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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# The Banality of Normalisation: The Desecuritisation of Israel's Aggrandisement in the Middle East

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## ABSTRACT

The United States (US)-orchestrated diplomatic integration of Israel in the Arab region, despite the continuous expansion of Israeli settler colonialism and violation of Palestinian and Arab sovereignty, is a paradigmatic example of how the politics of 'normalisation' serves as a tool for reordering space. The analysis offered here challenges dominant realist and liberal explanations – emphasising either interest-driven foreign policy or regional cooperation as a path to peace – by introducing the concept of 'desecuritisation without an audience'. Drawing on critical uses of Securitisation Theory (ST), it argues that 'normalisation' is not about persuasion of publics, but rather elite-driven transactionalism to bypass them. This process reflects a broader erosion of the notion of sovereignty as 'responsibility', where state policies openly serve the logic of capital without even the pretence of seeking popular legitimacy. A historical examination of the securitisation and desecuritisation of Israel by Arab states highlights a fundamental transition from alignment with Pan-Arabism and anti-colonial solidarity towards elite-driven transactionalism. This shift has further alienated Arab publics, sparking cycles of resistance against the ongoing erasure of Palestine. A conceptualisation of 'normalisation' within the logic of racial capitalism exposes how 'normalisation' facilitates Israel's settler-colonial expansion and suppression of indigenous political visions, ultimately undermining regional stability rather than securing it.

## KEYWORDS

normalisation; securitisation theory; desecuritisation; transactionalism; imperialism; regional security; Middle East; Arab-Israeli relations

“No one will notice you, no one will ask about you. You are left alone to face your inevitable fate” – read a leaflet that Israeli forces dropped on Gaza on 20 March 2025, at the height of their genocidal war against the Palestinian people, further adding: “Neither the US nor Europe care about Gaza. Even your Arab states don’t care, they are now our allies, they provide us with money, weapons and oil. They only send you shrouds” (*The New Arab* 2025). These words exalt the impunity of Israel’s annihilation of Palestine as well as its embeddedness in the so-called ‘normalisation’ – the United States (US)-orchestrated formalisation of cooperation between Arab states and Israel. The purpose of this article is

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to theorise the mechanism behind this process, and assess its intrinsic and extrinsic consequences for Palestine, the region and beyond.

Prevailing discourse in academic and policy circles treats ‘normalisation’ as diplomatic *rapprochement* among previous foes. Yet the conditions, costs and distributional effects of making friends out of enemies remain obscure and insidious (Lemay-Hebert and Visoka 2022). To address this anomaly, I problematise the normalcy with which ‘normalisation’ is invoked in both discourse and praxis to uncover the politics behind it or, as we will see, the *exit from politics* that it entails. The empirical focus is on the US-led ‘normalisation’ of Israel in the Arab region, examining why Arab states have chosen to formalise ties with an expansionist state that continues to entrench the colonisation of Palestine and other Arab territories. Realist and liberal approaches offer the most plausible explanations for this process but fail to account for its sources and consequences. By emphasising the interest-driven character of Arab foreign policies (Fakhro 2024; Madani 2024; Schuetze 2024), realists argue that Arab states trade political recognition of Israel for security. Yet, Israel has repeatedly laid bare the ephemerality of the security and sovereignty of Arab states, regardless of their collaborationist posture. It has occupied and bombed countries, such as Syria or Qatar, that posed no threat to Israel but were, in fact, willing to cooperate or establish formal ties with it. Conversely, liberals are keen to celebrate cooperation between Arab states and Israel as a path to economic prosperity and ‘peace’ (Press-Barnathan 2006; Dannreuther 2011; Ross 2022) even as such ‘peace’ comes at the expense of the fundamental rights they claim to defend – a key element that supposedly distinguishes liberals from realists. Neither approach acknowledges historical experience – that diplomatic reconciliation without justice does not produce lasting stability, let alone ‘peace’ (Levine 2009). They also fail to explain why most Arab states have waited until 2020 to formalise their informal collaboration with Israel. Thus, the process of ‘normalisation’ is far more puzzling than is acknowledged.

I find that explaining this change requires a revision of the Copenhagen school’s securitisation theory (ST). I do so by introducing the concept of ‘desecuritisation without an audience’, which captures the neutralisation of publics in shaping state policy on existential questions, and its replacement by transactional elite rule and the arbitrariness it embodies. The concept reflects the effects of ‘transactionalism’ – an elitist *do ut des* logic of political behaviour, privileging private capitalist interests over politics, intended as the mediation of conflict among different actors/interests in society. I claim that transactionalism has cumulatively become the organising principle of the US empire and its relationship with allies or ‘tributaries’, imposing its vision of security in exchange for short-term elitist benefits. Conventionally, ‘desecuritisation’ refers to removing a threat from the realm of security and transporting it into the “ordinary public sphere” (Buzan *et al.* 1998, 29). Yet, for (de)securitisation to function, elites must first persuade citizens – ‘the audience’ – of the validity of their security assessments. By engaging dialectically with the concept of ‘audience’, I define ‘desecuritisation without an audience’ as the deconstruction of the threat without resolving its erstwhile causes, *ostentatiously* recalibrated according to arbitrary elitist preferences. Security policy is presented as *fait accompli* without a meaningful relation to popular sovereignty and imposed from above to preserve hierarchy and domination – especially, though not exclusively, in the Global South. To be sure, security has long been framed in the context of global hierarchies and imperial interventions (Huysmans 1998). What I show here is however an

epistemic shift in the production and socialisation of security: a consequence of the US's open repudiation of the post-1945 international normative order. It is a shift revealing the tributary nature of the US empire. In this context, security policies displace *norms*, *political visions* and indeed *people*, with the primary aim of suppressing all remaining forms of resistance to US imperialism. They render the biological, political and social lives of ordinary people more – not less – precarious. From this vantage point, the US strategy of Arab-Israeli 'normalisation' serves to erase existing geographies and replace them with an imaginary 'Middle East'. This reconfiguration of regional politics eliminates indigenous obstacles to Israel's settler colonial expansion in Palestine and beyond, subjugating the region and turning it into a US-Israeli imperial zone, imagined as a new marketplace centred around high-tech infrastructure, surveillance technology and militarism.

The argument unfolds in three parts. I begin by revising the concept of audience in ST, highlighting its growing obsolescence in an increasingly transactional world. I then situate 'normalisation' within the ascendancy of US tributary diplomacy and theorise it as 'desecuritisation without an audience'. Finally, I illustrate these ideological changes by distinguishing three stages of the 'normalisation' process, organised chronologically from the 1978 Israel-Egypt 'peace' settlement to the present day. These stages correspond to: (i) contradiction of, (ii) concurrence with and (iii) displacement of international law by transactionalism.

## Securitisation and the problem of the audience

ST rests on the relevance of the 'audience'. Elites produce 'speech acts' to elevate a normal phenomenon into a security threat and manufacture consent for exceptional measures to address it. To make or unmake a threat, the political community – 'the audience' – needs to first accept it (Buzan *et al.* 1998, 25). Yet, the operation of this mechanism is not self-evident, as second-generation securitisation scholars reveal. Lene Hansen (2000), for example, emphasises the plurality of audiences. Plural are also the mechanisms by which audiences participate in the securitisation process (Balzacq *et al.* 2016), as are their responses to the very same speech act (Aradau 2018). Crucially, there are audiences that contest (de)securitising discourses, even when the (de)securitisation process is successful (Febrica 2017; Côté 2016; Guild *et al.* 2011). But while the function of the audience has been questioned from multiple perspectives, little has been done to remedy it, especially as regards its criteria. This is not a minor flaw. If reservations about the role of the audience are taken seriously, "the Copenhagen School will [...] need to downplay either the performativity effects of the speech act or the inter-subjective nature of security" (McDonald 2008, 573).

The question, then, is whether ST can survive a demotion of the audience – which is also what lends this theory its elegance and explanatory power: the democratic premise of security policy. But this premise triggers an ontological idiosyncrasy: as securitisation scholars incidentally reveal, it is the elite that decides *what is security*. At best, publics can validate or protest its definition but have little control over it. This seems to be the root cause of what other scholars see as the irredeemably contested nature of security (Huysmans 1998), or its "exclusionary logic" (Aradau 2004, 371). It goes beyond the question of if and how far ST can be applied beyond liberal democracies (Kapur and

Mabon 2018; Wilkinson 2007; Bilgin 2011; Pratt and Rezk 2019). I am not dismissing here the different methods that different regimes apply to frame security in the public sphere. Rather, I am pointing to the acritical treatment by securitisation scholars of the way democratic regimes evoke normalcy and exceptionality, or mobilise propaganda and lies,<sup>1</sup> to mainstream racist, dehumanising practices at home and especially abroad (Williams 2015; Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020). At the same time, it is misleading to assume that autocratic leaders do not need popular legitimisation for their security policies, which rely on persuasion and propaganda alongside coercion (Boussalis *et al.* 2023; Tripp 2019; Ayubi 1996).

The conceptual frailty of the ‘audience’ lies not in identifying its composition, but in the unrivalled power of elites to placate publics – turning the normal into the abnormal, and the abnormal into the normal – in the realm of security and beyond. That audiences supporting the implementation/relaxation of security measures can be identified is not proof of the ‘intersubjective’ nature of security, when alternative visions of security are marginalised, ridiculed, suppressed and erased. I do not mean to dismiss the discursive nature of security policy but rather to rethink the relationship between discourse and security in context.

### ***The historical embeddedness of securitisation theory: Is ‘the audience’ still relevant in a transactional world?***

I engage with ST not for its intrinsic explanatory value, but for its embeddedness in a specific social context: the post-1945 order that elevated human rights to a core principle of the international legal and political architecture, subsequently reframing sovereignty as ‘responsibility’ (Peters 2009, 514). Sovereignty as responsibility resonated with historical demands of popular struggles for rights (Glanville 2011; Getachew 2016; Pison Hindawi 2022), but its contemporary reincarnation rendered violence in the name of security more costly to the reputation and standing of securitising actors. The exercise of sovereign power internally and externally came under pressure from public scrutiny and demands for transparency and accountability, forcing states to justify all public actions (Hesford 2011). Increasingly, security has been framed as the *alter ego* of justice (White 1985) – a conceptual shift traceable not only to the United Nations’ (UN) Charter, organs and treaties, but also to regional treaties<sup>2</sup> and national institutions, such as state-level ‘Ministries of Security and Justice’.<sup>3</sup> This normative turn laid the foundation for a renewed intellectual reflection on how security is constituted and how it relates to the pursuit of justice. ST emerged in this specific normative context – the triumph of liberal principles and institutions after the Cold War. Central to this framework is the role of the ‘audience’, grounded in the recognition of publicity as a tool of regulating relations in global society by sanctioning appropriate and deviant behaviour. The increasing relevance of publicity elevated consistency with shared norms as a key measure of legitimacy in state actions – if not a criterion of statehood itself (Macaj 2020).

<sup>1</sup>The supposed existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq that the US used to justify its invasion in 2003 and subsequent occupation was later dismissed as false.

<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, Article 3 (2) of the Treaty on European Union: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF).

<sup>3</sup>For instance, in Jamaica and the Netherlands.

The dismantling of the post-1945 order in which ST was born, I argue, has diminished its explanatory power. The open transgression of domestic and international norms by the US, combined with a reshuffling of its alliances, is undermining the internal pillars of the existing normative order and facilitating the work of external challenges. Open attacks on the institutionalised expression of international norms – such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), or UN Special Rapporteurs like Francesca Albanese, who exposed the catastrophic transgression of supposedly ‘liberal’ norms by US-backed Israel, including apartheid, extermination and genocide – is a dramatic illustration of the end of a normative era (United Nations 2025). The US no longer pretends to act as a benevolent ‘hegemon’. What is laid bare in its most naked form is the transactional and tributary character of American imperialism. This is an ‘informal’ hierarchical system where the US offers its partners – or ‘tributaries’ – “military protection [and] economic access to its markets” in exchange for recognition of its “hegemony” and emulation of “its political forms and ideas” (Khong 2013, 1-2). Liberals scholars and politicians have long attempted to obscure the tributary nature of US domination by spreading a mystifying discourse of ‘rules-based international order’ – a system parallel to international law and institutions, yet preserving a liberal façade (Dugard 2023). But the sustainability of such a system necessitates the neutralisation and dismantling of all norms and institutions that constrain arbitrary power, where exposing inconsistency with shared norms becomes meaningless, if not entirely impossible, as a tool of the powerless to resist domination by the powerful (Macaj 2020). In Yuen Khong’s (2013, 15) view, the US tributary system is fuelled by US exceptionalism, where tributary recognition and emulation of US ‘greatness’ sustains the system. What I observe is that in our age of ‘too late capitalism’ (Kornbluh 2024) the tributary system is sustained by transactionalism without moral pretensions. Mendacity suffices to ‘get things done’ (Bear 2024), making the system arbitrary, coercive and ultimately, unstable. Herein lies its banality. Tributary recognition of US supremacy is perfunctory, resembling insincere flattery to an insecure emperor rather than adherence to a power cosmology. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s (NATO) Secretary-General Mark Rutte’s text message to US President Trump in 2025, praising his ‘courage’ for illegally bombing Iran and forcing European countries to increase their military contribution to NATO offers a telling illustration. Not only was the text message written in the language of performative self-subjugation and received by global publics as tragicomic. Trump also publicised a supposedly confidential message, flaunting disdain for confidentiality and redefining the most basic norms of diplomacy, even toward supposed long-time ‘allies’ (Calculli and Macaj 2025). The transmutation of US imperialism has elevated transactionalism to a policy principle (Bashirov and Yilmaz 2020; Spatz *et al.* 2021; Coates Ulrichsen 2025). We can observe its proliferation in the systematic selectivity of liberal democracies (Huber *et al.* 2025). Even European Union (EU) institutions and member states, for whom commitment to international law and human rights is central to their identity, have openly embraced “crass transactionalism” (Macaj 2025, 208), in a move towards a “reactionary international society” (Michelsen *et al.* 2025, 3). This reflects a transactional world in which private actors defending corporate interests face no meaningful constraints in shaping public policy to serve their own agendas from institutions that represent popular sovereignty. Transactional dealings are premised on ‘disintermediation’ – or the removal of all mediating institutions and norms – to produce *immediate* results (Kornbluh 2024). This is a collapsing normative

order that is hostile to the role of what securitisation scholars call ‘the audience’ as a historical subject and analytical concept.

### US tributary diplomacy and normalisation: ‘desecuritisation without an audience’ in three acts

Transactionalism disfigures the most basic forms of political mediation, including diplomacy – an ancient institution traditionally based upon the principle of honouring one’s word, even among enemies (Sartori 2002, 125). It reduces diplomacy to the art of ‘getting things done’ without qualification, where efficiency becomes a veil for duplicity or deceit. It makes no distinction between allies or foes: whether the US greenlights airstrikes on Iran in the midst of negotiating with Tehran to extract further concessions, or impels NATO members to raise their military spending under threat of reprisal, or coerces Arab states to sign normalisation deals with Israel, they are all ‘tributary subjects’. Only resistance makes a difference. The US’s pursuit of Arab-Israeli ‘normalisation’ epitomises this logic. Its goal is to obtain formal recognition of Israel by Arab states, bulldozing over the grievances that have motivated nonrecognition thus far, not to mention the Palestinian right to self-determination. By imposing bilateral deals, the US has deliberately neutralised the UN legal framework to rehabilitate Israel at a time when its transgression of basic norms of humanity has reached the zenith since its creation in 1948. What passes as ‘normalisation’ is a process of rendering an aberration normal and resistance to it abnormal: an effort to remove every obstacle to Zionist aggrandisement under the aegis of US empire, packaged as ‘Middle East security’. It is *hic et nunc* subjugation, without promise of future reward or the liberal pretence of ‘winning hearts and minds’ to disguise colonisation as legitimate (Owens 2015). Banal transactionalism dispenses with people and their sovereignty, injecting a radical anomia into the social contract. This is an exemplary form of what desecuritisation without societal mediation – or *without an audience* – looks like.

The US-brokered bilateral deals between Israel and Arab states illustrate the incremental elevation of transactionalism as the preferred method for making the world safe for American imperialism and Israeli expansionism. It reveals how a politics of erasure is presented as hope of salvation, displacing *norms*, *political visions* and, ultimately, *people*, physically relocating or exterminating those who resist so-called ‘normalisation’ and defend their land and heritage. This process unfolds across three critical junctures of ‘normalisation’, charting the eclipse of international law by transactional diktat:

- (i) *Contravention of international law* (1978-91): as illustrated by the 1978 US-brokered Israeli-Egypt ‘peace deal’.
- (ii) *Competition with international law* (1991-2000): from the start of the Oslo process to the failure of the 2000 Camp David agreement.
- (iii) *Dislocation of international law* (2001-present): from the start of the US global ‘war on terror’ to the Abraham Accords, expanding amidst the acceleration of the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people since October 2023.

Taken together, these three periods reveal the gradual transformation of transactionalism from an informal practice into an official principle – from a *modus operandi* that

coexisted alongside the post-1945 normative order to the preferred method of imperial rule at present.

### ***Arab-Israeli relations after the creation of the UN (1950-70s)***

The overwhelming majority of Arab states rejected UN Resolution 181 (1947) which established Israel in historic Palestine and relegated Palestinians to a regime of “legal subalternity” (Imseis 2021, 2). Yet, this formal rejection coexisted with informal arrangements. From the early 1950s, the US worked covertly to coopt Arab elites, especially in the oil-rich Gulf (Labelle 2011, 265). The aim was to ensure that the US “could support Israel and still extract oil from the region” (Makdisi 2011, 207). Publicly, however, from the 1950s through the 1970s, Arab elites presented Palestine as a red line; they overcame their rivalries to mobilise international law in defence of Palestine (Huber 2021, 48-9) – for instance by preserving the special status of Jerusalem at the UN (Howard 1953). In 1951, the Arab League established its Central Boycott Office in Damascus to blacklist Israeli and US products. These measures reflected not only diplomatic coordination, but also sustained popular pressure: mass mobilisation, organised domestically and transnationally by Arab nationalists and other anti-imperialist currents, demanded liberation from imperialism and equality of rights. This dynamic extended beyond traditional strongholds of Arabism, such as Egypt and Syria, to countries like Kuwait, where civil society mobilised vigorously for Palestine, and Saudi Arabia, where the regime, facing public anger, encouraged popular protests during the 1967 war – ranging from Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) worker strikes to coordinated attacks on properties of US and UK nationals on Saudi soil (Zahlan 2009, 37-41). After the Arab defeat in the 1967 *naksa*, Arab leaders convened in Khartoum and pledged that they would not unilaterally: (i) sign a peace deal, (ii) recognise or (iii) enter negotiations with Israel. At the same time, Arab ministers proclaimed an oil embargo against countries supporting the “aggression against the sovereignty or territory or territorial waters of any Arab state” (quoted in Daoudi and Dajani 1984, 67). This included: “(i) Direct armed aggression on the part of any state in support of Israel; (ii) Provision of military assistance to the enemy in any form whatsoever; and (iii) Attempts to secure the passage of commercial vessels through the Gulf of Aqaba under military protection of whatever form” (Ibid). Regardless of their effectiveness, the significance of the 1967 and 1973 oil embargoes lay in their reliance on the UN Charter as their main justification. The appeal to international law was part of a broader Third-Worldist struggle for equality and recognition within international society (Vieira 2016). More fundamentally, it aligned with popular demands. To say it otherwise, liberationism offered the ideological frame bounding Arab ‘audiences’ to their leaders in the collective securitisation of Israeli colonialism.

### ***Contravention (1978-91): the formalisation of transactionalism after Camp David***

The US strategy to subjugate the Arab states and integrate Israel as an ostensibly ‘organic’ regional actor, concealing its settler-colonial origin, was centred on the military and ideological neutralisation of Egypt as the most populous and powerful Arab country. Apart

from being the powerhouse of Arab nationalism, Egypt shared a border with Israel and was a major sponsor of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). Under Anwar Sadat, the US persuaded Egypt to liberalise its economy through the *infitah* policies (Joya 2020, 37-67), effectively undoing the socialist reforms introduced by Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s. However, rather than delivering the promised export-led growth and attracting foreign investments, these policies left Egypt grappling with hyperinflation, unemployment and a series of strikes between 1974 and 1977, culminating in the famous ‘bread riots’ (Ibid). Sadat’s deeply unpopular reforms increased his dependency – internally on the economic elite and externally on the US. Exploiting this vulnerability, the US – especially through the brokerage of then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger – pressured Sadat into signing a peace deal with Israel in 1978, providing Egypt with an annual USD 1.3 billion in US military aid in exchange for breaking the Khartoum pan-Arab consensus (Kassem 2010, 50). As a result, even before the Camp David talks convened, Israel felt emboldened to invade Lebanon to break Palestinian resistance. But Sadat was so desperate that he not only excluded Palestine from the negotiations – he also agreed on ambiguous terms concerning Israel’s withdrawal from Sinai (Elaraby 2019). He consented to two separate agreements – one on Sinai and the other on Palestinian self-determination in the West Bank – to deliberately exclude the latter from the conditions for ‘peace’ (Ibid). This constituted a significant concession to Israel’s particular interpretation of UNSC resolution 242 (1967) – prohibiting the acquisition of territory by force – whereby Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin insisted that the resolution did not apply to the West Bank (Anziska 2018, 119). Predictably, shortly after Camp David, Begin announced on American TV that Israel would retain the West Bank and expand settlements (127). The deal thus formalised a unilateral deviation from the UN legal framework on Palestine. It also penetrated Egypt deeply, transforming the army into the workforce of private business for private benefit (Elgebeily 2022, 313; Marshall 2015, 5), purging it of high-ranking cadres committed to Arab nationalism, the defence of Egyptian sovereignty and the liberation of Palestine – what Nasser had once defined “a natural force of resistance” (Aclimandos 2014, 58).

Camp David represented the first formal desecuritisation of Israel’s colonialism. Sadat attempted to manufacture a domestic ‘audience’, receptive of the agreement through state-controlled media campaigns, based on two strategies: (i) the promotion of an ‘Egypt First’ (*Misr Awwal*) policy, at times questioning Egypt’s Arab identity, to marginalise the Pan-Arab cause; (ii) the construction of a discourse in which Egypt had exhausted all options to confront Israel, leaving ‘peace’ as the only viable alternative (Ibrahim 2010, 24-30). Sadat further promised that the accord would “bring prosperity to the Egyptians and justice to the Palestinians” (26). Yet, opposition was widespread. Nabil Elaraby, an Egyptian diplomat who took part in the Camp David delegation, captures the tension between Western narratives and local receptions of the deal:

Although President Sadat was hailed as a peacemaker [...] in the West, the reaction in the Arab World was searing. There were vocal protests against what was perceived as an abandonment of the Palestinian right to self-determination and the perpetuation of the Israeli occupation (Elaraby 2019).

Deeply unpopular domestically and regionally, Camp David precipitated Sadat’s assassination during a military parade in 1981. Opposition persisted under his successor, Hosni

Mubarak, with civil society pressuring the state not to play any mediation role between the US/Israel and Palestinian factions (El-Sayed 1989, 49). Arab states unanimously condemned Egypt for breaking Pan-Arab solidarity, leading to its suspension from the Arab League and the move of the League's headquarters from Cairo to Tunis. Egypt's regional leadership evaporated overnight. Palestinians protested at the UN, castigating Sadat's opportunism for granting Israel formal recognition without committing to end its unlawful occupation (United Nations 1978). In breaking pan-Arab solidarity, the US weakened the PLO and emboldened Israel to further expand settlements in Palestine and to invade and occupy South Lebanon in 1982. Despite US President Jimmy Carter's official announcement that Israel would halt settlements, Begin insisted *post facto* that "he only agreed to a three-month freeze [and] had never actually conceded the Israeli 'right' to build in the West Bank." (Anziska 2018, 127). The first *intifada*, which erupted in December 1987 to oppose Israel's colonial expansion, was a direct consequence of this chain of events, exposing a widening rupture between Arab leaders and their citizens. It triggered a new wave of Israel's brutal repression of Palestinians. Whilst Camp David sought to desecuritize Israel's expansionism, it failed to secure popular acquiescence.

The absence of an 'audience' ready to accept the equation between elitist economic advantages and the deflation of the Israeli threat to the region left an unstable *status quo* – or a "cold peace" (Sallam and Winter 2017) – requiring constant US brokerage. Nevertheless, the architects of Camp David in Washington and Tel Aviv succeeded in redrawing the Arab regional space, isolating Egypt, severing its embeddedness in the region and tethering its stability to an asymmetric dependency on US and Israeli imperialism. The US presented Camp David as a *model* for a "comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict" (Sayegh 1979, 3). In practice, however, this approach set a precedent for promoting unilateral transactional deals, revealing how Israel and the US could leverage their military and economic power to secure substantial political concessions from postcolonial elites.

### **Competition (1991-2000): the Oslo Process as the consolidation of transactional politics**

The end of the Cold War did not stop US constant warfare against its ideological rivals, such as the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, pursued through strategies of isolation and military intervention. At the same time, the US imposed 'peace agreements' on protracted civil wars in postcolonial states, bringing their economies into its sphere of influence, as evidenced by the US-brokered end to the Lebanese civil war and subsequent post-war economic reforms (Corm 2012, 269-70; Baumann 2016). The same logic shaped the so-called Arab-Israeli 'peace process'. The 1991 Madrid Conference, a seemingly multilateral scheme, merely signalled the beginning of bilateral negotiations between Israel and the PLO under direct US oversight – the so-called 'Oslo process'. The PLO was compelled to negotiate on terms that disfigured international law, reframing settlements – illegal under international law, as reaffirmed in 2024 by the International Court of Justice (2024) – as 'disputed territories' (Said 1993). The shift of terminology from 'occupation' to 'dispute' constructed a "new mental framework" (Zreik 2003, 42), facilitating the shared jurisdiction of the West Bank under Oslo I (1993) and Oslo II

(1999). The agreements did not prohibit the building of new Israeli settlements but sought to create a juridical exception to Art. 49 of the ‘Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilians’, prohibiting the occupying power from “deport[ing] or transfer[ring] parts of its own civilian population into the territories it occupies”.<sup>4</sup> The Oslo Accords enabled Israel to challenge the illegality of settlements under the Geneva Convention (for an example of this legal reasoning, see Baker 2011). Such *ad hoc* transactional dealings contravened not only the spirit but also the letter of international law.

Breaking international law required an ideological justification, which the US pursued through the language of ‘development’ and ‘prosperity’ as the new vocabulary of ‘peace’ (Roy 1999). In the same spirit, Shimon Peres published *The New Middle East* in 1993, a book that envisioned ‘prosperity’ as the foundation of regional stability, with trade, industry and tourism promoted as substitutes to violence. This discourse was key to mobilise a global business community and embedding the neoliberal logic of the ‘peace industry’ in Palestine, artificially separating the economy from politics and promoting economic reforms without a political settlement (Haddad 2016, 57–9). Edward Said (1993) exposed the insidious logic behind these international investments, arguing that their actual goal was to protect Israel’s *de facto* colonisation through economic domination of Palestine. With Israel controlling over 80 per cent of the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians could not control their labour, manufacturing and export, even if a *de jure* independent Palestinian state emerged. The Oslo process further entrenched this asymmetry. Oslo I and Oslo II created the Palestinian Authority (PA) which recognised Israel within the 1967 borders, without receiving recognition of Palestinian sovereignty in return. Oslo also consolidated Israeli control over Palestinian finances, trade and taxation. Between 1993 and 1996, Palestinians lost USD 28 billion in export revenues. The seclusion of Gaza from the West Bank reduced intra-Palestinian trade from 50 per cent to 8 per cent within a decade (Gilani 2024). Unemployment rate increased up to 60 per cent when Israel cancelled a significant number of work and travel permits after the collapse of the Oslo process (Roy 1999). As Nur Arafah (2023) explains, the essential function of Oslo was the establishment of the PA as “an institution of indirect rule to which Israel outsourced its responsibilities for the occupied population, as direct rule over Palestinians was becoming financially and militarily very costly”, especially after the first *intifada*. In essence, the PA emerged as a political entity to which Israel transferred all sovereign responsibilities, whilst retaining all sovereign prerogatives. It displaced ‘self-determination’ as the normative and ideological tool that had once galvanised the PLO’s national liberation struggle, embedded in the principles of Arabism, the Non-Aligned movement and decolonisation.

Regionally, Oslo facilitated the 1994 bilateral Israel-Jordan peace deal. Although this settled a long-standing water dispute, Israel has continued to control all water resources and retains the power to cut off Jordan’s supply at will (Pernot 2023). To facilitate the conclusion of the agreement, the US promised to write off Jordan’s debt and provide aid and investments (Fakhro 2024, 34). Fearing popular backlash, the Jordanian government avoided public discussion of the agreement, presenting it *post facto* in what Allison Astorino-Courtois (1996) called “marketing peace”. This could be more accurately named ‘market-washing’: a ‘peace’ explicitly framed in cost/benefit terms to compensate

<sup>4</sup>The text of the Fourth Geneva Convention can be consulted here: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949>

for the Kingdom's abandonment of any pretence of Arab solidarity. Not only was Jordan's ruling class unable to cultivate a domestic 'audience' for the desecuritisation of Israel; it never even attempted to do so. It constructed the 'peace deal' as a transactional elite bargaining, stripped of politics. Unsurprisingly, fierce opposition emerged from below, reclaiming politics. Dissent primarily came from nationalists and Islamists (Lobell 2008, 92), with 70.5 per cent of Jordanians rejecting the peace deal in 1999 (Khashan 2000). Protests calling for the end of the 1994 agreement have continued in Jordan ever since and have intensified amidst Israel's genocidal war on Gaza in 2024 (Al-Khalidi 2024). The devastating effects of the Oslo process were further underscored by the collapse of the 2000 Camp David Summit and the outbreak of the second *intifada*. The popular uprising in Palestine was once again met with brutal Israeli repression and further settlement expansion. Between 1993 and 2023, the settler population more than quadrupled, rising from 169,000 to 700,000 (Imseis 2021, 197-8).

Israel's military response to the second *intifada* prompted Gulf countries to suspend further diplomatic overtures (Fakhro 2024, 37). At the same time, they sought to reinsert politics into the regional picture by reviving the 'Arab Peace Initiative', endorsed by the Arab League in Beirut in 2002. The initiative proposed a multilateral framework for normalising relations with Israel in exchange for its full withdrawal from occupied territories, a just settlement for the Palestinians and the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. However, Israel and the US ignored the proposal. Its political logic – anchored in multilateralism and legality – clashed with the US-Israeli strategy of 'economic normalisation without political settlement'. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu openly rejected the two-state solution, suggesting that "Palestinians give up their national aspirations and all forms of resistance in exchange for marginally improved economic arrangements" (48). In effect, the failure of Oslo entrenched transactionalism as a systematic feature of the US's *modus operandi* – a tributary diplomacy concealed under the veneer of neoliberal 'prosperity', avoiding open confrontation with international law, whilst constructing a parallel scheme under US exclusive supervision.

### ***Dislocation (2001-present): the road to the 'Abraham Accords' and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people***

In response to the 9/11 al-Qaeda attack in New York, the US launched a global 'war on terror' that further entrenched its role in the Middle East and beyond, reshaping relations with Arab states (Calculli 2019). The US persuaded Arab leaders of the need to procure advanced weaponry and surveillance technology – much of the latter produced by Israeli firms – to consolidate their regional status and quell internal dissent (Gordon 2009; Shezaf and Jacobson 2018; Zureik 2020). This move was accompanied by a reconfiguration of the 'Iranian threat', which incentivised key Gulf monarchies to pursue normalisation with Israel (Bianco 2020). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) pioneered this endeavour, initiating informal collaboration with Israeli private companies. To facilitate the process, the US approved the sale of 80 F-16 Falcons and 60 Mirage 2000-9s from Lockheed Martin in 2007 to the UAE, which simultaneously acquired new technologies for aerial imagery, intelligence and big data from Israeli firms (Fakhro 2024, 45). Israel became a model of high-tech surveillance garrison state, especially after the 2011 Arab Uprisings, where elites started treating protesters as existential threats (Tarvainen and

Challand 2024, 5). In 2021, the French non-profit media group ‘Forbidden Stories’ revealed that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Morocco and Bahrain had purchased the Pegasus spyware from the Israeli firm NSO Group, which had hacked into 50,000 phone numbers of activists, journalists and world leaders, including Emmanuel Macron (Amer 2021). This technology has allowed the UAE and Saudi Arabia to spy on dissidents like Emirati activist Ahmed Mansoor, imprisoned in 2017, or Saudi activist Jamal Khashoggi, brutally killed inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018 (Ibid). This elitist offensive on citizens not only prevented any basic form of socialisation of the notion of ‘security’; it excluded *a priori* the possibility of mobilising an ‘audience’ for it. Covert diplomacy became practically indistinguishable from covert business and paved the way for a new wave of normalisation deals.

The US played a key role in formalising the transition from shadow business deals to formal diplomacy, effectively collapsing the boundaries between the two, while Israeli CEOs operating covertly in Arab countries were praised as pioneers of normalisation in the Israeli press (Mandel 2020). Jared Kushner, President Trump’s son-in-law, founder of equity firm Affinity Partners and the architect of normalisation, embodies the centrality of the politics-business nexus. In his memoirs, he wrote: “In the Arab world politics is a family business [...]. As the son-in-law of the president and a former executive of a family business, I represent something that they found familiar and reassuring” (Kushner 2022, 70). In 2019, Affinity Partners attracted massive investments from Gulf sovereign wealth funds – most notably USD 2 billion from the Saudi Arabia Public Investment Fund. In 2024, during Israel’s genocidal war on Gaza, it attracted a further USD 1.5 billion from the Qatar Investment Authority and the Abu Dhabi-based asset manager Lunate (*Arabian Post* 2024). Kushner also authored the so-called ‘Deal of the Century’, revealed in January 2020 as a “peace to prosperity” plan for the emergence of a Palestinian state (The White House 2020). ‘Prosperity’ features 44 times in the 181-page report introducing the deal in conjunction with ‘peace’ or ‘security’. The report also repeatedly refers to a “realistic two states solution”, where ‘realistic’ functions as an implicit synonym for what Israel is willing to concede. This formulation effectively dismisses Israeli legal obligations under international law as ‘unrealistic’ and ‘unachievable’.<sup>5</sup> The plan aimed at formalising Israel’s annexation of 87 per cent of the occupied West Bank in exchange for developing “human capital, entrepreneurship and innovation, and small and medium businesses through investments and grants” promising to “more than double Palestinian gross domestic product”, create “over one million Palestinian jobs”, “reduce the Palestinian unemployment rate to nearly single digits” and “reduce the Palestinian poverty rate by 50 per cent” (Ibid). Besides this bombastic entrepreneurial language, the report mentions ‘justice’ only once - as negation. Among the PA’s obligations is the requirement to “[take] no action [and dismiss] all pending actions, against the State of Israel, the United States and any of their citizens before the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice and all other tribunals” (39). It is noteworthy that Arab states, including Jordan and Egypt, were believed “unable to say no to their US patron for fear of isolation or retribution,

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<sup>5</sup>Donald Trump had already paved the way for such a discursive shift when, with two presidential proclamations in 2017 and 2019, he unilaterally moved the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, proclaiming the latter as the ‘capital of Israel’ and recognising Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan.

especially when the Trump administration [was] offering financial rewards” (Bishara 2019). This is the essence of US tributary diplomacy.

The ‘Deal of the Century’ was not implemented but served as a test balloon for dismissing international law and establishing a new paradigm of political-deals-as-business-plans. In 2020, Kushner championed the Abraham Accords as a “vision of peace, security and prosperity in the Middle East and around the World” (US Department of State 2020). It consisted of a UAE-Israel peace deal and normalisation agreements between Israel and Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. Despite their multilateralist pretence, the Abraham Accords represented a series of bilateral agreements, negotiated directly by the US. The accords were designed to boost economic and financial relations, and the development of tourism and security cooperation between Israel and Arab countries (Ibid). Article 7 of the agreement focuses on the development of a ‘Strategic Agenda for the Middle East’, the rationale of which strengthens a US strategy, developed by the Obama presidency, to reduce US military role and costs by outsourcing imperial governance to partner-clients in the region (Calculli 2018). Upon signing the accords, Netanyahu announced a halt to settlement expansion in the West Bank – seemingly a condition set by the UAE for agreeing to the peace deal. However, settlement activity resumed only few months later, including in East Jerusalem, alongside multiple IDF raids on the Al-Aqsa compound (*Al Jazeera* 2021a). Following in Begin’s footsteps, the Netanyahu government ‘clarified’ *a posteriori* that a permanent cessation of settlements was never envisioned – only their ‘suspension’ (*Middle East Monitor* 2022). At best, this episode embarrassed the UAE, which summoned the Israeli ambassador (*The Cradle* 2022), while keeping the peace deal intact.

The transactional logic behind the Abraham Accords was more explicit in the case of Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco – three states locked into the normalisation process (Cafiero 2024). As for Sudan, the Trump administration rescinded its designation as a ‘state sponsor of Terrorism’. Sudan’s PM saluted the deal in the most unenthusiastic transactional terms, announcing that “Sudan [would] regain access to over USD 1 billion in annual financing from the World Bank for the first time in 27 years” (*Al Jazeera* 2021b). Similarly, Trump proclaimed US support for Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, which is claimed by the native Sahrawi people, to make the deal more palatable to the Moroccan kingdom. The Biden administration fully endorsed the Abraham Accords and refused to reverse Trump’s unlawful decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. Overall, the Abraham Accords have elevated transactionalism to a governing principle, pushing international law into oblivion.

US and Israeli leaders have continued to present the Abraham Accords as part of their vision for a ‘New Middle East’. In September 2023, Netanyahu displayed two maps to the UN General Assembly – one envisaging Israel as occupying the entirety of historic Palestine and naming only the countries that had signed the Abraham accords; one featuring the countries opposed to US diktats covered in black – Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (*The Times of Israel* 2023). As in previous instances of so-called ‘normalisation’, the Abraham Accords galvanised the Israeli establishment to alter the *status quo* in Jerusalem, leading to an increase in IDF incursions into Al-Aqsa mosque, as well as escalating violence against civilians across the occupied territories (*BBC* 2023). In parallel, the US pressured the PA to join the Abraham Accords. On 5 September 2023, the PA sent a delegation to Riyadh to discuss the issue, while Hamas reiterated its “unwavering position of rejecting

all forms of normalisation and contact with the Israeli occupation”, in light of the “damaging consequences [...] on the Palestinian people, their holy sites and their just cause” (*Middle East Monitor* 2023).

Ostensibly, the acceleration of normalisation plans triggered Hamas to carry out an extreme act: on 7 October 2023, 6,000 ‘Islamic resistance’ militants broke into Israel, assaulting civilians and soldiers in several areas adjacent to Gaza, killing 1,139 people, including 373 members of security forces, and taking 250 hostages – both civilians and soldiers – to the Gaza Strip. In response to this attack, Israel launched a war of annihilation and genocide (Amnesty International 2024). The total depopulation of Gaza has become Israel’s stated goal, coupled with mass displacement of Palestinians in the West Bank (Amnesty International 2025). Instead of condemning the forcible transfer of Palestinians – a crime against humanity – Kushner and Trump have publicly envisioned a Gaza cleared of its inhabitants as a ‘real estate business opportunity’, whilst pressuring neighbouring countries – especially Jordan and Egypt – to welcome Palestinians and collaborate in their deportation (Gedeon 2025). The US ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, declared that “the United States is no longer pursuing the goal of an independent Palestinian state”, negating entirely Palestinian self-determination, *contra* international law. He also presented Israel’s claim to the land as a necessity of space and size, stating: “Muslim countries have 644 times the amount of land that are controlled by Israel. So maybe, if there is such a desire for the Palestinian state, there would be someone who would say, we’d like to host it” (Ibid). Beyond the bizarre equation of Palestinians with Muslims, the US elevated the denial of the existence of the Palestinian people, their land and their right to self-determination to official policy.

Outside Palestine, Israel has expanded further by occupying parts of Lebanon in 2024 in violation of a US-brokered ceasefire deal with Hezbollah that stipulated Israel’s withdrawal in 60 days. Israel has since violated the so-called ‘ceasefire’ without pause, including by occupying areas of Lebanon it failed to capture during the war. Also, in addition to the Golan Heights (occupied since 1967), Israel has occupied more Syrian land in 2024, after destroying 80 per cent of its military capabilities following the fall of the Asad regime (Fabian and Staff 2024). Israel continues to bomb both Lebanon and Syria, imposing a neither-war-nor-peace reality. It has demanded, through the US envoy to the Middle East, that Lebanon demilitarise and ban Hezbollah, a member of the government – an endeavour the US and Israel have pursued for almost four decades without success, and something unlikely to happen without annihilating a significant part of Lebanon’s population and ostracising it from Lebanon’s body politic (Calculli 2025). Finally, Israel and the US launched airstrikes against Iran in June 2025, while the Trump administration was negotiating with Tehran over its nuclear programme and ballistic missile arsenal. *The Jerusalem Post* (2025) called on the US to “[f]orge a Middle East coalition for Iran’s partition”, echoing colonial fantasies of divide and rule, akin to the US-driven ‘federalisation’ of Iraq after 2003. Following these acts of aggression, Israeli Foreign Minister, Gideon Saar, declared Israel’s intention to “include Lebanon and Syria in the Abraham Accords”, whilst reiterating that the Golan Heights “will remain part of Israel” (Haddad 2025). At the request of the US, Syria’s new president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, expressed a favourable opinion on the proposal, whilst amending the Investment law and establishing a Sovereign Wealth Fund in

return for the removal of US sanctions (*The Syria Report* 2025). To add symbolic pressure to US tributary diplomacy, Israel displayed a gigantic image of the leaders who are part of the normalisation coalition' at Tel Aviv airport, featuring al-Sharaa among them, while in an interview with *Fox News* (2025), Trump said he was hoping "Iran could join the Abraham Accords" too.

The fog of lawlessness generated by the combination of US intimidation and pressure alongside Israel's military aggression is shaping the contours of the US-Israeli plan for a 'New Middle East'. Arab states are given the choice between voluntarily becoming tributaries or being demilitarised by force. It is a vision of the Middle East in which Israel would not only enjoy military supremacy – a condition it already enjoys – but effectively act as the *only* sovereign state. As of July 2025, Israel has killed nearly 62,000 Palestinians in Gaza – though the real number of victims is feared to be four times higher – and it has imposed a blockade of food, medicines and clean water. During the 2024 war on Lebanon, it mainly targeted civilian areas and infrastructure, killing 4,200 and displacing one million (OCHA 2025). The intensification of the Arab desecuritisation of Israel without any pretence of societal mediation – 'without an audience' – has produced an increase in criminalisation of solidarity with Palestine in Gulf states (*Middle East Eye* 2024). This is justified through a banal logic of 'prosperity'. Since the start of Israel's genocide in Gaza, trade between Israel and Abraham Accords signatories decreased only by 4 per cent, compared to an 18 per cent decrease in Israel's overall trade in 2024 (Abraham Accords Peace Institute 2024). This is 'Capital's genocide' as Sai Englert and Gargi Bhat-tacharyya (2024) have put it, while private companies are massively profiteering from it (United Nations 2025). More generally, the self-determination of Palestinians and Arabs is seen as an obstacle to the relentless 'capitalisation' of new spaces, that the US-Israeli imperial strategy is pursuing by centring militarism and high-tech surveillance as drivers of the global economy, locking not only Arab but also European states into its logic. Normalisation without political settlement has become a core European policy too, as the European Commission has allocated €18 million to "strengthen regional stability in support of the Abraham Accords" (European Parliament 2024). At the peak of Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza, when we would have expected political pressure and sanctions to compel Israel to abide by its legal obligations, we have instead witnessed the normalisation of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

That Arab popular support for 'normalisation' has been consistently irrelevant, as shown by the *Arab Barometer* (2025), should surprise no one. Arab mass mobilisation against 'normalisation' has only deepened, ranging from the 2011 Palestinian 'Unity intifada' (El Kurd 2021) to the coordinated civil society pressure in Gulf states (El Kurd 2023), to the catalysation of global solidarity with Palestine between 2024 and 2025. The accelerating Arab desecuritisation of Israel's expansionist project, going hand in hand with the revelation of the colonial logic behind it, is not the consequence of a socialised idea of security within Arab societies, as ST would predict. Not only does it rest on the explicit disenfranchisement of Arab people and repression of their visions of security; it is also premised on the reduction of Arab political leaders to mere executioners of US imperial diktats, bargaining only for their ephemeral survival in a US-Israeli imperial zone. It cannot contemplate an 'audience' in the terms posed by ST. The people of Palestine and other Arab countries are at best

presented with ‘deals’ concerning their very existence, drafted in closed rooms in Western capitals or Tel Aviv, without consulting them. To label these diktats ‘diplomatic negotiations’ is to indulge in the eclipse of international law by the resurrection of colonial diktats as a new ‘normal’. This is the essence of what ‘normalisation’ seeks to normalise. And it is here that the limits of ST are laid bare – in the gulf between the security of capitalist networks and ruling elites and the security of people in Palestine and everywhere else.

## Conclusion

“Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose”, Robert Cox wrote over four decades ago (1981, 128), highlighting how theory reflects ‘perspectives’ embedded in particular historical contexts. In this article, I have critiqued one of the most prominent theories of security – Securitisation Theory – by examining its limits at the end of the normative era that catalysed its thriving: the post-1945 international order, especially in its development after the Cold War. *Contra* ST, I argue that security is not intersubjectively constituted within a political community, but moulded by the dominant ideologies of ruling classes. Their capacity to mobilise ‘audiences’ to accept their security vision, without fracturing the body politic, depends on historical contingencies. The historical perspective helps locate the triumph of ST in the post-1945 order, its waning explicatory power in the gradual erosion of this order, and its progressive replacement by transactionalism – a process that displaces norms and political visions, as well as people who embody them.

Writing from the edges of this collapsing normative order, I have interrogated the banality of desecuritisising Israel in the Arab world at a time when Israel is not only committing genocide against the Palestinian people, but also simultaneously bombing neighbouring states and colonising their territories. I have shown that the desecuritisation of Israel’s aggrandisement reflects US/Western visions of ‘Middle East security’, grounded in the legacy of colonialism and racial capitalism – the *raison d’être* of the so-called ‘West’ and Israel as an extension of the West in the Levant. This vision is being imposed on Arab states, through transactional dealings and colonial diktats – what is called ‘normalisation’ – by excluding *a priori* Arab ‘audiences’, as such vision of ‘Middle East security’ rests on the production of their insecurity, through arbitrary oppression and subjugation. It is a ‘desecuritisation without an audience’ – a US-Israeli policy that recasts ‘peace’ as an elitist transactional arrangement granting ‘security’ and ‘stability’ to private firms and compliant/pacified facilitators of Israel’s aggrandisement, at the expense of the security, rights, aspirations and existence of indigenous peoples.

Spatially, this project is doomed to transform the Middle East from a space of contention among rival political visions into a monochromatic space where opposition to US-Israeli imperial expansion is violently repressed. ‘Normalisation’ conveys total intolerance for – and a determination to eradicate – political visions grounded in indigeneity and opposition to US imperialism. It is premised on rendering the Middle East as a de-ideologised and demilitarised zone under US-Israeli supremacy, turning the already fragile sovereign states of the region into unnamed entities, with no military and ideological power to resist Israel’s aggrandisement. However, whilst the entrepreneurs of ‘normalisation’ have recurrently sought to depoliticise the regional space, Palestinians

and their allies have systematically reclaimed it, disrupting the enterprise of market-washing an Orwellian ‘peace’ and putting into question its long-term sustainability.

## Notes on contributor

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