

Chapter 12: Chapter exercises

The 1967 war and the struggle for Arab nationalism

In this chapter, Smith looks at identity politics in the 1967 war. The Arab national idea in the twentieth century, defined on the basis of language and culture, sought to unite Arab peoples from Morocco to the Arabian Peninsula in one state. It failed, owing to rivalry for leadership of the movement, especially between Egypt and Syria, which ultimately became a major factor inciting the 1967 war. More recently, after the 2003 Iraq War and the Arab Spring, we can observe a deeper weakening of the internal cohesion of Arab states, especially along Sunni–Shia lines.

Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1947, its history has been marked with clashes with the Arab world. In 1956, the Arab–Israeli animosity was housed within Cold War lines, as the involvement of western countries and the Soviet Union testifies. The 1956 Suez crisis proved a political failure for France and Britain, and resulted in the resignation of the British Prime Minister, Anthony Eden. Meanwhile, Nasser’s reputation as the defender of Arab nationalism was strengthened.

In contrast to the Suez crisis, the preliminaries to the 1967 Arab–Israeli War directly involved Palestinian factions: Palestinians served competing Arab state interests, while seeking to define their own objectives. In the ten years following the Suez crisis, rivalries between Arab states had been put aside under the single leadership and vision of Egypt. The single most important issue was the Palestinian question. Egypt’s Nasser agreed to back the formation of an official organization that represented the Palestinians—the PLO—intending to use the PLO to focus Palestinian attention on political concerns under Egyptian control. Egyptian sponsorship of PLO activities would counter Syrian charges of ignoring the Palestinians, while diffusing Syrian calls for war with Israel. Damascus continued to incite tensions with Israel, if only to bolster its own Ba’athist image as the leader of Arab nationalism. Israel in turn threatened Syria with retaliatory attacks. In order to boost his anti-Israeli stance, Nasser sent troops into the Sinai Peninsula. The war began when Israel attacked Egypt, resulting in a lightning capture of a lot of territory thus bringing large areas of the West Bank and Gaza under Israeli rule.

Assess the role played by Arab Nationalist trends in the 1967 war against Israel.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/arabunity/2008/03/200852518359222993.html>

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6709173.stm

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/consequences-of-the-1967-war>

<http://www.merip.org/mer/mer146/1967-consequences-catastrophe>

Louis, Wm Roger and Avi Shlaim (2012) *The 1967 Arab Israeli War: Origins and Consequences* (New York: Cambridge University Press)