these actors effortlessly move between public and private functions. As such, their narratives are very political, even if they don't at first seem to be. An example is Gal Hirsch, a controversial brigadier general (res.) who, after being forced out of the military, founded a private security company through which he made some highly questionable deals; he then almost became chief of police. Finally, he started his own political party, Shield of Israel, its name similar to that of his company Defensive Shield, which he had named for the military operation that made him famous. While the role of politics in such instances is rather overt, the way these actors speak is neutral in terms of political and policy preferences, instead mainly focusing on the objective quality of the products Israel is developing and selling. Political reality only surfaces in the form of the often-unnamed terrorist enemy that unquestionably needs to be fought in the name of national defence. Such powerful men perform their military capital and experience in the context of the sale of security materials.

This military capital is also important when looking at other actors at the fair – or rather, at their uniforms. As we will see below, many officials from different countries are invited to fairs, and military and police officials generally come in full uniform; among the Israeli actors are uniformed individuals from a multitude of different units and battalions. A uniform provides the wearer with military capital in this field of the fair. As Israel's military is highly praised worldwide, the uniform is hence an important element of the nation-branding performance taking place, giving security products legitimacy and assuring their quality.

Speakers typically either give a talk at the opening ceremony of a fair or are part of a side programme – the so-called conferences. When we study high-profile speakers (politicians, high ranking military officials or academic specialists), their roles and the way they are introduced to the audience, we see a clear blurring of the roles they perform. Conference moderators introduce and refer to many businessmen by their military rank (in retirement) and, more importantly in my view, their nickname. For example, at one event, a speaker shared the story of how he and another panel member served in the military together and thus had known each other ‘forever’. Another speaker, thanking a person named Reuven, called him Reuvke, explicitly performing an old and intimate relationship. The use of this sort of nickname, which is very common in Israel and especially in the Israeli military, is a performance of a certain masculine intimacy, old friendship and romantic military brotherhood. Important here, furthermore, is the process of securitising capital, in which such social and cultural capital is converted into that which has value in contexts where security is highly regarded (Diphooorn and Grassiani 2016).

Besides Israeli military actors, international speakers are also important guests at Israeli security fairs. They are asked to speak about the situation back home and about the ways that Israeli technology and experience could help them in their quest for security, giving this technology legitimacy. At the HLS & Cyber conference in 2016, for example, the organisers of the conference invited Jan Jambon, Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium and Minister for Security and the Interior, to ‘testify on the recent events that struck the beating heart of Europe and [show] how his team makes all efforts possible in preventing similar threats in the future’. Jambon was taken on a tour to see how the adjacent train station had been secured, and he made clear he was looking for new ways to secure his country, especially after the attacks it faced in 2016.⁵ The politics performed here are those of legitimising and approving Israeli security systems, branding Israel as a bringer of solutions for all.

Lastly, there are the ‘regular’ clients at the fair. As a client can also come in the form of a business partner or political ally, I group all such actors here together as ‘visitors’, separating them from the organising and selling parties. These visitors are actors both Israeli and foreign, public and private. I have encountered people from virtually every country in the world at fairs, from Vietnam to Brazil to Sweden and even including unlikely ones such as Egypt. Among these visitors are many members of foreign militaries and police units, as well as politicians, and there are many official state delegations present. Personnel from foreign embassies in Israel are also invited to ‘show their faces’ at the fair as a diplomatic gesture. These officials are important, as their presence itself indicates a political element to the security fair and lends it legitimacy.

Finally, both private and government actors present at the security fairs are part of the ‘sales’ side. Often, they are employees or owners of one of the multitude of private companies selling security and defence technologies, services and materials. They can also be representatives of the immense public security and defence industry, hailing from institutions such as the Israeli Aerospace Industry (IAI) or the Israeli Military Industry (IMI systems). These staunchly represent the Israeli security industry with their products, knowledge, experience and connections.

Speech acts

Above, I described the different actors present at security fairs. While such actors’ status, (national) identity, uniform and VIP status are important to understand the dynamics of the fair, their speech acts and the messages those acts convey are equally so when it comes to the fair’s politics. To this end, it is important to look at speakers’ explicit and implicit messages, combined with their identity and the performance they enact at the fair. As noted before, fairs differ in the space they reserve for talks.

Introductory speeches are usually given by high-ranking officials – former military personnel who have become politicians, for example. Sweeping messages are disseminated; that Israel is a ‘world-leading nation’ in security, for instance, and that, as then Likud minister Gilad Erdan said, ‘you have come to the right place’. Erdan then continued on to say that the real threat was radical Islam and

that after 9/11, Islamic terrorism became a global problem. While some subjects are completely ignored – such as the occupation of Palestinian territories – a strong emphasis is placed on the threats posed by terrorism, radical Islam and ISIS. Such threat assessments are treated uncritically, and at every fair I attended, there was at least one speaker whose talk was geared at explaining to the audience (radical) Islam and the dangers it poses to those in the west.

If one wishes to provide a solution to a specific security problem, one first needs to define this ‘problem’ and make sure that one’s audience recognises and feels compelled by it. In that light, the discourse on global terrorism has undoubtedly been successful; most fair attendees I spoke to came to Israeli to learn more about how to tackle this ‘problem’, regardless of whether it is, in fact, real. I see this discourse as depoliticised because it is extremely general; no party or organisation is mentioned by name, but everybody knows what and who is being talked about. It is an almost childlike narrative in which there are bad people and good ones, the latter needing to be defended against the former. And importantly, Israel is portrayed as an example to follow again and again.

Besides the nationalist and orientalist messages being spread at the security fairs, there is also a growing tendency to look for a threat closer to home. I have witnessed many talks by security sector professionals and public security figures about the dangers of the ‘protestor’, wherein the identity of this figure is usually not made explicit, but from the narrative, one understands that (s)he is a leftist and critical of the state. For a foreign audience, this message conveys Israel’s experience with anti-riot gear and activities, which can also be used in other contexts, such as civil unrest in cities of the global South or North America (Grassiani 2021). Within Israel, the threat of the ‘protester’ is often linked to the BDS movement (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions). This movement has been named in Israeli political circles as dangerous and threatening to Israel as a Zionist entity, and during security fairs, it is referred to as such. During discussions of surveillance technologies and the value of different kinds of intelligence (HUMINT, open-source), BDS activism is often portrayed as just as threatening as terrorism. So are other kinds of protests – the Arab Spring, for instance, which is discussed by speakers as a very negative development. As one speaker said when discussing solutions for such ‘threats’, clearly framing activism as a danger and a social menace: ‘We can think about how we can predict social and/or public activism. We want to know when it will break out’.

Repoliticizing the depoliticised

As with most dominant discourses, there is a counter discourse to security fairs, albeit a small one. As it is a political act that teaches us a great deal about the fair itself, I will briefly address it here. Even though most Israeli citizens do not see the fairs and exhibitions as problematic, there is a group of activists who do. They are actively against the sale of weapons and security technologies to countries with dictatorships and other places where these tools are used against civilians. Furthermore, these activists are feminists and against the patriarchy in general, which these fairs are seen to exemplify. In June 2017, a conference critical of the big ISDEF conference in Tel Aviv was organised in its shadow. At this conference, called Insecurity, international activists, professionals and academics (myself included) came to speak about the downsides of the security and military industry and events such as ISDEF. On the first day of the fair, a few activists staged a ‘die-in’ during which they lay down on the ground covered with fake money and carrying slogans such as ‘Occupation is good business here’, ‘Bloodstained money’ and ‘The arms industry profits from the occupation’. The activists attempted to make a clear connection between the commodification of security technologies and weaponry and their use against citizens of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. At other fairs, activists held demonstrations near the entrances, trying to reach the fairs’ customers with their anti-militarist message. There were efforts to communicate with foreign visitors, too – something difficult to do, as the protestors were kept at a distance by security personnel.

The goal of this article is similar to that of these counter-voices: to unveil the politics at play. Activists do this through a political performance in which they critically look beyond the commercial aspects of the security fair to see the suffering it produces (in Palestine and elsewhere) and call for the abolishment of not only the industry but also the militaristic society it is a product of. They are, in fact, critically re-politicizing such events, protesting the depoliticisation I have described here.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how politics are performed within the Israeli security fair. I showed how, at such fairs, politics are performed in a myriad of ways, including through discourse and via visual, embodied and material representations. By expanding the way we operationalise the concept of politics, I attempted to see politics in the way actors sell weapons, the spatiality of the fairgrounds and the way weapons become part of an embodied experience when they are held or tried out.

I looked at performances that were spatial, such as demonstrations at the security fair that showcased Israeli soldiers, security equipment and technologies and weaponry, portraying each as the very best on offer. Such demonstrations are political performances communicating the message that Israel and its soldiers (and thus its military efforts) are examples that other nations can learn from. I further investigated different products and the way they were marketed and sold at fairs. I showed how nation-branding messages and deeply orientalist notions of us vs them were performed through the way weapons were presented visually and materially and also through embodiment – by letting clients hold and feel the weapons or vehicles on sale. I also looked at different actors and the different roles, narratives and uniforms that signified who and/or what they represented. Here, politics were performed through the identities of the actors and their (military) capital, their experience and their status, accompanied by sanitised speech about Israeli security products.

Importantly, such performances are embedded in colonialist and orientalist logics that I traced back to historical world's fairs where nations were branded as technologically superior. When looking at the Israeli security industry and its colonial heritage, we see the development of weapons and technologies within the occupation of Palestine and the subsequent selling of these same weapons globally as a well-known colonialist practice. The politics performed at the fair were characterised by depoliticisation; at such fairs, only the success story of Israeli security is told, while the political reality outside of the fair – which is instrumental to the development of the products for sale inside – is erased. This makes the fairs bloodless, exciting spaces characterised by the complete neutralisation of problematic or controversial issues related to Israel's engagement in the world, such as the occupation of Palestinian lands and the continuous attacks on the Gaza strip – both locations research and testing grounds for the weapons and products that Israel sells at the security fair.

Notes

1. The names of the conferences are prone to change over the years, here I have used the names as they were during the time of my research.
2. Blue also generates positive emotions in clients and is often used in business branding for this reason (Chan and Park 2015).
3. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-female-israeli-combat-soldier-proudly-models-for-weapons-companies/> accessed 23 March 2022
4. Skunk is a very foul-smelling liquid developed by an Israeli company. It was originally used to break up protests in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and today, it is also used against civilian populations in other countries. See <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/10/9/israel-uses-skunk-on-palestinians-but-what-is-it.html> accessed 15 January 2021.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35869985> accessed 9 June 2021.

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ORCID

Erella Grassiani  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0722-400X>

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