

Research Article

Bordering Beyond Borders: A Governmentality Analysis of Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders and Israel's Externalisation of Asylum Policy

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Abstract

This paper analyses how Australia and Israel transform deterrence into an ethical means of moral control; it investigates how these nations are using the concept of "care" in order to rationalise their strict border management practices. Through its analysis of Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders and Israel's externalisation policies, this paper demonstrates how the act of coercion can be disguised as compassionate action, and exclusionary actions are portrayed as protective actions. This paper utilises the theoretical framework of Foucauldian governmentality to illustrate how the Australian and Israeli governments utilise moral reasoning to govern asylum seekers; they merge authority with empathy, and both appear to be one and the same. Furthermore, this paper illustrates that while deterrence may work through physical force, it also works by the notion that controlling movement is an ethically responsible obligation. Both instances demonstrate how morality is used as a mechanism of power and how humanitarian language serves as an exclusionary device. Thus, by demonstrating how such practices occur, this paper aids in explaining how the discourse of care has become a core aspect of the global governance of mobility.

Keywords: Governmentality, Operation Sovereign Borders, Externalisation, Asylum Seekers, Deterrence, Australia, Israel

I. Introduction

The sea has long been a source of promise and rejection. For those fleeing danger, it prompts hope of safety, but so often the hope ends in rejection. In recent years, governments have taken that contradiction and made it official policy. There are words of compassion, reasonableness, and obligation to save lives, but so often these words disguise control. This pattern emerges all too clearly in Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders and in Israel's relation to its African asylum seekers. Both profess moral purpose while engaging in deterrence.

Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders was initiated in 2013 with the idea of nullifying the advantage of boats traversing the oceans and carrying asylum seekers (van Berlo, 2015). The military, immigration agencies, and border authority were placed under one command, given the purpose of stemming deaths at sea. Israel, on the other hand, signed "voluntary departure" agreements with Rwanda and Uganda, calling it humanitarian expressed as relocation (Birger et al., 2018). The various emphases differ, but all bend coercion into care. They depend on moral reasonings in their guard of sovereignty but exclude others.

Despite their differences in geography, identity, and history, Australia and Israel deploy remarkably similar discursive strategies when justifying deterrence. Both governments frame restrictive border practices as necessary acts of protection that are carried out in the name of compassion and responsibility. In each case, humanitarian language softens the appearance of coercion, transforming interdiction at sea or removal to third countries into measures portrayed as humane solutions rather than exclusion. By tracing how



moral language operates within these policies, the study positions Australia and Israel not as separate cases but as parallel examples within a broader pattern of moral governance directed at asylum seekers. This comparative approach highlights that deterrence today is mediated through the language of care and that the border has become a site where compassion and control are fused.

This article will submit the idea of Michel Foucault's governmentality as a satisfactory explanation of the way in which states govern through moral reason. The term governmentality refers to the way in which the state has a monopoly on direct governing through force but controls through norms and persuasion (Foucault, 1991). It shows that moral eloquence can be a weapon of power, that compassion can be a result of governing (Fassin, 2011). When states mix verbal morality and nominal bureaucracy, they gain legitimacy among one another insofar as they are supposed to care. In immigration policy, this is the process whereby deterrence can be metamorphosed into moral governmentality (Bigo, 2002).

II. Literature Review

Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality has helped us understand how power can be exercised through the use of everyday forms of thinking and behavior rather than just law or the application of physical force; he defined governmentality as the "conduct of conduct," which is the ability to guide how individuals conduct themselves (Foucault, 1991). The focus of governmentality is how certain forms of thought create the appearance of legitimate and moral forms of control. In today's modern societies, governmentality is exercised through the

encouragement of self-discipline and responsibility, along with an alignment with a particular state agenda. Therefore, power is at its most effective when individuals perceive that they are making free choices and doing the "right" thing while still being governed (Foucault, 1991).

Governmentality is useful for understanding how migration control functions. Governments often frame restrictive policy initiatives as both morally imperative (for example, as humanitarian) and necessary (for example, as a means of maintaining national security). As Lemke (2002) points out, governmentality links moral thinking to political action and converts ethics into a tool for governing. Additionally, the use of moral language provides governments with a way to justify the act of excluding migrants from a country. Bigo (2002) terms this "a governmentality of unease," where fear and risk management are performed in the guise of protection. Furthermore, Fassin's term "humanitarian governmentality" illustrates how compassion itself is a mechanism of control, and when states articulate policies as a means of protecting lives and alleviating suffering, coercion is framed as care, and the state gains moral authority (Fassin, 2011).

Through governmentality, this research demonstrates how Australia and Israel have constructed deterrence in a manner that appears to be moral and ethical. Rather than viewing their border policies as unique or reactive, governmentality allows researchers to view these policies as an extension of a rational system that combines administrative, security, and moral reasoning. Both Australia and Israel establish legitimacy



by portraying exclusion as protection and control as compassion, and governmentality allows researchers to demonstrate the moral reasoning underlying these policies that sustains authority.

Additionally, governmentality facilitates comparative case studies. It does so by examining similar logics that underlie both cases, and not through geography or institutional frameworks. Therefore, researchers are able to examine the similarities in the reasoning that underlie Australia's sea-based deterrence and Israel's externalization agreements, and demonstrate how both are based upon similar reasoning regarding the governance of mobility. Finally, through this theoretical framework, governmentality allows researchers to not only demonstrate what these policies do but also provide insight into why they appear to be justified to those who develop and implement them.

III. Methodology & Data

This paper studies the field through qualitative textual and discursive analyses, as gained through government utterances, government legislation, academic writing, and evidence of asylum seekers. It studies connotation rather than denotation, with the view of gaining meaning on how the elocution of humanitarianism and security gives cover for deterrence. The argument of the paper is that both Australia and Israel are engaged in governmentality outside their respective borders. Their moral elocution attracts valid authority, whereas coercive solutions are made to appear responsible.

The analysis draws on recurring themes found across the texts, including moral

justification, deterrence framing, responsibility narratives, and humanitarian language. Policy documents such as Operation Sovereign Borders briefings, amendments to Israel's Prevention of Infiltration Law, voluntary departure agreements, and official press statements are examined alongside independent reports, academic scholarship, and testimonies from asylum seekers. These materials are read not only for their explicit content, but for the ways they construct asylum seekers as subjects of protection or exclusion and align state interests with moral virtue. In doing so, the research uncovers how deterrence becomes articulated as care within differing legal and political environments.

The comparative component of the study is conducted through cross-reading rather than being treated as two separate case descriptions. Similarities are identified through shared rationalities of moral governance, and differences through institutional and historical contexts that shape how control is implemented. This approach is later illustrated through a comparative table that highlights patterns of convergence and divergence, demonstrating how both countries use humanitarian reasoning to justify exclusion, even through distinct mechanisms. In doing so, comparison becomes direct and visible within the analysis, showing that Australia and Israel are linked not by geography, but through a common governmental logic of deterrence presented as moral responsibility.

IV. Discussion

a. Australia: Operation Sovereign Borders

Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB), Australia's border enforcement agency since 2013, is much more than a border control



agency. Rather, it is a model of how a government transforms control into care. The government created OSB to be portrayed as a humanitarian response to stop illegal boat arrivals. The stated goals were to "save lives," "restore order," and "protect the country's borders." However, beneath the surface of this narrative is how deterrence has been transformed into moral governance. Using a military command structure, secrecy, and appeals to compassion, the Australian Government has effectively transformed coercive policies into policies of kindness (van Berlo, 2015).

From its inception, morality has provided the framework for the operational logic of OSB. The "No Advantage Principle," which was implemented in 2012, established the moral basis for the policy; the principle established that those arriving by boat would not receive any advantages over those who were waiting in offshore processing camps. According to Brown (2016), this was a transformation from restriction to fairness, and also suggested that the use of deterrence was not cruel but rather fair. Similarly, Ibekwe (2021) argues that when the Australian Government referred to its efforts as "saving lives at sea," it created another example of how interdiction could be framed as compassionate and, therefore, how the turning away of boats could be framed as protective rather than exclusionary. Thus, within the story of OSB, the prohibition on arrivals became an act of rescue.

The organizational structure of OSB also contributed to the framing of its mission as a humanitarian endeavor. The operation is managed jointly between the military and civilian authorities, which allowed the Australian Government to place the

management of immigration within the purview of national defense. This enabled the government to maintain close control over the process and keep it secret. Van Berlo (2015) states that the Australian Government maintained a balance between "public panic" and "quiet maneuvering" to allow it to maintain public fear of unregulated borders while conducting the deterrent measures in a quiet and secretive manner behind bureaucratic processes. Kampmark (2017) further argues that the utilization of military authority allowed the government to conceal information regarding the details of the process in the name of national security, thereby preventing scrutiny of the process. Although the government utilized secrecy in implementing OSB, it has continuously spoken of the need to display compassion and fairness. Therefore, OSB used both fear and empathy to manage populations through the use of moralistic language.

Using the theoretical framework of governmentality, it can be seen that OSB demonstrates how morality can serve as a form of power. Citizens are socialized to view border control as a moral obligation, while asylum seekers are socialized to believe that their exclusion is due to their own decision-making. Furthermore, according to Ann Martin (2025), in this type of environment, sovereignty is more about defending national virtue than about protecting national territory. In essence, OSB represents a broader trend in governmentality where care and coercion become indistinguishable from each other. By describing its actions as being done to "save lives," the Australian Government legitimized its policies that deny asylum seekers access to safety. Ultimately, the control of individuals by



the state takes the form and meaning of compassion.

b. Comparative Discussion: Bordering Beyond Borders

Although Australia and Israel differ significantly in geography, history, and security environments, both countries rely on a similar moral logic when governing asylum seekers. Each state uses humanitarian narratives to frame deterrence as an ethical responsibility, transforming coercive measures into practices of care. Australia employs a military model to justify maritime interdiction, while Israel relies on bureaucratic pressure and legal categories to control mobility. These different tools produce the same effect: exclusion is presented as protection, and responsibility becomes a rationale for denying access. By placing the two cases side by side, the comparative nature of this study becomes clear, revealing that their approaches are not isolated national strategies but examples of a shared mode of governing through moral reasoning.

At first sight, there appears to be little in common between Australia and Israel: one, a great island continent surrounded by ocean; the other, a tiny state wracked by long-standing conflict and narrow borders. But their attitude towards refugees reveals a common logic. They both use morality as a language of control. They purport to save lives and protect fairness and national integrity, but what underlies those claims is a much more fundamental exercise of power. The Australian Operation Sovereign Borders and the Israeli externalization contracts both depend on humanitarian discourses that change coercion into care. This governmentality, as Foucault (1991) called it, is the practice of governance

by means of norms and persuasion rather than force. In both instances, deterrence works not merely by movements being prevented but by citizens being taught what it is to be good, safe, and civil.

This governmentality has a similar aspect to morality. Australia enacts it through military operations and secrecy. Israel carries it into effect through bureaucracy and law. Both shift their border practices away from the public gaze to which they were initially exposed, by offshore detention and by third-country transfers. Van Berlo (2015) and Birger et al. (2018) show that the externalisation of control makes deterrence seem humane because its harshness is concealed. Each government defends exclusion under the aegis of a moral script: “saving lives at sea” in the one and “voluntary departure” in the other. Through these narratives, the moral necessity of deterrence perpetuates the notion of national virtue.



Dimension	Australia	Israel	Comparative Insight
Primary moral narrative	"Saving lives at sea" is presented as protection	"Voluntary departure" framed as individual choice	Both transform coercion into a form of care
Operational mechanism	Military interdiction, maritime turnbacks, secrecy	Bureaucratic pressure, legal categorisation as "infiltrators."	Different tools but similar logic of managing mobility
Mode of coercive soft power	Turnbacks justified as preventing harm	Forced "voluntariness" justified as humanitarian relocation	Soft power relies on moral reasoning in both cases
Visibility of deterrence	Offshore detention and classified operations reduce public scrutiny	Third-country transfers and administrative processes occur out of view	Deterrence is relocated away from the national public
Governmentality technique	Encourages self-blame and personal responsibility among asylum seekers	Normalises consent through legal procedures and language of choice	Both reshape behaviour through moralised governance
Outcome of the policy	Exclusion reframed as protection of life and order	Exclusion reframed as responsibility and moral compliance	Exclusion appears ethical in both national narratives

Table 1. Comparative Features of Moralised Governmentality in Australia and Israel

Source: Author's analysis

The table illustrates how Australia and Israel employ different institutional tools yet arrive at the same moralised logic of deterrence. Australia relies on military operations, secrecy, and a narrative of saving lives, while Israel uses legal classifications, administrative pressure, and the language of personal choice. Both states relocate the most coercive elements of their policies away from public view, and both justify exclusion through claims of compassion and responsibility. These similarities demonstrate that coercive soft power is not produced through force alone, but through moral reasoning that frames

exclusion as ethical protection. When examined side by side, the two cases reveal a shared mode of governing mobility in which governmentality is expressed through moral claims that reshape how asylum seekers and citizens interpret responsibility, safety, and belonging.

The moral aspects of the various systems arise from differing histories, but each in practice attains the same results. Australia's past as a settler-colonial country is still glorified, yet rooted in a belief in sovereignty as both territorial and moral obligation remains deeply influential. Ann Martin (2025) notes that border control in Australia is often depicted as cleansing and protective, a mode of restoring order. In Israel, moralisation is allied to an ethnocentric state functioning to give Israeli identity an ethnic or Jewish form. Yaron et al. (2013) show that the label "infiltrator" serves not merely as a legal term but as a moral dividing point discriminating between the deserving and the undeserving. In each society, deterrence serves to disclose who belongs and who does not.

What ties these instances together and spreads this moralising governmentality across boundaries is another fact. Brown (2016) notes that the Australian system of deterrence has been adopted by other states, including Israel, so that those states as well have been encouraged to represent exclusion as a responsibility. This shows that deterrence has become a shared political language, no longer merely a means of preventing movement but one of moral order. Acts of resistance, such as the testimony of asylum seekers and the work of civil rights groups, expose the suffering concealed beneath this narrative. Yet the endurance of these policies suggests the degree to which the moral



justification of deterrence has become embedded in modern systems of power. Australia and Israel show that these boundaries are no longer mere physical delineations but moral frontiers, where compassion and control converge.

VI. Conclusion

The first step in this research was to understand how power works when it uses the language of care. This was achieved using governmentality, as well as showing that deterrents on both sides of the border were a moral issue for both Australia and Israel. Each country takes compassion and converts it into a method of governance; control looks like responsibility, with each country teaching citizens and asylum seekers that exclusion could be virtuous and that security and morality go hand in hand.

Governmentality is an effective means of revealing what is concealed within these narratives. It allows the analysis to show how moral reasoning functions as a technique of power that shapes how individuals understand danger, duty, and belonging. Australia uses "saving lives at sea" as the justification to transform deterrence into protection. Similarly, Israel transforms "voluntary departure" into a means of allowing the individual to make a personal decision about whether or not they wish to leave their home. While neither example is a slip of the tongue, they represent two methods of governing that allow the state to claim that control is not being used while maintaining a veneer of humanity. What sustains the continued use of deterrence is not only the coercive capacity of the state but also the belief that harm can be morally justified when it is framed as a protective act.

In addition, viewing these examples through a governmentality perspective illustrates how far-reaching the influence of these ideas has become. The rationale behind Operation Sovereign Borders can also be seen in Israel's externalisation arrangements and in the practices adopted by several other states. Deterrence has developed into a shared form of governance, and its spread occurs based upon moral rationales rather than geographic location. Deterrence operates not only at borders but in laws, in institutions, and in the day-to-day rhetoric of ethics.

A primary lesson from these examples is that moralized governmentality does not merely cover up coercion under a veil of compassion; rather, it transforms compassion into the mechanism of coercion. As such, when the act of saving lives is transformed into the rationale to close borders, humanitarianism becomes a subtle yet effective means of control. The importance of recognizing this transformation cannot be overstated. Only by understanding how morality has been incorporated into the mechanisms of deterrence will it be possible to envision a different type of protection, one that separates care from control.

Taken together, the findings from Australia and Israel show that deterrence operates through a shared moral framework that presents exclusion as an act of protection. Although the two countries employ different mechanisms, each relies on the same rationality that converts control into responsibility and transforms coercion into care. This study demonstrates that governmentality is central to understanding why these policies appear justified both to policymakers and to the public. It also shows that contemporary border governance is



shaped by moral narratives that influence how safety, virtue, and belonging are defined. Recognising this dynamic is essential for understanding the global reach of moralised deterrence and for imagining forms of protection that do not rely on the fusion of care and control.

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