

A conversation between the sword and the neck: On censorship, colonialism and academic responsibility.

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Prologue

In May 2025, I withdrew a book review and a separate article from *al-Masāq: Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean*, published by Taylor & Francis, which focuses on cross-cultural dynamics in the premodern Mediterranean world. This decision was not made lightly, and I feel compelled to share the reasons behind it, especially at a time when many of us are grappling with how academia responds (or fails to respond) to the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

The Facts

The editor of *al-Masāq* refused to publish my review unless I deleted a short passage that referred to the Israeli colonial project and apartheid. The sentence which was demanded to be erased was:

“The chapter also discusses the Israeli publishing house Andalus, which translated Arabic literature to Hebrew. However, this is a residual cultural interest in Israeli society and unfortunately usually part of an agenda presenting both parts as equals, in an intent of whitewashing the Nakba (the catastrophe) and the Israeli colonial project and apartheid.”

This comment came in the context of reviewing a chapter from Eric Calderwood’s *On Earth or in Poems: The Many Lives of al-Andalus* (Harvard University Press, 2023), which discusses Andalus, an Israeli publishing house (2000-2009), which translated Arabic literature into Hebrew.¹ Founded by Yaël Lerer, the project invoked al-Andalus – the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule – as a model of coexistence and was intended as a response to Israeli racism and xenophobia, as well as a form of resistance to the

¹ The review appears in the next section of this volume.

occupation. Lerer, also a co-founder of the pro-Palestinian party Balad party, later became active in French politics, running in the 2024 legislative elections with the left-wing New Popular Front alongside Gazan-born Salam Ismail.² A supporter of Boycott from Within,³ resulting from the BDS movement,⁴ Lerer has condemned Israeli military operations in Gaza, which she has described as a ghetto under Israeli apartheid.⁵ She has also criticized the use of essentialist narratives linking all Palestinians to Hamas' homophobia and rejected the framing of criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic,⁶ practices associated with what has been termed pinkwashing and whitewashing of Israeli state policies, particularly in light of ongoing military operations against Gaza and the continued establishment of settlements considered illegal by the United Nations. My review highlighted the significance of this framing while also offering a critique of how presenting cultural initiatives like Andalus as exemplary can be co-opted into broader discourses that obscure systemic violence. For Calderwood, while projects such as Andalus are not entirely anomalous within Israel, they did run counter to the dominant Israeli politics of the 2000s, which prioritized the expansion of Israeli occupation. In this context, al-Andalus was also invoked by marginalized groups, such as the Mizrahim (Eastern Jews), as a counter-symbol—a response to the prevailing Ashkenazi-Zionist ideology that framed Israeli identity as exclusively Western (pp. 198–201).

The editor's response was that my sentence "implies questioning the existence of a state and can be seen as an incendiary attack on its citizens," and "simplify historical circumstance." The review would not be published unless that sentence was removed entirely. According to the editor, while individuals may hold "strong opinions," the journal could not publish such language "without any further context, where a strong opinion and perspective is seemingly presented as an acknowledged fact."

On censorship, colonialism and academic responsibility

This decision is deeply troubling. First, because the language objected to is grounded in legal and scholarly frameworks—including UN reports⁷ that have, since 2007, described Israeli policies as consistent with colonialism and apartheid.⁸ The most recent UN findings go even further, identifying patterns that constitute genocidal conduct.⁹ Second, the review is a genre of academic writing that necessarily reflects the voice of the reviewer. It includes interpretation and perspective. It is not a neutral summary of content. The editor also emphasised that there is a big difference when terms such as "whitewashing,"

² <https://yaellerer.fr/>

³ https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/11/17/boycotter-israel-une-lutte-pour-une-paix-juste_1440957_3232.html

⁴ <https://bdsmovement.net/>

⁵ <https://mondoweiss.net/2021/05/200-israeli-jews-call-for-external-intervention-to-stop-israeli-aggression-work-towards-decolonization/>

⁶ <https://www.marianne.net/agora/tribunes-libres/associer-tous-les-palestiniens-a-lhomophobie-du-hamas-est-essentialiste>

⁷ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/593075?v=pdf>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/23/israelandthepalestinians.unitednations>

⁹ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/anatomy-of-a-genocide-report-of-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-the-palestinian-territory-occupied-since-1967-to-human-rights-council-advance-unedited-version-a-hrc-55/>

“colonial project,” and “apartheid” are used by Jewish Israeli, “or whether this is used uncritically by non-Jewish authors, in an act of appropriation, to question the right of the state of Israel to exist”. The implication that certain terms can only be used by particular identities is not only academically untenable but professionally inappropriate – especially when, as in this case, my identity is simply unknown to the editorial team. These kinds of speculative readings, and the decision to gatekeep vocabulary based on assumed identity, have no place in rigorous scholarly publishing.

As pointed out, the terms “colonial project” and “apartheid” are widely used within critical scholarship,¹⁰ international legal frameworks and institutions, and human rights discourses – including by Jewish Israeli scholars, journalists, and organizations.¹¹ The same goes for the term “whitewashing,” which has been widely used in media worldwide, including Israel.¹² Calderwood engages this very body of discourse throughout his book. Even if he would not have used those exact terms verbatim, my responsibility as a reviewer is precisely to analyse, to draw out the implications of the text—not to merely paraphrase it. To suggest otherwise and reject it on the basis that it contains a critical perspective is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of scholarly review.

Third, and most importantly, framing this type of critique as “incendiary” or as a danger to civil discourse is part of a wider attempt to silence conversations about Palestine – particularly when they are voiced from within institutions in the Global North. We must ask why so many editorial and academic spaces cannot accommodate critiques of apartheid or settler colonialism, especially at a time when international bodies are documenting war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The editor assumed the role of the journal as a place to “build bridges”: “Being very careful with terminology used in articles is a crucial part of our commitment to avoid language that can be viewed as racist, sexist, or homophobic, and to give guidance about vocabulary with potential Islamophobic or antisemitic overtones, or any hate speech in general.” I find it alarming that the invocation of antisemitism is being used here to police academic critique of a state and its policies. This tendency to conflate critique of Israel with antisemitism not only stifles debate—it also ironically reinforces the very frameworks of apartheid and colonialism that my review sought to address. It is precisely this kind of discursive strategy that renders critical scholarship vulnerable to censorship, and that confirms the structural asymmetries my review tried to name. The insistence that the term “apartheid” is not adequate to describe the treatment of Palestinians disregards the work of countless scholars, human rights organisations, and South African activists who have drawn precisely this parallel. To censor the use of this language in a review—especially when it reflects a widely acknowledged analytical framework—is not a neutral editorial act. It is a political choice that undermines both the reviewer’s scholarly judgment and the lived reality of the people on the ground. It also underlines how the debate about these terms is not possible, because when they are brought forward, they are automatically

¹⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/5/14/israel-and-palestine-in-2018-decolonisation-not-peace>

¹¹ <https://www.cnbctv18.com/world/israel-hamas-conflict-noam-chomsky-to-henry-siegmans-famous-jews-who-have-strongly-opposed-israel-18003421.htm>

¹² <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2025-03-06/ty-article/bds-no-other-land-normalizes-israeli-oppression-of-palestinians-whitewashes-apartheid/00000195-6c6f-d46d-a3f7-edef284d0000>

silenced. In that sense, this editorial intervention doesn't contradict my reading of Calderwood's book – it vindicates it.

I made the decision to withdraw not only the review but also an article I had previously submitted to a special issue of the journal. This decision is not based on personal disagreement with the editors, but on a refusal to be complicit in censorship. I cannot accept that a historical journal would block analysis that aligns with well-documented research and international findings, particularly when this analysis was directly relevant to the book chapter under review.

I would like to share a concern I raised regarding institutional affiliations. The journal's editor, Esther-Miriam Wagner, is also director of the Woolf Institute, whose partners¹³ include institutions funded by the Israeli government, such as the ISGAP (The Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy) – offering grants¹⁴ and undisclosed funding¹⁵ from the Israeli government – or the Dangoor Education – whose centre is based at the Bar Ilan University, in Israel.¹⁶ Wagner is also Vice-President of the Society for the Medieval Mediterranean, with which *al-Masāq* is affiliated. While I do not claim a direct link, the entanglement of funding structures and institutional gatekeeping deserves open scrutiny, especially when it comes to questions of censorship and boycott of Israeli state institutions and funding.

In the exchange of emails, my aim was not to “discredit” the institute, as it was suggested, but to highlight the broader networks of affiliation that shape knowledge production. The suggestion that the Institute has no links with Israeli government funded institutions is, at best, misleading. Some of its partner institutions are indeed beneficiaries of Israeli state funding, and this information is publicly accessible, as mentioned above. Denying these connections, or framing their mention as “irresponsible,” undermines transparency and accountability, especially in an era where institutional complicity is under increasing scholarly scrutiny. I did not suggest that the Woolf Institute receives funding from these partner institutions – or whether they are merely “friend” or partner institutions – but it is a fact that some of these institutions are themselves funded by the Israeli government.

Epilogue

Finally, I would like to end on a note that speaks to the broader stakes of this exchange. When I read the exchange of emails, the words of the Palestinian political theorist and writer Ghassan Kanafani echoed in my mind. He once said that so-called peace conversations with Israel are “a conversation between the sword and the neck.”¹⁷ He was not speaking in metaphors. Kanafani – along with his young niece – was assassinated by the Mossad in 1972. His words remain tragically relevant. Silencing critique – especially under the guise of civility, neutrality, peace, or institutional policy – often masks the power dynamics at play. When the occupier insists on the terms of dialogue while silencing the occupied and massacred, who are then simultaneously demanded to speak “responsibly”,

¹³ <https://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/about/partners-and-funders>

¹⁴ <https://thecjn.ca/news/ngo-looks-to-combat-anti-semitism-through-academia/>

¹⁵ <https://forward.com/israel/453339/israel-antisemitism-isgap-think-tank-foreign-funding/>

¹⁶ <http://www.dangooreducation.com/>

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHgZdCJOuAk>

it becomes difficult not to see such conditions as part of the broader machinery of domination.

The editor assured that the aim of the journal was to “to keep bias at bay and to avoid the judgement of historical circumstance”, while being “very careful not to conflate justified outrage against the war crimes committed in Gaza with attacks on the state of Israel itself”. But let us not be mistaken: even if the existence of the state of Israel was not discussed at any moment in my review, the state was created through successive colonial waves into Palestine. In 1917, Palestinian Jews comprised less than 10% of the population of Palestine; the majority were Muslim (80%) and Christian Palestinians (10%)¹⁸ who were displaced by Jewish colonial settlement, especially from Europe. Even leading Zionist thinkers explicitly framed their project as colonial. Theodor Herzl referred to the Zionist movement as “a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism”.¹⁹ Ze’ev Jabotinsky, in his 1923 essay *The Iron Wall*, openly acknowledged that Zionist colonization could only proceed by force, against the will of the native population.²⁰ David Ben-Gurion, too, spoke of the Jewish state as a temporary stage to facilitate further expansion.²¹ These are not radical reinterpretations – they are the words of the very architects of the Zionist movement – regardless of whether one supports or opposes it. To critique this history, and its ongoing repercussions, is not antisemitic. On the contrary, to suppress that critique through veiled accusations is to refuse historical accountability, and to reproduce the very structures of silencing and domination that Kanafani warned us about.

I hope this exchange contributes to a necessary conversation about editorial ethics, scholarly responsibility, and the role of critique in moments of humanitarian crisis. This experience has reaffirmed my conviction that speaking up is not about politicizing scholarship – it is about human responsibility. Silence is not neutrality. In moments like this, silence protects power.

Post Scriptum

I would like to thank the editorial team of *Ex Novo* for their commitment to editorial ethics and academic responsibility. I am especially grateful to Martina Revello Lami for the opportunity to publish this piece.

¹⁸ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-206581/>

¹⁹ Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State, English translation* (New York: Dover Publications, 2008), 96.

²⁰ <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25282/25282-h/25282-h.htm>

²¹ chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://en.jabotinsky.org/media/9747/the-iron-wall.pdf

²¹ Cited from Nur Masalha, *Imperial Israel and the Palestinian. The Politics of Expansion* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 8 (Protocol of the Jewish Agency Executive meeting of 7 June 1938, in Jerusalem, confidential, Vol. 28, No. 51, Central Zionist Archives (CZA); Ben-Gurion’s memorandum dated 17 December 1938, S25/7627, CZA).

