

Introducing

Youssef Mnaili

Research Fellow at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WiSER) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg)

Youssef Mnaili is a Research Fellow at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WiSER) at Wits University, where he also teaches in the Wits Politics Department. He is also a GIAS Fellow at Central European University and the European University Institute, where he earned his PhD in Political Science in 2022. In this interview, Youssef discusses his work on the Israeli settler movement and the delegation theory in MENA and Africa.



Hello Youssef! Let's start with a question about your current position at WiSER: what projects are you working on now?

I joined WiSER almost a year ago as a research fellow and OSUN Global Lecturer in political science. My work primarily revolves around questions of delegation and agency. My arrival at WiSER coincided with the launch of the Trust Project, and I was immediately welcomed into it. The project examines the development of digital population registration systems and their effects on institutions. While I don't specifically work on digital infrastructure, I am trying to develop a reflection on trust and delegation. I think control problems in hierarchical relationships can't be solved by mechanism design alone—you need some source of trust to keep things running smoothly. Are certain professional domains more predisposed to trust? What factors contribute to trust within corporate cultures, and how can it be nurtured? I also had the opportunity to teach a semester-long graduate class at the Wits Politics Department on delegation, which allowed me to (re-)read the canon on hierarchy and delegation

Your paper "[Does the Buck Stop Somewhere? Blame Games and State Capture in the Legalization of the Israeli Land Grab](#)" was recently published in *Politics & Society*. Could you give us a pitch on some of the key messages of this paper?

Of course. A primary contribution of this article lies in its depiction of how the Israeli government has strategically engaged with the settler movement through ambiguity and duplicity to conceal the unlawful policy of settlement expansion. This strategy allows the government to maintain the illusion of compliance with international obligations. The article shows that, despite the [Oslo Accords](#) prohibiting the establishment of new settlements, such activities persisted. The first part of the article traces the seemingly spontaneous emergence of numerous illegal "hilltop settlements" and how they were tolerated by higher levels of government and actively supported by lower levels. The second part examines the Israeli strategy to "regularize" outposts into new settlements by actively redirecting existing planning and land ownership laws.

The article is highly relevant to current debates about the adequacy of international jurisdiction in holding Israeli leaders accountable: why is there a need for international intervention when Israel has law enforcement, a judiciary, and elected leaders? The article shows how the [Sassoon Report](#), for example, commissioned by Ariel Sharon in the 2000s, exposed the collusion of various state entities in the establishment of outposts, revealing a systematic disregard for Israeli law by government officials and

settler leaders. Despite its strong accusations of corruption and illegality, the report paradoxically became a tool for justifying the legalization of settlements.

Another aspect I highlight in the article is the relationship between the increasing institutionalization of the state's Jewish identity and the successes of the settler movement. The movement's ability to blur the distinction between Israel and the [Occupied Palestinian Territories](#) (OPT) challenges the once clear concept of a Jewish majority. The assertion of the state's Jewish identity through legal mechanisms—of which the Jewish Nation-State Basic Law of 2018 is just one example—suggests the inadequacy of past tools for maintaining ethnic separation. This creates a paradox between maintaining a Jewish and democratic state, reopening the debate about the state's self-definition for the foreseeable future.

"Another aspect I highlight in the article, and that I plan to investigate further in a future article or book, is the relationship between the increasing institutionalization of the state's Jewish identity and the successes of the settler movement."

What are your future research plans and objectives? Are there any specific areas or topics you are particularly excited to explore?

Since defending my PhD, my work has primarily focused on indirect governance. I launched a [book project](#) comparing strategies employed by ruling elites in the MENA region to engage third-party actors – such as religious authorities, local notables, and warlords – in performing governance tasks the rulers may lack the capacity to execute. A central theme of the book is the trade-off between competence and control. As intermediaries gain competence, they also accumulate influence over the governing entity, posing a delicate balance for leaders who want to strengthen control mechanisms without undermining intermediaries' capabilities. I actually submitted the manuscript to the publishing house earlier this summer! The book explores cases from Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. I believe it offers a novel perspective on the rise of authoritarianism, tribalism, civil-military relations, and political violence in the MENA region; it goes beyond the conventional focus on specific delegation by introducing a comprehensive spectrum of indirect governance forms (delegation, orchestration, co-optation).

In Johannesburg, I am currently involved in a [follow-up research project](#) with colleagues Laura Phillips and Keith Breckenridge, exploring the relationship between delegation and trust in Africa. This research extends beyond the premise of agent self-interest, central to my previous work in the MENA region, proposing that various forms of trust dynamics may also influence agents. This July, we had an excellent first authors' workshop, thanks to the Open Society University Network and the French Institute for Research (IFAS). We are currently digesting the wealth of contributions and will likely produce an edited volume or special issue next year.

And, of course, I am also working on a book based on my dissertation on delegation practices in Israel's occupation, going beyond bureaucratic blame avoidance within the occupation's bureaucracy, delving into settler violence, and the shifting role of the Israeli army. It aims to provide an analytical framework for understanding how the Israeli state and society have been transformed in recent decades.

Finally, I am working on a few papers with my colleague Chendi Wang, where we use the Tax Introduction Database to explore the link between variations in food prices, natural resources, and tax introductions over the last two centuries.

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