

SUEZ CONFLICT (1956): A POLEMOLOGICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes historical facts and evidence that contribute to understanding the causes of the Suez Conflict (1956) between Egypt, the United Kingdom, and France, limiting the scope of the research to the 20th century. The authors use a multidimensional approach supported by contemporary theories that help understand the processes leading to armed conflict outbreaks to achieve this goal. It is demonstrated that the situation presented in Suez – which includes not only a political background but a multifaceted one – was elucidated by Polemology, which demonstrates the classic complexity of international relations and the enormous variety of interests involved in these relations.

Keywords: Suez Conflict; Suez Canal; Polemology; Cold War; Security Dilemma.

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INTRODUÇÃO

In 1956, an armed conflict of short duration involved Britain, France, Israel, and Egypt. Better known as the Suez War, it would see all the major powers of the post-war set their political approaches harder and would profoundly alter Europe's political and economic situation. It was a conflict where nobody could present itself as victorious. Indeed, it may be considered an initial stimulus for major disputes that would culminate in typical crises of the Cold War period – like the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 – and the long-lasting Arab-Israeli conflict. In contrast, Suez could be considered as only one of its many chapters.

Given the large number of lead actors and the complexity of the interests involved, identify the exact cause or causes of the Suez conflict is a massive task for any researcher. Hugh Thomas – who had studied the subject ten years after its occurrence and having managed direct contact with some prominent political figures –, said he could not consult any official document because they seem to have been destroyed briefly after the upshot of the conflict. Besides this, everyone involved seemed to have suffered from amnesia or did not want to reveal secrets they were bound to protect³.

To answer the question which underlies the study, this essay will analyze historical facts and evidence which may explain the cause or causes of the Suez war, limiting the scope of the research to the twentieth century. To achieve this purpose, these authors will utilize a multidimensional approach, supported by a few contemporary theories which might be helpful to understand the causes of conflicts.

Old Issues: The causes of war and the inevitability of conflict

Before beginning the Suez study, it is necessary to look at past examples of philosophers and historians who sought to understand the underlying causes that led human groups to fight. However, it seems to be an immense task. According to Garnett, there is no clear answer to the question 'Why war?' because it is a term used to depict various activities connected by implying organized military violence⁴. Notwithstanding,

3 THOMAS, Hugh. *The Suez Affair*. Lisbon: Ulisseia, 1967, p. 9.

4 GARNETT, John. *The Causes of War and The Conditions of Peace*, in John Baylis et al,

this approach can be initiated in ancient Greece of Thucydides, a member of the Athenian elite born in 471 BC and “undoubtedly a serious man and of a large fund of solid sense.” Considered by many the father-founder of the realist approach in international relations, he wrote the book History of the Peloponnesian War by participating directly in the events narrated in it. Thucydides attempts to justify why Athens and Sparta went to war in the narrative, naturally having their own cultural and social context as background. Briefly, Thucydides concluded that the chief reason that led the Greek states to war, and its inevitability, was that Sparta felt threatened by the growth of Athenian military and economic power⁵. Like Thomas Hobbes concluded centuries afterward, Thucydides had no reason to believe in human goodwill but saw human nature as essentially auto-destructive. He wrote prophetically, “I have written my work...not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time”⁶.

Nowadays, Thucydides’ conclusions can be linked to modern realist approaches such as survivability, the security dilemma, and the balance of power. The realist thinkers have used these ideas throughout the last decades to justify why states engage in wars.

The first realist concept written above exposes the primary need of the state to secure its survival, considering it as a *condicio sine qua non*⁷ to be guaranteed and from which derive all other goals, whether they comprise broad conquests or merely a quest for own independence⁸.

The second concept which deserves attention is the ‘security dilemma.’ The ongoing necessity of the states to provide security can generate a ‘snowball effect.’ It happens when one realizes that the development of a state military capability, even if their intention is straightforward legitimate self-defense, starts to cause doubt and insecurity in their neighbors as to their true pacifist intentions⁹. It seems

The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 23.

5 NYE JR., Joseph S. Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History. New York: Pearson International Edition, 1993, p. 15.

6 Ibid, p. 18.

7 Latin term that refers to an indispensable and essential action.

8 BAYLIS, John et al. The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 94.

9 WHEELER, Nicolas; BOOTH, Ken. The Security Dilemma, in Baylis and Rengger, Dilemmas of World Politics: International Issues in a Changing World. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 95.

like finding no sense in the quest for peace through the bellicose means of being prepared for war, like the adage that has been constantly repeated by military institutions worldwide: *se vis pacem, para bellum*¹⁰.

The third realist concept depicted above is named 'balance of power' and refers to the natural tendency of the states to remain in equilibrium concerning the instruments of national power. It points out a doctrine where the states always have their power tracked and equalized by other states or groups of states. According to Nye, it also means a policy of seeking alliances with other states to prevent another player or group of states from achieving a preponderant power. As an example, he pointed out the multipolar system of Europe during the nineteenth century¹¹.

Through a simple induction, it is possible to find out a link of interconnectedness through these concepts. It works like this: 'survival' or the need to survive leads the state to enhance its military capability, then generates a 'security dilemma' or a feeling of insecurity among its neighbors, who will manage to equilibrate the 'balance of power' among them. Regarding this connection as accurate in most cases, states are primarily embedded in a kind of 'distrust cycle,' which is managed by policies and politics that, sometimes, have failed to preclude conflicts.

Another critical aspect of the conflict is the level of politicized decisions, which it includes. The Suez conflict is notably known as one of the most politicized campaigns that have been studied so far. It reflected the world's circumstances on a nascent Cold War era and the decline of European powers which failed to keep their preponderance over former colonies.

When discussing politics, it is nearly impossible not to remember Von Clausewitz and his masterpiece 'On War.' The Prussian military said in the 19th century that war would be simply the continuation of politics by other means. Moreover, he stated, "When whole communities go to war - whole nations, and especially civilized nations - the reason is always some political situation, and the event always due to some political purpose." Influenced by Clausewitz, the Western approach sees the war as a tool, instrument, or means to an end. In this sense, it is worth finding out a clear definition for both terms: politics and policy. For Brazilian academics, in a broad sense, politics is the use of power to persuade others

10 Latin sentence which means "if you want peace, prepare for war".

11 NYE JR., 1993, p. 327.

to behave according to desired intents¹². The policy can be regarded as “a statement of intent.” Thus, it can be considered that politics aim to achieve a planned and rational political purpose (or objectives) described in its (national) policy. These authors believe that the significant contribution of Clausewitz, in this case, is that he was the first to have stated firmly that, in most cases, the war is the only viable way for states to achieve their political purpose and fulfill its policy.

Nevertheless, realist approaches and Clausewitz explanations are not enough to fully understand the causes of such a complex situation in 1956. Thus, moments before the unleashing of the Suez conflict had emerged as a subdivision of sociology studies, a discipline known as Polemology¹³, which had as its main sponsor the French sociologist Gaston Bouthoul. In 1951, in his book *Les Guerres* (Wars), later renamed ‘Polemology Treaty’ (1970), Bouthoul presented the need for a broad study of the causes of the conflict at a crucial time when humanity was threatened by the possibility of extinction by nuclear Armageddon. For Bouthoul, the situation became more dramatic due to the lack of tools that could lead researchers to understand the causes of conflict as a fundamental instrument to prevent disastrous consequences. From a polemological perspective, war cannot be just the “organized violence carried on by political units against each other,” like was defended by Clausewitz. Instead, Bouthoul and his ‘Institute of Polemology’ said that conflicts rarely originated by a single cause, but several interrelated reasons of which some are more relevant than others “depending upon the confluence of forces in specific situations and historical periods.” Therefore, the polemological perspective comprises an interdisciplinary and historical approach to studying conflicts considering the interaction of Geostrategic, military technological, economic, legal (including domestic and international law), socio-cultural, ideological, dialogical (including diplomacy, media, and propaganda), and psychological factors¹⁴.

Julien Freund (1921-1993), another renowned French sociologist who provided a significant contribution to the polemological thinking, defined the conflict as an intentional clash of interest between hostile human groups which not to lose an earned right seek to destroy the

12 BOBBIO, Norberto et al. *Dicionário de Política*. Brasília: Universidade de Brasília, 13ª edição, 2008.

13 From Greek πόλεμος (polemos) which means “war, warfare”. <http://www.kypros.org/cgi-bin/lexicon> (accessed May 13, 2020).

14 GARDNER; KOBTZEFF, 2012, p. 5.

resistance of the opponent, eventually using violent means¹⁵.

Many other authors and studies have been conducted for a long time to explain the occurrence of wars, which would not be possible to address in this essay. However, these authors believe that it might be possible to achieve the purpose of this essay by using as parameters some of the three approaches presented herein: the realist approach, Clausewitz, and his emphasis on the primacy of politics or the polemological standpoint of Bouthoul and Freund, to identify some relevant causes of the conflict of Suez. To this end, some historical evidence about the states which took part directly in the conflict, through the presence of military forces on the terrain (Egypt, Britain, France, and Israel), will be analyzed from now.

Historical antecedents in the Middle East

The end of the II World War and the recognition of the Holocaust of the Jewish people contributed to the emergence of international joint efforts that aimed to create the state of Israel. Despite international recognition, the same did not occur regionally. Israel began to suffer the hostility of neighboring Arab states that immediately attacked the new state, which is recognized as the first Arab-Israeli war (1948-1949). Thus this became known by Israelis as the 'war of independence' and the Arab people as 'the great tragedy.' The overwhelming Arab defeat in 1949 exacerbated many internal problems of the Arab states involved in the conflict, bringing an atmosphere of revolutionary extremism to the stage. In the end, a fragile armistice was established in Rhodes, and a forced escape of more than seven hundred thousand Arabs to neighboring areas aggravated the social situation of this population that was forced to live in harsh conditions in refugee camps. Since this time, in these authors' viewpoint, the complicated Palestinian issue has been used as a political weapon to face internal problems since it is a topic that ensures excellent popularity and support among citizens in the various Arab states, and this happened notably in Nasser's Egypt. Therefore, political populism and the deliberated unleash of ancient hatreds are difficult in finding a practical and pragmatic solution to this problem. Referring to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the former Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres said: "We do agree about the future, but it is too hard to get rid of the barriers of the

15 FREUND, Julien. *Sociology of the Conflict*. Madrid: Ediciones Ejercito, 1995, p. 310.

past.”¹⁶

Through the expressed above, it is possible to identify the historical background and socio-cultural factors of Middle East conflicts and the dialogical and ideological aspects highlighted in Polemology studies as relevant factors to identify the causes of conflict in such a complex scenario. The first can be recognized by profound differences in the religious and cultural values of the people involved. The second utilizes propaganda techniques that motivate individuals to engage in disputes by exacerbating incompatibilities, which can be identified as a typical characteristic of ideological movements like Nasserism¹⁷ and Zionism¹⁸.

Another acute episode that helps understand the pre-conflict international stage was the anti-Soviet security pact sponsored by Britain and the United States in 1955, most known as the ‘Baghdad Pact.’ As a political arrangement typical of the Cold War, it reflected the priority given by the U.S. government to the ‘containment strategy’ of the Soviet Union¹⁹ through collective security agreements. Other states that formed the strategic containment ring were: Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan.

In Cairo, through the ‘Voice of the Arabs’ radio broadcast, the Egyptian government depicted the Baghdad Pact as another manifestation of Western imperialism and dominance in the region that clearly sought to neutralize or even weaken its leadership position within the Arab and Muslim world, moreover, provided potential leverage to his political

16 PERES, Shimon. *Time for War, Time for Peace*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 2004, p. 71.

17 Nasserism or Arab socialism was a Nationalist and innovative policy implemented by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt in the 1950s, through a set of economic measures aimed to strengthen state power thus regarded as socialist, although rejecting the core of Marxist ideology and secularism by considering Islam as the dominant religion (LEITE, p. 16).

18 The word Zionism is derived from the biblical word “Zion”, often used as a synonym for “Jerusalem” and the Land of Israel (Eretz Israel). Zionism is an ideology which expresses the deep feeling of the Jews throughout the world for their historical homeland - Zion, the Land of Israel, and their chief goal is the regaining of its sovereignty (exclusively by Jews). <http://www.visaojudaica.com.br/Principal/Religiao/datas/sionismo.htm> (accessed May 11, 2020).

19 Influenced by the ideas of the U.S. diplomat George Frost Kennan (1904-2005) which became the underpinning of the U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. In 1947, in an article issued in the *Foreign Affairs* magazine Kennan wrote: “The main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies”. (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian). <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/Kennan> (accessed May 27, 2020).

opponent, the Iraqi leader Nuri al-Said. Under the influence of Nasser, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria did not join the treaty²⁰.

The 'Baghdad Pact' is an example of a typical security alliance that demonstrates the realist concept of 'Balance of Power' and helps understand the political-military rapprochement of Egypt and the Soviet Union during the 1950s. Later, it would contribute decisively to originate a 'security dilemma' within the Israeli leadership, who saw their survival threatened by the evidence.

Nonetheless, the global political context and the struggle of major powers do not help comprehend all the Suez conflict's implications. It is necessary to go further to identify the significant reasons for each state involved in the conflict. Set off by the events that occurred in Egypt since the coup d'état carried out by Nasser and his coreligionist – which is in the opinion of these authors the event that triggered all the process –, thus can be considered the actual backstage of the Suez war. This opinion lies in the fact that all actions executed by Egyptian opponents were carried out after political events executed in the wake of Nasser's revolution, as described below.

Egyptian origins of the war

In 1952, a military coup sponsored by General Naguib Muhammad deposed the Egyptian ruler, King Farouk, accused by the revolutionaries as the main culprit for the defeat in the conflict against the Israelis in 1949. Notable among them was Colonel Nasser, the true architect of the revolution. In 1954, he removed Naguib and assumed unlimited political power by abolishing political parties and all opposition²¹.

Nasser felt a deep rage against Israel and Britain in his pan-Arabic perspective, considering them imperialists and usurpers²². Nasser defended the right of people to exploit their natural resources. In this sense, it included the exploitation of Egyptian cotton – which London controlled international market price –, and because of this principle²³, the

20 JANKOWSKI, James. *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, p. 55.

21 LEITE, 2007, p. 14.

22 Nasser was severely wounded in combat in Felouga, during the first Arab-Israeli conflict.

23 This essential right of people was enshrined by the UN general assembly resolution (626-VII, 21 December 1952) due to the nationalization of petrol occurred in Iran, during the

economic exploitation of the Suez Canal. In this sense, Nasser supported the nationalization of significant sectors of the economy, and began an agrarian reform, considered as socialists initiatives of Soviet inspiration, which worried the Western leaders²⁴. The attacks on British forces increased in Ismailia, the primary British military base in the region, and terrorist attacks against Israel by Fedayun's in Gaza. Besides, through the 'Voice of the Arabs' radio broadcast, Nasser openly encouraged the revolutionaries in Algeria against French troops in support of the African decolonization movements²⁵.

Another fact that supported the psychosocial facet of the crisis, considering a polemological approach, is how Nasser's revolution happened undemocratic and authoritarian. Because of this, Nasser was considered extremely dangerous, leading other leaders to compare him to Hitler²⁶. Thus the common mindset was: as more time they would spend to stop Nasser, most complex and expensive the task would be – as it happened with the Third Reich, almost a decade before.

The development of a modern and powerful army was considered fundamental for the Pan-Arabic project²⁷. However, the attempt to purchase Western weapons was entirely refused. Thus, Nasser initiated intense relations with Moscow that would provide not only modern weaponry but technical support. In retaliation, the Western countries canceled the financial-technical support for the Aswan dam, regarded as a fundamental project to provide water and energy for the country's industrialization²⁸. Hence, in July 1956, Nasser addressed an inflamed speech ordering his troops to seize the Suez Canal. It was the peak act of the crisis²⁹. The military response was only a matter of time.

These authors consider the Egyptian case the most difficult to identify a single cause of the conflict due to the complex situation and

Mossadegh government. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/resources.htm> (accessed April 30, 2020).

24 LEITE, 2007, p. 15.

25 Ibid, p. 16.

26 John Foster Dulles, then U.S. Secretary of State, regarded Nasser's Pan-Arabism similar to the Hitler's Pan-Germanic concepts considering the Egyptian leader as "an extremely dangerous fanatic". CHOMSKY, Noam. *The New World Order*. Barcelona: Critica, 2003, p. 259.

27 TAL, David. *The 1956 War: Collusion and Rivalry in the Middle East*. London: Frank Cass, 2001, p. 6.

28 LEITE, 2007, p. 17.

29 LEITE, 2007, p. 18.

the ideological and revolutionary struggle in which Egypt was deeply involved. Exacerbation of recent and ancient hatreds – and a big desire for emancipation of their usurpers, allied with promises to be guided to a golden future by a messianic Nasser –, led the majority of Egyptian society to support his autocratic leadership and engage in war. However, they cannot be blamed for having shot first, despite supporting terrorist attacks against British troops and civilian Israelis. Therefore, the polemological approach fits best to explain the causes of the conflict on the Egyptian side, emphasizing the economic, socio-cultural, ideological, and dialogical (Voice of the Arabs) aspects.

Nasser's antagonists' reasons for war: the British, French, and Israeli cases

The Suez case was marked by the Franco-British response to the canal's nationalization, seen as such a provocative attitude since, according to the previous agreement, it automatically would transfer to the Egyptian control in 1968. Moreover, Britain had just withdrawn a large part of its troops in the region regarding other concessions agreed by Nasser³⁰. On the other hand, by its apparent geopolitical importance, the British economy greatly depended upon sea lanes like Suez, which had been the primary reason for its construction. Furthermore, no less than their naval power and military prestige were being put to the test. The recovery of its investments seemed to be an excellent opportunity to regain her strategic clout lost since the signing of the 1954 agreement³¹.

France, which still felt the recent loss of Morocco and Tunisia, saw her empire collapsing in the Maghreb. In Southeast Asia, they had lost Indochina in a humiliating manner. Most importantly, they were carrying out a fierce battle in Algeria, in which Nasser was blamed for supporting the insurgency. The military operation was an opportunity to punish Nasser exemplarily and to protect her economic interests³².

However, the lack of a clear political purpose for the military

30 According Milner the 1954 Anglo-Egyptian agreement established, among other issues, that British troops were to be withdrawn from Egypt by June 1956 and outlined the Egyptian commitment to respect the freedom of navigation through the canal. Laurie Milner, *The Suez Crisis*, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/suez_01.shtml (accessed May 5, 2020).

31 TAL, 2001, p. 1.

32 Ibid, p. 11.

intervention was an issue that caused quite a concern because there was no answer to this question³³. What would they do? Topple up Nasser's regime? Give order to troops to march towards Cairo? Still, if Nasser fled to organize resistance from the hinterland, was there any contingency plan? Pressured by public opinion and its strategic interests, the British and French decision-makers began the invasion without regard to Clausewitz's principles. Hence, these authors believe that the best approach which fits a reasonable explanation for British and French intents is provided by Freund and his polemological thinking, which depicted conflict as a violent and intentional clash between hostile groups to secure an earned right.

For the recently born Israeli state, the situation was no more than the need to survive and a kind of "Thucydidean" fear caused by Egyptian growth. Since its foundation, the Israeli state has been an area of reduced dimensions without available space to allow the occurrence of significant strategic losses, which has often obliged them to act offensively and to carry out pre-emptive actions. Additionally, a recent and vital military pact made with France that had secured the necessary conditions for its defense also led them to a commitment to improving its relationship beyond the trade level³⁴. Therefore, the explanation for the Israeli question lies in the realist approach, including all three concepts previously described: survivability, security dilemma, and the balance of power. Nevertheless, due to the French-Israeli political agreement, Clausewitz could be reminded too.

In conclusion, the situation presented in Suez includes not only a political explanation but a multidisciplinary one – as elucidated by the Polemology –, which demonstrates the classical complexity of international relations and the wide variety of interests, ideologies, and values they layout. It is worth noting that the participation of both Cold war superpowers was not addressed here, which would require another essay. Curiously, many of the polemological aspects that can be found in 1956 can still be seen today in Abdel el-Sisi's Egypt; in the ongoing quest for survival of the Israeli state in the face of their neighbors' hostility; and through the Franco-British ubiquitous interests in North Africa – expressed, for example, by their participation in the Libyan conflict (2011) –, which leads these authors to defend that Suez would be only the first chapter of a conflict that can still be revived.

33 LEITE, 2007, p. 21.

34 TAL, 2001, p. 9.

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