President Nasser, Pan-Arabism, and the Suez Crisis

Directions: Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper using the article and speech below.

1. Who was Nasser, and what was his plan for Egypt?
2. What is Pan-Arabism, and how is it different from Pan-Islamism?
3. Why did Pan-Arabism fail?
4. What happened to the Suez Canal during the 1956 crisis?
5. What is Nasser’s attitude towards the West? Why?

Nasser and Pan-Arabism
(from http://www.arab.net/egypt/history/et_nasser.html)

Gamal Abd-Al Nasser was a charismatic, ruthless and brilliant political leader who transformed pan-Arab politics and left a troubled legacy to Egypt and the Arab world. There is little doubt that Nasser was a sincere Egyptian patriot who wanted to improve the lot of his people. But he was also a man utterly committed to the retention of power at any cost which quickly evolved into a harsh, repressive socialist-style dictatorship. Those involved in political opposition were persecuted, driven underground, imprisoned, tortured, exiled or executed.

The Muslim Brotherhood which had initially supported the 1952 revolution, was outlawed and thousands of its members were imprisoned. The Wafd suffered a similar fate. Journalists who disagreed with the regime were silenced. A totalitarian pall fell over Egypt during the Nasser years. Industry and then private property was nationalized.

Ironically, as he was rounding up the opposition, Abd-Al Nasser achieved unprecedented popularity throughout the Arab world. He was admired for his rousing support of Arab Nationalism; his domestic social programmes (which, for the first time in Egypt’s history, sought to better the lot of the peasant majority); his dramatic nationalization of the Suez Canal; and also because of Egypt's heroic stand against the British invasion.

However Nasser's vehement opposition to Israel and his outspoken criticism of the West lost him US and European support for the building of the Aswan High Dam, forcing the Egyptian president to turn to the Soviets for aid. The need for capital to build the High Dam is cited as one of the reasons for nationalizing the Suez Canal.

Whatever Nasser’s initial intentions, the Suez Crisis propelled him to the forefront of the Arab Nationalist movement. Pan Arab unity became the overriding theme of the Arab world from the late 1950s up to 1967 and Nasser became its chief advocate and spokesman. The most dramatic display of Pan-Arabism took place in 1958 when Egypt united with Syria to form a single country, the United Arab Republic. But Nasser, for all his oratory, was essentially an Egyptian nationalist. The practical interests of the two countries never meshed and the union came to nothing.

But Nasser's revolutionary pan-Arabism was not all talk. Egypt entered the Yemeni civil war against the monarchy on the side of leftist guerrillas, further alienating the west and Saudi Arabia. At the same time he strengthened Egypt's ties to the Soviet Union, relying on the communist bloc for technical and military assistance to build an army to fight the US supported Israeli army. Nasser also supported the formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization, further alienating him from the West.

Nasser's relations with the West were complex. He knew that he could never develop Egypt without large infusions of foreign aid and he knew that the West was the most reliable source of this aid. Yet he came to discover that the more anti-Western his stance appeared to be, the more foreign aid he was offered by western countries to buy his moderation. When at one point in his regime he became more conciliatory to the west, his foreign aid dropped dramatically. As a founding-leader of the Non-aligned movement Nasser could have it both ways. Along with India's
Nehru and Indonesia's Sukarno, Gamal Abd-Al Nasser became a major international power-broker in the politics of the developing world.

Nasser's pan-Arab politics of the period tend to overshadow the achievements of his regime. Land reform was put into effect, breaking up the large feudal estates into smaller parcels of land and redistributing land to the fellaheen who for millennia had been an underclass of serfs. When the Aswan High Dam was completed, arable land in the Nile Valley increased by 15%. Nasser also built the country's industrial base, powered by electricity generated from the High Dam.

Prior to the revolution, Egypt had been an elitist society with few if any state-sponsored benefits to the large majority of the population. The new government established extensive free educational programmes for both boys and girls and developed the country's medical infrastructure.

The country had to pay a heavy price for much of this development. Political repression and censorship increased. The educated classes and political elite who could have contributed to the building of the country were disenfranchised and persecuted. They were replaced by an under-educated socialist bureaucracy which provided Nasser with his power base, but which was grossly incompetent, setting the lowest possible standards for the administration of a great country. Economic stagnation and industrial and agricultural inefficiency subverted real development. Rhetoric had replaced reality.

The Six Day War in 1967 marked the end of Nasser's Pan-Arab dream. The Arab world's ignominious defeat by Israel ended in the Israeli occupation of Syria's Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in Palestine and, most painfully for Egypt, the Sinai. However, the greatest symbolic humiliation for the Arabs was the fall of Jerusalem. The bombastic rhetoric of Arab leaders now seemed like so much hot air. Hatred of Israel and its chief supporter, the United States, reached a pinnacle.

The defeat of the Egyptian army and the loss of Sinai would have destroyed the political career of an Arab leader of lesser stature and indeed, Abd-Al Nasser offered to resign as president. Such was his extraordinary popularity that the Egyptian people staged massive spontaneous demonstrations in support of the president and he remained in power. His death in 1970 of a heart attack sent shock waves throughout the Arab world. In a stunning display of emotion, millions of Egyptians followed his funeral procession through the streets of Cairo.

President Nasser: Denouncement of the Proposal for a Canal Users’ Association, 1956
_Speech by President Nasser of the United Arab Republic, September 15, 1956_

In these decisive days in the history of mankind, these days in which truth struggles to have itself recognized in international chaos where powers of evil domination and imperialism have prevailed, Egypt stands firmly to preserve her sovereignty. Your country [Egypt] stands solidly and staunchly to preserve her dignity against imperialistic schemes of a number of nations who have uncovered their desires for domination and supremacy.

In these days and in such circumstances Egypt has resolved to show the world that when small nations decide to preserve their sovereignty, they will do that all right and that when these small nations are fully determined to defend their rights and maintain their dignity, they will undoubtedly succeed in achieving their ends. . . .

I am speaking in the name of every Egyptian Arab and in the name of all free countries and of all those who believe in liberty and are ready to defend it. I am speaking in the name of principles proclaimed by these countries in the Atlantic Charter. But they are now violating these principles and it has become our lot to shoulder the responsibility of reaffirming and establishing them anew. . . .

We have tried by all possible means to cooperate with those countries which claim to assist smaller nations and which promised to collaborate with us but they demanded their fees in advance. This we refused so they started to fight with
us. They said they will pay toward building the High Dam and then they withdrew their offer and cast doubts on the Egyptian economy. Are we to declaim [disclaim?] our sovereign right? Egypt insists her sovereignty must remain intact and refuses to give up any part of that sovereignty for the sake of money.

Egypt nationalized the Egyptian Suez Canal Company.... Egypt nationalized this Egyptian company and declared freedom of navigation will be preserved.

But the imperialists became angry. Britain and France said Egypt grabbed the Suez Canal as if it were part of France or Britain. The British Foreign Secretary forgot that only two years ago he signed an agreement stating the Suez Canal is an integral part of Egypt. Egypt declared she was ready to negotiate. But as soon as negotiations began threats and intimidations started. . . .

Eden stated in the House of Commons there shall be no discrimination between states using the canal. We on our part reaffirm that and declare there is no discrimination between canal users. He also said Egypt shall not be allowed to succeed because that would spell success for Arab nationalism and would be against their policy, which aims at the protection of Israel.

Today they are speaking of a new association whose main objective would be to rob Egypt of the canal and deprive her of rightful canal dues. Suggestions made by Eden in the House of Commons which have been backed by France and the United States are a clear violation of the 1888 convention, since it is impossible to have two bodies organizing navigation in the canal. . . .

By stating that by succeeding, Abdel Nasser would weaken Britain’s stand against Arab nationalism, Eden is in fact admitting his real objective is not Abdel Nasser as such but rather to defeat Arab nationalism and crush its cause. Eden speaks and finds his own answer. A month ago he let out the cry that he was after Abdel Nasser. Today the Egyptian people are fully conscious of their sovereign rights and Arab nationalism is fully awakened to its new destiny....

Those who attack Egypt will never leave Egypt alive. We shall fight a regular war, a total war, a guerrilla war. Those who attack Egypt will soon realize they brought disaster upon themselves. He who attacks Egypt attacks the whole Arab world. They say in their papers the whole thing will be over in forty-eight hours. They do not know how strong we really are.

We believe in international law. But we will never submit. We shall show the world how a small country can stand in the face of great powers threatening with armed might. Egypt might be a small power but she is great inasmuch as she has faith in her power and convictions. I feel quite certain every Egyptian shares the same convictions as I do and believes in everything I am stressing now.

We shall defend our freedom and independence to the last drop of our blood. This is the stanch feeling of every Egyptian. The whole Arab nation will stand by us in our common fight against aggression and domination. Free peoples, too, people who are really free will stand by us and support us against the forces of tyranny....

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