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# Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Suez Crisis, and Arab Nationalism

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**Abstract:** Egypt, long celebrated as the cradle of civilization, flourished along the Nile River but endured centuries of foreign domination that diminished its cultural prominence. Autonomy briefly resurfaced after Napoleon's 1798 expedition, yet Western imperial control soon prevailed, especially following the construction of the strategically vital Suez Canal. By the early twentieth century, Egypt had become an Arab nation striving for independence. Three milestones marked this process: the establishment of a British-protected monarchy in 1922, the Free Officers' Movement of 1952 that founded the republic, and the 1956 Suez Crisis. The latter, provoked by Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal, ended with the failure of a joint British, French, and Israeli invasion under pressure from both the United States and the Soviet Union. This moment signified Egypt's true independence and a triumph for Arab nationalism. While most studies emphasize Britain's decline or U.S. opposition to the invasion, this paper adopts an Arab-centered perspective. It investigates Egypt's motives for nationalizing the canal and shows how the Suez Crisis elevated President Gamal Abdel Nasser as the leading figure of the Arab world. The discussion highlights economic, social, and political dimensions of how the crisis advanced Nasser's vision of Arab nationalism.

**Keywords:** Arab nationalism; Ottoman Empire; Suez Canal; Free Officers' Movement; Aswan High Dam

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Nationalization and the Outbreak of Crisis

On July 26, 1956, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal before a crowd of 100,000 supporters. While he denounced colonial exploitation, Egyptian forces simultaneously seized the Canal Zone and the Suez Canal Company. The move symbolized Egypt's decisive break from imperial domination and demonstrated its ability to govern its own strategic resources. Yet this triumph quickly provoked a major international crisis. Britain, France, and Israel, each threatened by Egypt's assertive policies, coordinated a military response. Israeli airstrikes and paratrooper landings were soon followed by British and French naval deployments, signaling a possible full-scale war [1].

### 1.2. International Confrontation and Withdrawal

The tripartite invasion initially seemed overwhelming, but it collapsed within a week. Britain faced mounting domestic protests, financial strain from sanctions, and an oil shortage caused by the canal's closure [2]. At the same time, the United States and the Soviet Union exerted heavy diplomatic pressure on the aggressors: Washington feared that continued fighting would push Egypt into Moscow's orbit, while the Soviet Union sought to expand its influence in the Middle East. These factors forced a ceasefire on

November 6. The failure of the operation humiliated Britain, led to Prime Minister Eden's resignation, and accelerated the decline of British influence in the region [3].

### *1.3. Impact on Arab Nationalism*

For Egypt, the crisis was a resounding political victory. Nasser emerged as a hero across the Arab world, celebrated for defying imperialism and Zionism. The crisis also reshaped regional dynamics in three key ways: it ended Britain's economic dominance over the Middle East, enabling Arab states to pursue economic independence; it elevated Nasser's personal prestige, inspiring nationalist and anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa; and it deepened Arab alignment with the Soviet Union, fostering solidarity under an anti-imperial consensus. Together, these outcomes solidified Nasser's role as the central architect of modern Arab nationalism [4].

## **2. Historical Context**

### *2.1. Origins of Arab Nationalism*

Arab nationalism emerged in the nineteenth century as Arab societies sought to break free from Ottoman rule while establishing ties with the West [5]. Despite Ottoman domination, shared cultural and historical ties fostered nationalist sentiments. Napoleon's 1798 conquest of Egypt disrupted the Ottoman political and economic order, enabling Muhammad Ali, an Albanian commander, to rise as Egypt's viceroy. Ali implemented economic reforms and expanded Egypt's territory into Sudan and Syria, earning autonomy from the Ottoman Empire—the first instance of significant Arab self-governance. Although he envisioned a strong Arab state, his adherence to Ottoman administrative principles limited the realization of a fully independent Arab polity.

### *2.2. European Influence and Economic Domination*

By the mid-nineteenth century, European powers extended their influence across the Arab world. The Suez Canal, constructed by Egyptian labor under French supervision and inaugurated in 1869, became a critical international trade route, generating substantial revenue for European shareholders. European economic and technological superiority, accelerated by the Industrial Revolution, increasingly marginalized Arab domestic industries, which were replaced by Western-operated factories. Gradually, Arab economies yielded to European control, facilitating colonial domination, military interventions, and eventual political subjugation [6].

Egypt's strategic importance grew alongside the Suez Canal, which became vital to British global interests. Britain controlled the majority of canal traffic and stationed troops to protect it, recognizing the canal as a critical artery for imperial trade. This dominance, however, coincided with growing Arab nationalist sentiment, fueled by the spread of nationalist publications and resistance to imperial interference. Early twentieth-century independence movements, World War I uprisings, and the interwar period illustrated the persistent struggle for self-determination, though Arab states remained largely under foreign influence [7].

### *2.3. The Free Officers and the Path to Reclaiming the Suez Canal*

Hope for full liberation emerged with the Free Officers' Movement in Egypt. Motivated by dissatisfaction with King Farouk's corruption, military failures, and inability to resist Western dominance, the Free Officers seized power to assert national sovereignty and restore pride among Egyptians. Their rise laid the groundwork for reclaiming Egypt's last foreign-controlled asset: the Suez Canal [8]. Recognizing the canal's symbolic and strategic significance, President Gamal Abdel Nasser acted to remove Western influence from Egyptian politics, setting the stage for nationalization and the assertion of Arab nationalism.

### 3. Nasser's Beginnings

#### 3.1. *Early Life and Formative Influences*

Gamal Abdel Nasser was born in 1918 in Alexandria to a modest middle-class family, yet he consistently identified with the village of Beni Mur as his ancestral home. This dual identity, bridging both Egypt's cosmopolitan urban centers and its traditional rural communities, provided him with a profound sense of connection to the broader Egyptian and Arab heritage. Nasser's father, a postal clerk, was frequently transferred across Egypt, exposing young Nasser to a wide spectrum of social conditions—from the bustling streets and vibrant commercial life of Alexandria to the quiet, traditional rhythms of rural life. These experiences offered him an early awareness of class disparities, social stratification, and the challenges faced by ordinary Egyptians [9].

From a young age, Nasser exhibited intellectual curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. He immersed himself in extensive reading, spanning history, politics, and philosophy, while mastering English to access broader perspectives beyond Egypt. His education also brought him into contact with the intellectual environment surrounding Al-Azhar University, where he absorbed ideas of cultural identity, religious tolerance, and civic responsibility [10]. This blend of urban exposure, rural roots, and rigorous intellectual engagement nurtured in Nasser a lasting sense of national pride, personal dignity, and a commitment to social reform, laying the psychological and ideological groundwork for his future leadership [11].

#### 3.2. *Military Career and Political Awakening*

Nasser's enrollment in the military academy marked a critical stage in his development, both as a strategist and a leader. His aptitude for organization, strategic thinking, and charismatic leadership quickly earned him recognition among peers and superiors alike [12]. His formative military experience culminated during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, where he confronted Egypt's structural weaknesses firsthand. Despite being wounded in battle, Nasser observed the pervasive corruption, inefficiency, and lack of accountability within the monarchy and military hierarchy. These experiences catalyzed his commitment to national liberation and provided him with an acute understanding of the systemic challenges facing Egypt.

In 1952, Nasser emerged as a central figure within the Free Officers Movement, orchestrating a coup that successfully overthrew the monarchy and established the Egyptian republic. His leadership and strategic vision were further solidified in 1954 when he survived an assassination attempt. Rather than retreating or yielding to fear, Nasser leveraged the incident to demonstrate courage and articulate his political vision, reinforcing his bond with the Egyptian populace and solidifying his image as a decisive, principled leader committed to national progress.

#### 3.3. *Leadership, Reforms, and Popular Appeal*

Once in power, Nasser immediately pursued policies aimed at asserting Egyptian sovereignty and promoting social equity. A key early achievement was the removal of British troops from the Suez Canal Zone in 1954, an act that elevated his national stature and established him as a symbol of independence. Following this, he implemented comprehensive land reforms targeting entrenched inequalities, redistributing land to peasants who constituted the majority of Egypt's population, thereby addressing long-standing social grievances.

Nasser also pursued policies that balanced modern governance with respect for traditional and religious values. While introducing secular measures such as promoting birth control, limiting polygamy, and encouraging female education, he maintained personal devotion to Islamic practices, performing regular religious duties and undertaking pilgrimages to Mecca. This integration of faith and reform enhanced his

credibility across diverse segments of society, appealing both to progressive reformers and the devout.

Unlike many contemporaneous Arab leaders, Nasser embraced his modest origins and cultivated a populist style that emphasized direct communication and accessibility. By presenting himself as a man of the people, he fostered widespread trust and legitimacy, enabling him to mobilize public support effectively. This combination of personal charisma, strategic reforms, and populist appeal laid the foundation for Egypt's assertive stance during the Suez Crisis, positioning Nasser as a transformative leader capable of reshaping both national identity and the broader trajectory of Arab nationalism.

#### **4. Economic Implications of the Suez Crisis**

##### *4.1. Reducing European Dependence and Promoting Self-Reliance*

The Suez Crisis provided Gamal Abdel Nasser with a critical opportunity to advance his vision of Arab nationalism by diminishing European influence in the Middle East. Following the nationalization of the Suez Canal, Egypt deliberately reduced its economic reliance on Western European nations, while simultaneously fostering trade relations with Eastern Europe and other regional powers. The initial freezing of Egyptian assets by Western countries disrupted imports and canal operations, compelling Nasser to explore alternative economic partnerships. In response, Egypt increased trade with non-Western nations and withdrew from the International Monetary Fund, signaling a decisive shift toward economic self-reliance and sovereignty.

These measures not only strengthened Egypt's diplomatic and economic ties with regional allies but also fostered a broader sense of pan-Arab confidence. By asserting economic independence from traditional colonial powers, Nasser cultivated a narrative of self-determination that resonated across the Arab world. The partial severance from Europe demonstrated that Arab nations could chart their own economic course, while simultaneously promoting regional cooperation and shared economic development. This approach laid the groundwork for a cohesive, self-reliant Arab bloc capable of pursuing nationalist goals without undue dependence on external powers.

##### *4.2. Economic Transformation and State Control*

Although the Suez Crisis initially caused significant disruptions—including widespread unemployment among canal workers, a sharp decline in oil production, and temporary revenue losses—it also catalyzed long-term structural economic reforms. In response, the Egyptian government undertook the nationalization of key banks, insurance companies, and major enterprises, consolidating them under public corporations tasked with investing in national development projects. This strategy increased domestic investment, enhanced government revenue, and reduced Egypt's dependency on foreign employment and expertise.

The nationalization of the Suez Canal itself represented a transformative economic milestone. Previously, the substantial annual revenue generated by the canal was largely appropriated by Britain, with only a fraction indirectly benefiting Egypt. After nationalization, the entirety of canal profits accrued directly to the Egyptian state, providing a stable and significant source of income. This newfound financial capacity enabled Nasser to pursue ambitious infrastructural and social projects. Most notably, canal revenue funded the construction of the Aswan High Dam, a monumental undertaking that provided flood control, hydroelectric power, irrigation for agriculture, and long-term economic stability. Beyond the dam, funds were channeled into comprehensive infrastructure development, including housing, transportation networks, educational institutions, and healthcare systems, laying the foundation for a modernized and socially inclusive Egypt.

##### *4.3. Long-Term Economic and Cultural Impact*

Nasser's economic policies had profound and enduring effects on Egypt's regional influence and cultural development. The strategic shift toward economic independence fostered industrial growth, modernization, and diversification of the national economy. By the 1960s, Egypt had emerged as a regional economic leader, with expanding industries and a more sophisticated urban infrastructure. Cultural development paralleled economic progress: Egyptian cinema, music, and performing arts flourished, projecting the nation's soft power across the Arab world. Tourism and international investment increased, transforming Cairo into a cosmopolitan hub that seamlessly blended historical heritage with contemporary innovation.

The combination of economic modernization, infrastructural investment, and cultural expansion underscored the success of Nasser's policies in asserting Egyptian sovereignty and regional leadership. The Suez Crisis not only enhanced Egypt's economic autonomy but also reinforced its political centrality in the Arab world. By leveraging economic reforms to foster national pride, social development, and cultural prominence, Nasser's strategy provided a template for sustained regional influence, demonstrating the intertwined nature of economic independence, national identity, and Arab unity.

## **5. The Development of Arab Nationalism**

### *5.1. Nasser's Rise and Charismatic Leadership*

The Suez Crisis provided Nasser an opportunity to advance Arab nationalism and inspire Afro-Asian independence movements. The Arab nationalist movement had long roots in shared cultural and religious ties across the Arab world. Nasser capitalized on this historical consciousness, emphasizing the importance of Egyptian and Arab pride. By nationalizing the Suez Canal, he captured the hearts of the Egyptian people, who celebrated the reclamation of a vital economic and symbolic asset. The withdrawal of British forces elevated Nasser as a hero of the Arab world, and his charismatic speeches resonated beyond Egypt, influencing neighboring countries facing similar colonial pressures.

Nasser's appeal was rooted in his focus on domestic welfare and social equality. By implementing secular policies, land reforms, and education programs, he sought to modernize Egypt and reduce social disparities. His initiatives aimed at uniting Egyptians under a shared sense of national identity, fostering both social cohesion and national pride. Nasser's attention to the conditions of ordinary citizens, particularly peasants who constituted the majority of the population, demonstrated a governance approach that combined populist rhetoric with concrete social policies.

### *5.2. Support for Regional Anti-Colonial Movements*

Beyond domestic policies, Nasser actively supported anti-colonial struggles across the Arab world. He provided political, financial, and military backing to liberation movements, reinforcing Egypt's leadership role in the region. From Algeria to Yemen, Nasser's interventions symbolized a commitment to the eradication of imperial influence, promoting a shared sense of Arab solidarity. Through these actions, Nasser positioned Egypt as a central actor in Arab politics, allowing nationalist ideals to diffuse throughout the region and inspiring a generation of leaders and citizens to resist foreign domination.

### *5.3. Pan-Arabism and Ideological Legacy*

Central to Nasser's vision was the pursuit of Arab unity through Pan-Arabism. He believed that Arab nations, united by common culture, geography, and resources, could collectively resist external aggression and achieve political and economic independence. This ideology materialized in the formation of the United Arab Republic with Syria in 1958, marking a historic milestone in Arab unity. Even after the union dissolved, Nasser continued to advocate for Pan-Arabism, solidifying his reputation as an enduring symbol of Arab nationalism.



Despite criticisms regarding military setbacks or reliance on foreign powers, Nasser's influence remained profound. He balanced authoritarian measures with genuine concern for social welfare, ensuring that policies reflected the needs of his people. His dedication to Arab unity, social reform, and anti-colonialism made him an enduring icon of Arab nationalism, whose legacy resonated across the Middle East until his death in 1970, when millions mourned his passing, reflecting the depth of his influence and popularity.

## **6. Expansion of Soviet Influence**

### *6.1. Strategic Alignment with the Soviet Union*

Politically, Nasser strengthened his leadership of the Arab nationalist movement by distancing Egypt from Western influence and fostering relations with the Soviet Union. This strategic alignment allowed Arab nations to assert a common anti-imperialist stance, accepting Soviet support without formally joining the Eastern Bloc. In the wake of European decline after the world wars, emerging independent Arab states presented both a challenge to Western powers and an opportunity for the Soviet Union to expand influence. Nasser recognized the need for external support to modernize Egypt's military and economy, while maintaining autonomy from the West.

### *6.2. Military and Economic Cooperation*

Nasser's pursuit of Soviet aid began with arms agreements that supplied tanks, planes, and other weaponry, solidifying Egypt's military independence. During the Suez Crisis, Soviet support reinforced Egypt's position against Britain and France, demonstrating the tangible benefits of this partnership. Beyond military assistance, the Soviet Union contributed to major infrastructure projects, most notably the Aswan Dam, and provided economic, technological, and educational aid. These measures facilitated state-building, rapid economic growth, and modernization, while Nasser emphasized that such support came without interference in Egypt's internal affairs. Through these initiatives, Egypt leveraged Soviet resources to strengthen domestic stability and regional influence, while maintaining a balanced foreign policy.

### *6.3. Soviet Relations with Other Arab States*

The influence of the Soviet Union extended beyond Egypt, reaching other Arab countries such as Algeria, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Morocco. Through recognition, trade, and arms deals, the USSR gained popularity and established itself as a reliable partner for emerging Arab nations. These relationships strengthened Arab-Soviet cooperation, reinforced anti-imperialist solidarity, and facilitated the spread of Nasser's vision of Arab nationalism. By aligning strategically with the Soviets, Nasser consolidated Egypt's role as a regional leader and enhanced the ideological and political cohesion of Arab states, supporting the broader goal of Pan-Arab unity.

## **7. Conclusion**

The Suez Crisis marked a pivotal moment in global history, signaling a shift in the anti-colonial movement and inspiring independence efforts across Africa and the Arab world. Gamal Abdel Nasser emerged as the champion of the Arab people and a symbol of Arab nationalism. His charisma, vision, and unwavering dedication secured the support of his populace, enabling bold initiatives such as the nationalization of the Suez Canal and resistance to the Tripartite Aggression. Without Nasser's resolve, the crisis might have resulted in severe setbacks for Egypt and the broader Arab region.

The Suez Crisis provided Nasser with an opportunity to advance Arab nationalist ideals, reshaping the economic, social, and political landscape of the Arab world. His achievements illustrate two enduring lessons. First, Nasser exemplifies the pursuit of what rightfully belongs to a nation: the Suez Canal, constructed through the labor of millions of Egyptians, was reclaimed under his leadership. Second, his story serves as a

cautionary tale for powerful nations, demonstrating that underestimating the determination and unity of less dominant states can lead to unexpected outcomes. The Egyptian people's cohesion and resilience during the crisis defied expectations and affirmed the potency of collective action against oppression.

Reflecting on the culmination of these events, Nasser's triumph resonated far beyond Egypt. He secured prestige and respect across the Arab world, earning recognition from allies and opponents alike. More broadly, his leadership symbolized a victory for the Afro-Asian decolonization movement and reinforced the momentum toward a multipolar global order. Through his populist engagement and commitment to his people, Nasser transformed Egypt into a regional leader and solidified his place in history. From a middle-class upbringing to the pinnacle of political influence, Gamal Abdel Nasser's life embodies the transformative power of vision, determination, and national leadership in shaping the Arab world of today.

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