Arab Nationalism’s Downward Slide, 1958–1967
Adeed Dawisha

This chapter discusses Arab nationalism’s downward slide. The Syrians had imagined the United Arab Republic (UAR) as a union of equals under the leadership of Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir. However, Syria had little choice but to follow in Egypt’s shadow, and to do things the way Egyptians did them. This created backlash from the Syrian business and army circles, resulting in the Syrian coup and the end of the UAR. Momentous as it was, the Syrian secession did not mean the end of the Arab nationalist movement. However, Arab nationalism still did suffer a very serious setback. If Iraq’s refusal to join the UAR was the first dent in Arab nationalism’s seemingly impregnable armor, the dissolution of the UAR was a significant fracture.

Consolidating Arab Nationalism: The Emergence of “Arab” Egypt
Adeed Dawisha

This chapter examines the emergence of “Arab” Egypt. When the idea of a Western alliance threatened to isolate Egypt in 1953, an Egyptian campaign to galvanize the citizens of other Arab states against Western alliances had to tap the most readily acceptable bond that drew Egyptians and the other Arabs together, that of Arab nationalism—the notion that, politically divided as they were, the Arabs still constituted one indivisible nation. Thus, the phenomenal speed with which Arab
nationalism became the predominant radical, on the whole anti-Western, ideology in the region in the 1950s resulted in large measure from Egypt’s onslaught against Western alliances. Moreover, Egypt’s undoubted success was aided substantially by two factors: the country’s own capabilities, and Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir’s committed leadership and single-minded pursuit of his goals.

The Demise of Arab Nationalism: A Postmortem
Adeed Dawisha

in Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair

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This chapter argues that after the Six Day War, Arab nationalism’s slide toward political marginality became irreversible. What stamped on it the sense of finality was the fact that it was Egypt under Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir that lost. Indeed, Egypt’s devastating defeat was Arab nationalism’s mortal loss, for the fate of Arab nationalism during the struggles, triumphs, and reversals of the 1950s and 1960s was inexorably linked to Egypt and its charismatic president. Had it just been Syria or Jordan, or even both, who lost the war, it would not have been the unmitigated disaster for Arab nationalism that the June war turned out to be. But Arab nationalism could not survive the abject humiliation inflicted on its acknowledged prophet, who promised a fabled triumph in this al-Ma’raka al-Masiriya, the battle of destiny.

Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century
Adeed Dawisha

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Like a great dynasty that falls to ruin and is eventually remembered more for its faults than its feats, Arab nationalism is remembered mostly for its humiliating rout in the 1967 Six Day War, for inter-Arab divisions, and for words and actions distinguished by their meagerness; but people tend to forget the majesty that Arab nationalism once was. This book brings this majesty to life through a sweeping historical account of its dramatic rise and fall. The book argues that Arab nationalism—inspired by nineteenth-century German Romantic nationalism—really took root after World War I and not in the nineteenth century, as many believe,
and that it blossomed only in the 1950s and 1960s under the charismatic leadership of Egypt’s Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir. The book traces the ideology’s passage from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire through its triumphant ascendancy in the late 1950s with the unity of Egypt and Syria and with the nationalist revolution of Iraq, to the mortal blow it received in the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel, and its eventual eclipse. The book criticizes the common failure to distinguish between the broader, cultural phenomenon of “Arabism” and the political, secular desire for a united Arab state that defined Arab nationalism. In recent decades, competitive ideologies—not least, Islamic militancy—have inexorably supplanted the latter, the book contends.