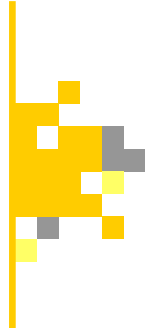


## RESENHAS

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### Declared and undeclared wars against Israel: unveiling double standards on anti-zionism, anti- semitism, and Middle East conflicts




#### Book review:

HERF, Jeffrey. **Undeclared Wars with Israel:** East Germany and the West German Far Left, 1967-1989. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

The theoretical and analytical field of International Relations (IR) presents several challenges for practitioners of the profession. Some academics defend problem-solving, while others prefer problem-posing in the sense of taking an openly critical stance. There are those who aim to construct grand theories based on history and the traditions of Western political thought to analyze international dynamics (BULL, 1966; MEARSHEIMER; WALT, 2013). Conversely, there are those who advocate for the gradual but constant accumulation of knowledge (POPPER, 1959), supported by the

modern tradition of the scientific method: this necessarily involves the careful evaluation of the logical consistency of theoretical proposals and the ultimate discretion of empirical evidence (KAPLAN, 1966; BUENO DE MESQUITA; MORROW, 1999; FEYNMAN; LEIGHTON; SANDS, 1963).

What does the general public expect from IR professionals in the face of crises like the two world wars, the Cold War, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States, and the recent terrorist attack by Hamas against Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, resulting in at least 1,400 fatalities? The public expects real-time responses and proposals for feasible and quick solutions. However, while some practitioners follow the slow path of the scientific method, building analytical models that require meticulous comparison with real-world data before interpretation (WEBER, 2019), others strive to uncover how pow-

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er and private interests operate under political discourses that attempt to naturalize them (SHAPIRO, 1991). Meanwhile, piles of human bodies continue to grow, and the suffering of multitudes of refugees seems to have no end.

Even for those who maintain a commitment to a simultaneously critical and scientific stance (ALKER, 1996) and emphasize the need to build bridges over the abyss between the sciences and the humanities (FIERKE, 2002; HAMMAN, 1994; SNOW, 2012), such commitment is not enough to satisfy public expectations. The seemingly eternal difficulty in defining the scope and method of international studies (ONUF, 2018) is, in part, due to the persistent frustration of not being able to respond adequately to what is expected of us. This sentiment is evident in the various clashes/debates between incompatible and incommensurable ideologies/paradigms (KUHN, 2012) that constitute the field of IR.

Why, then, do we face difficulties in meeting those expectations? Whether by constructing mathematical and computational models based on game theory and statistical methods or by critically interpreting the various discourses and narratives associated with the main actors in the international arena, we encounter obstacles in unraveling the operational gears of the “Black Box” of IR. For the sake of intellectual integrity, we depend on official documents, statements from political

agents, and access to primary sources. At most, with careful reservations, we rely on the rigorous evaluation of journalistic information and the opinions of other academics or analysts.

The dynamics of international politics, however, are largely generated behind the scenes, from information circulating in intelligence communities, secret agreements established to publicly defend the end of secret agreements, covert negotiations between interest groups, and the deliberate distortion of fragments of information to manipulate the expectations of antagonists in relationships of strategic interdependence (LAKE; POWELL, 1999; SCHELLING, 1981).

When it comes to topics that divide and inflame opinions, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, IR practitioners feel the weight of their responsibility. How can we reconcile our inevitable personal and humanitarian convictions with the necessary political engagement that moments of crisis demand from conscious human beings without compromising academic integrity and intellectual honesty? A simple, or rather simplistic, answer would be to base our convictions and positions on what we know. However, do we truly know what we believe we know?

At this point, our legitimate concern for human lives and suffering, as well as the morally defensible desire to align ourselves with the side of the oppressed, needs to be constantly evaluat-

ed and reevaluated in an ongoing exercise of self-criticism. It is to provide evidence-based factual support for our self-criticism, essential to deal more effectively with the themes and problems that unfold in the international arena, that works such as those of the historian and sociologist Jeffrey Herf play a crucial role.

In *Undeclared Wars with Israel*, professor Herf, specialized in modern European history and themes such as Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism, offers indispensable information for any analyst or researcher dedicated to understanding the dynamics of relations between Arabs and Israelis since the onset of the Cold War. Herf's expertise enriches this comprehensive exploration of the complex historical interactions in this critical geopolitical arena.

The author initiates by questioning the foundation of West German policy after the Second World War, which centered on “coming to terms with the Nazi past” based on the moral principle of avoiding doing further harm to the Jews. This approach involved actions such as financial reparations and the establishment of political relations. The significance of this commitment is underscored by Chancellor Angela Merkel, who declared in the Israeli parliament (Knesset) in 2008 that Israel's survival is a matter of reason of state for Germany.

However, in stark contrast to the West

German stance, the government of the communist regime in East Germany actively pursued anti-Zionist endeavors throughout almost the entire Cold War period. This also involved extensive efforts by left-wing radical groups in West Germany, including collaboration with Palestinian terrorist organizations during the 1970s and 1980s.

Thus, the author focuses his analysis on anti-Israel activities and policies promoted by the East German state and radical left organizations operating in West Germany during Cold War. These policies included support for wars and terrorist actions against the State of Israel and its civilian population:

The spectrum of antagonism included hostile political warfare at the United Nations and repeated assertions that Israel bore sole responsibility for what was then called “the Middle East conflict.” Yet, as the following chapters confirm, the antagonism combined hostile words with providing military training and delivering weapons of war including thousands of Kalashnikov assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, land mines, explosives, and on occasion tanks and MiG fighter jets to the Arab states and Palestinian organizations then at war with Israel. (HERF, 2016, p. 2)

Herf also analyzes the consequences of such policies in terms of “political warfare, hostile

propaganda, and military support for states and terrorist organizations at war with Israel” (HERF, 2016, p. 3). One might question the basis on which the author relied to provide such information. Essentially, the data is drawn from East Germany files, made available after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as files from the United States and West Germany from the relevant period. Additionally, the author consulted the documentation of statements by far-left organizations in West Germany, Arab States, and Palestinian organizations. In other words, the reliance is primarily on primary sources and solid pieces of evidence.

It is important to note that the founding of the State of Israel had support from the Soviet bloc. At the time, the Soviet Union's relations with the Arabs were precarious. Besides, there was a perception that the Arab League itself had been created under British influence to hinder Soviet penetration in the region. Thus, initially, the Soviet Union had the motivation to oppose British interests in the region without explicitly endorsing the immigration of Jews to the Palestine region. However, from 1947 onwards, it became clear to the Soviet Union that an independent state for the Jews could serve its interests in the region and help demarcate its position in the United Nations (UN), contrary to the policies of the Western powers (GORODETSKY, 2010).

In 1954, however, the Soviet Union, which

had supported Israel, including providing military material for the 1948 war, “switched its allegiance to the other side” (OREN, 2002, p. 8). The change in the Soviet Union's position resulted, in part, from the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union as key players in the Middle East, following a long period of European colonial hegemony. Thus, the regional impact of the rebalancing of forces between the superpowers at the beginning of the Cold War cannot be ignored.

Between 1948 and 1953, there were several clashes between Israeli policies and Soviet interests. The Soviet Union, in turn, maintained an ambivalent position regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition to the perception that Israel, once established and independent, would be willing to maintain good relations with the Soviet Union but would not be subservient to its policies, Soviet leaders, after Stalin's death, developed policies regarding the Third World that contemplated the desire for rapprochement with the Arab States. Thus, the change in the Soviets' position was largely motivated by the perception that they would have better chances of penetrating the Middle East by increasing their influence over the Arab States (RO'I, 1980).

Nevertheless, as Jeffrey Herf clearly demonstrates, more than just a change in its position in the Middle East scenario due to geopolitical motivations in the strategic game of the Cold War,

the Soviet Bloc began to develop and undertake a campaign of hostility and defamation against Israel, primarily from East Germany. In addition to providing covert military assistance to Arab states and Palestinian terrorist organizations, West German terrorist groups such as the Revolutionary Cells, the Red Army Faction, and the June 2nd Movement directly collaborated with the activities of terrorist organizations in Palestine. In this way, the Soviet bloc did not limit itself to criticizing the policies of the State of Israel to strengthen its position in the Arab world:

East German diplomats emitted a rhetorical fog about moderation and negotiated solutions based on United Nations resolutions while placing the entire blame for the Israel-Arab-Palestinian conflict on Israel. Simultaneously, and in secrecy, the flow of weapons, military training, and intelligence cooperation from East Germany solidified alliances with Syria, Iraq, Libya, and the various Palestinian terror organizations represented on the PLO's Executive Committee. (HERF, 2016, p. 449)

From 1967 onwards — coincidentally with the Six-Day War — Herf observes that not only did world Communism, but practically the global Left, including self-proclaimed progressive individuals and organizations in the West, begin to adopt an anti-Israeli stance as one of its main banners.

Thanks to the articulations of the Soviet Bloc and the intense campaign of anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic propaganda elaborated and disseminated from East Germany, the majority of the Member States of the UN General Assembly began to characterize Zionism as a form of racism, while both ignoring the terrorism undertaken by Palestinian organizations and condemning Israel's self-defense actions as acts of aggression.

Among the various anti-Israel policies adopted by the East German government and West German leftist organizations during the Cold War, Jeffrey Herf notes concrete efforts to characterize Israel's position as based on lies, while portraying Arab states and organizations such as the PLO as defenders of truth. Furthermore, there was a constant insistence on characterizing Zionism as a form of racism associated with colonialism and imperialism, aiming to morally delegitimize the State of Israel.

Thirdly, acts of terrorism against Israel or Israeli civilians, as well as attacks by Arab states, were neglected by news agencies. When Israeli civilians were targeted, the guideline was to justify terrorist attacks as armed resistance against an illegitimate invader. It was insisted that Israel faced no real existential threats, and when it defended itself, Israeli actions were immediately treated as unilateral aggression. Celebrations by Arabs and Palestinians of successful terrorist

attacks against Israeli citizens were not disseminated by the East German media and left-wing organizations in West Germany.

Furthermore, when Arab and Palestinian civilians died as a result of Israel's self-defense and counterterrorism operations, the numbers provided by the PLO and Arab states were considered reliable. Besides, such deaths were described as the results of intentional actions of Israel's policies, not as unintended collateral damage. Affirming their position that they merely sought a political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, they vehemently denied participating in or supporting actions aimed at the destruction of the State of Israel. It is also important to highlight that:

(...) they claimed that the policies of the Soviet bloc, the West German Left, and the Arab states at war with Israel had nothing to do with anti-Semitism, that is, hatred of Jews or Judaism. Accusations of anti-Semitism were, they claimed, an instrument of imperialist propaganda intended to discredit wrongly those struggling against colonialism, racism and imperialism and for human rights, peace and justice. (HERF, 2016, p. 455)

The recent events since the Hamas terrorist operation on October 7, 2023, suggest a parallel with the systematic and coordinated efforts observed during the Cold War era, particularly the

anti-Israel policies promoted by the East German government and the Soviet Bloc, along with their sympathizers during the 1960s and 1980s. This indicates that certain anti-Israel sentiments and strategies persist more than three decades after the end of the Cold War.

Herf also highlights that in East Germany, policies toward the Middle East aligned with Soviet guidelines, whereas leftist organizations in West Germany engaged in anti-Zionist actions driven by ideological conviction. They worked intensively with pamphlets, newspapers, and magazines, often in close proximity to university campuses. Through these efforts, they successfully disseminated their convictions not only within intellectual and academic circles but also in the education and training of students at the time. This, I observe, suggests that propaganda and defamation campaigns may have had the enduring effects that persist even until today. In this regard, Herf notes that the anti-Israel actions and campaigns perpetrated by both East German and West German leftist organizations left behind a "toxic ideological brew".

After the terrorist events of October 2023, perpetrated by Hamas, even in states officially supportive of Israel, civilian protesters have carried out massive anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist demonstrations. In numerous cases — far more than would be considered reasonable to call "isolated cases" — violent and even fatal attacks against

Jews have occurred worldwide. Attacks on synagogues and Jewish cemeteries, alongside direct threats and expressions of support for the terrorist organization Hamas, have contributed to creating the perception that we have transcended the temporal limits established by the end of the Cold War. It actually seems like we returned, this time on a global basis, to a situation reminiscent of what the Jewish population experienced in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s.

This prompts relevant reflections that, as academics and practitioners in the field of International Relations, we cannot simply overlook. Firstly, there's a need to discern how much of the anti-Israel reactions manifest genuine opposition to the policies of the State of Israel and how much they represent the resurgence of an underlying anti-Semitism that was, in reality, always present but perhaps disguised. Secondly, from a strictly academic standpoint, there arises a question of how insistent one can be on differentiating between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, especially when many supposed "critics" of Israel have openly expressed desires for the annihilation and extermination of the Jewish people. Thirdly, the challenge lies in how to accurately evaluate the actions of the State of Israel from its foundation to the present day, considering that much of the available information for such analysis may have passed through filters and distortions linked to strategic

interdependence relationships during the Cold War. Fourthly, why does the academic/intellectual environment, alongside professional journalists, currently reproduce the double standard established by Soviet Bloc propaganda in the Cold War? That is, condemning Israeli "aggression" without due support in History and facts, while, at the same time, avoiding characterizing Hamas as a terrorist organization that, in addition to the explicit motivation of destroying the State of Israel and the Jewish people, also oppresses the civilian population of Palestine?

Moreover, another question arises: are the expressions, including physical and fatal incidents, of anti-Semitism around the world since October 2023 still a consequence of the active measures taken by the Soviet Bloc and its sympathizers during the Cold War, or do they have another origin, possibly involving geopolitical interests of other international players in the Middle East?

The questions I raise here do not have simple answers. To address them, honest academic research work is essential, capable of reconciling humanistic inclinations with the methodological rigor intrinsic to a scientific approach. This commitment extends to ensuring logical consistency supported by empirical evidence. The valuable contribution of Professor Jeffrey Herf's work provides a solid starting point for conducting research that can more effectively guide our professional

practices. This includes meeting public expectations by improving our ability to provide clarification and answers during events. It also involves proposing realistic, quick, and viable solutions that consider the need to minimize human suffering while attributing due responsibilities based on the evidence available to us.

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