

# Egypt and controlling the Nile: From mythologies to real politics

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Sep 07, 2017



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River Nile is steeped in Egyptian mythology. But the waters of the Nile are a crucial resource for several other countries. Conflicts over the world's longest river, even in recent times, have almost led to war. This should not be the case. The Nile waters must be managed as a source of cooperation and sustainable development for all the countries involved.

## **1. Introduction**

The Nile River occupies a central place in the general perception of all Egyptians since the pre-Christian era of ancient Egypt. The river has been the nucleus of the ancient world and its lifeline, thereby justifying the sanctification of its

waters. Claiming a lack of knowledge on the part of the ancient Egyptians could not have been why they perceived that the source of the Nile water was of divine nature. The origin of the Nile's water and its flow for the ancient Egyptians was the god *Noun*, the Lord of the eternal water, who was the cradle of all living beings including the gods themselves.

It is possible that this sacred development of the Nile River, which dominated ancient Egyptian thought, is due to two fundamental reasons. First, Egypt was considered the gift of the Nile, thereby explaining the constant respect and veneration it received from the Egyptians; and, second, the inconceivable notion that the lifeline of Egypt stems from outside its holy lands. Based on this belief in the holy progression of the Nile, this great river became a determinant of Egypt as a homeland and its national identity.

As Emile Ludwig identified, the Egyptian god *Amun* deemed Egypt as the country where the Nile flooded from, and that anyone who drinks from the Nile after Elephantine is Egyptian [1]. Moreover, Seneca argued: "All rivers were '*vulgares aqua*' but the Nile was the 'most noble' of all watercourses." [2] The modern Egyptian thinker, Jamal Himdan, emphasized this sense of thinking by saying: "The first civilization was the fruit of a blissful union between Egypt and the Nile. If history is the father of the Egyptians, Egypt is the mother of the world, and the Nile is simply the greatest ancestor of human civilization". [4]

## **2. Danger emanating from the South**

There is no doubt that this link between Egypt and the Nile River has created a sense of insecurity coupled with the existence of a serious threat to the lives of Egyptians with the possibility of a disruption in the flow of the Nile waters. An

excerpt from the reign of King Djoser of the Third Dynasty of Egypt is a clear indication of the effects of halting the flow of the Nile water after the famine hit Egypt for seven years, which reads:

"I was in mourning on my throne, those of the palace were in grief .... Because Hapy had failed to come in time. In a period of seven years, Grain was scant, Kernels were discharged up ... Every man robbed his twin ... Children cried ... The hearts of the old were needed ... Temples were shut, Shrines covered with dust, everyone was in distress .... I consulted One of the staff of the Ibis, the Chief lector-priest of Imhotep, son of Ptah South-of-the-Wall .... He departed, he returned to me quickly, He let me know the flow of Hapy ..." [5]

These ancient legends were also associated with Christianity and Islam, where the great river remained linked to the general Egyptian conscience as a point of holiness and reverence. The relationship between Egypt and Ethiopia remained uncertain because of Egypt's belief in Ethiopia's ability to divert the river, which could cause famine and overall losses for Egyptians. After Christianity entered Ethiopia, Egypt sent the Bishop of the Ethiopian Church from Alexandria. Consequently, there has been a sense of stability in the regional balance of power as a result of this religious variable. If Ethiopia is the source of water, then Egypt is the home of the *abun* - the Egyptian metropolitan bishop - for Ethiopia.

The conversion of the Nile and its domination became a religious issue in the Egyptian and Ethiopian imagination, and until the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was associated with a religious miracle in Christianity. In Islam, Muslims have conquered the Nile River and considered it the master of the rivers, and they have added to it an element of holiness, as many Muslim scholars have linked it to many Islamic texts. Furthermore, some

historical sources refer to the so-called "Nile Charter" which the Caliph Omar Ibn al-Khattab wrote about, citing the annual celebration of the Nile's flood, where the flood was emanating from God Himself and not from the river. [6] This reveals the centrality of the Nile River in Egyptian customs since the era of ancient religions and even Islam.

Along with the prevailing Egyptian religious perception of the Nile River, the evidence confirming that the origins of the Nile waters lie outside the Egyptian borders has prompted those who ruled Egypt throughout history to try to dominate the tropical region where the Nile waters embark from. The father of modern Egypt, Mohamed Ali, summoned a group of European engineers to come to Egypt who unanimously establish that the Nile's sources under the control of any other country besides Egypt would be detrimental to Egypt's livelihood and future. Hence, with Muhammad Ali Pasha and after him with Khedive Ismail, great attention was given to pinpointing and revealing the origins of the Nile. Muhammad Ali traveled himself and oversaw his campaigns and their administration that were sent to the Sudan and beyond. It was no secret that the aim of these scouting campaigns for the Nile sources was to secure the flow of water coming to Egypt.[7]

The Nasserite leadership recognized the importance of water in constructing the new national ideology, where the role of the Nile waters was not limited to ascertaining the Egyptian identity, but it had become a source of life which wars could be fought over. Egypt had already been able to expand the 1959 agreement with Sudan separately, with no other river state joining it. Therefore, it has become commonplace, as mentioned in another study from the Egyptian national perspective, to describe the Nile River as Egypt's principle artery of life. It is life itself for Egypt. This statement does not apply to the same extent to the other riparian states. Therefore,

one of the major strategic threats to Egyptian national security is the threat to its vital resources that lay beyond Egyptian borders.

Despite the construction of the high dam, by which Nasser sought to modernize Egypt by transforming it into the 'Japan of Africa', he did not free the Egyptian administration from the external threat complex. In effect, the waters of the Nile will always remain one of the main determinants of Egyptian foreign policy towards the basin countries. The matter of securing the flow of Nile water remains dominant in Egypt's decision-making, regardless of who controls Cairo.

On a number of occasions, Egypt has demonstrated its preparedness to go to war if the situation so warranted. For example, in the 1970s when Ethiopia tried to establish projects in the Blue Nile without consultation with other fluvial states, Egypt warned Addis Ababa against such destabilizing actions. Egypt made it clear to Ethiopia that Cairo was prepared to go to war to protect its national interests. [8] Egypt's interests in Sudan are centered on the desire for stability in Khartoum. Specifically, the successful governments in Egypt have been concerned with potential hostile leaders taking over in Sudan. Similarly, any internal or external threats to stability in Sudan are viewed with great concern by Egyptian foreign policy-makers.<sup>[9]</sup>

For decades, Egypt has become the dominant water power in the Nile Basin region, where it has veto power vis-à-vis other riparian states, which has kept the situation as it is in the Nile Basin region. No other Nile state has dared, as John Waterbury would say, to engage in a confrontation with Egypt, especially with respect to Egypt's national security. [10]

The Egyptian political and media discourse, which has prevailed in all its intellectual and ideological diversity since the beginning of the new millennium, has the same historic imperatives that bind Egypt and its sacred right to the waters of the Nile. Perhaps what was written by one of the famous Egyptian writers in 2010 reflects Egyptian concerns regarding its water security. Fahmi Huwaidi explained that:

"The Egyptian antiquities embodied the fact that the Nile River is the source of life in Egypt through a painting depicting a boat combining the pharaoh with the symbol of the Nile Hapi with the symbol of justice Ma'at."

Egyptian researchers considered this painting as a representation of the map of Egypt since the dawn of history, based on the three ruling arms of power: the Pharaoh, the Nile, and the Mediator of Justice, *Ma'at*. This is what the Pharaohs defended and protected for thousands of years, and what modern Egyptians are struggling to install and preserve in the twenty-first century. While it was thought that the Pharaoh's order and the Maat's justice order occupied the nation's top security concerns, it came as a surprise to the Egyptians that the power arm of Hapi's was in danger. It is true that the danger is neither immediate nor imminent, but the initial precepts are not misguided.

Egypt's historical share of the Nile's stable waters since 1929 and its agreement with Sudan in 1959 is now under scrutiny, in the same instance that Egypt realized that it needed to add another 11 billion to its share because of the sizeable increase in population and consumption rates. In light of its need for a bigger share of the Nile's resources, Egypt is staggered that they have to fight a long battle to maintain their original stake. [11]

There is a strong belief in Egyptian and Arab thought that there is a correlation between the claim of the upstream countries to reconsider the Nile water quotas in the mid-nineties, with the return of Israel to the region. At a time when Egypt withdrew itself from its African involvement after the assassination attempt on President Mubarak in 1995 in Addis Ababa, Israeli and international policies have been active in order to encircle Egyptian security in its African extension [12]. The former Egyptian minister of irrigation and water resources, Mohammed Abu Zayd, expressed this thought when he stated in February 2009, that there was an Israeli-American plan to pressure Egypt to supply water to Tel Aviv, by raising the issue of the internationalization of rivers.

There are many Egyptian trends, especially those under the veil of Arab nationalism, which speak of the waters of the Nile as an Arab issue. In other words, as Helmi Sharawi says, Afro-Arab cooperation is not only to resolve African economic crises, but also to contribute to the Arab-African issues, foremost of which is the Nile water crisis. The water problem is a direct complication for Egypt, and its responsibility is necessarily distributed amongst many international regional and national parties, to currently include the Gulf States as well, as a key player in the balancing of investments in Ethiopia. Therefore, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is regarded as an Arab Gulf issue and not just a purely Egyptian affair.

### **3. Challenge to Egyptian water hegemony**

Despite the announcement of the Ethiopian government on the construction of GERD in 2011 and the agreement to form a tripartite committee to assess the impact of the dam on the downstream state (Egypt and Sudan) in September of the same year, Egypt did not realize the dimensions of this danger

coming from the South until 28 May 2013, when Ethiopia diverted the course of the Blue Nile, marking the beginning of the actual implementation phase. The Egyptian reaction, which was embodied by the meeting of the former President Mohamed Morsi with politicians and activists, combined the scenes of tragedy and absurdity at the same time, which may have implied Egypt's power decline in its regional environment. The follow-up assessment of the developments in the Upper Nile states over the past ten years showed that Egypt's strategic thinking failed to understand its regional variables and remained locked in the old delusions that viewed Egypt as a dominant regional force, while the situation remained the same in the Nile Basin countries. In effect, three major transformations can be pointed out that have affected the water interactions in the Nile Basin countries and led to the crisis of filling the GERD <sup>[13]</sup>:

**First:** The evolution of the political and economic bloc in East Africa, which took on an institutional character in 1999 when the East African Community Agreement was signed, which included Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi, all from the Upper Nile countries. There was no doubt that this regional movement began to call for the need to review the international conventions on the Nile, particularly the 1929 Agreement between Egypt and the United Kingdom, and the Nile Water Agreement between Egypt and Sudan in 1959 concerning the establishment of the Aswan Dam in Egypt. This review signaled the first step towards rejecting the legal regime governing the Nile Basin, which was inherited from the colonial era.

**Second:** the strategy of the Ethiopian dams, which was adopted by the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, aims to maximize the use of Ethiopia's water potential by investing in water infrastructure. This vision entails building more than twenty dams, headed by the GERD, to achieve the goal of



transforming Ethiopia into a major hydroelectric regional power. Ethiopia is seeking to produce about 8,000 megawatts of electricity over the next decade, exporting the surplus to its neighbours such as Djibouti, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and Egypt.

**Third:** Signing the Nile Basin Initiative in 1999, where all river countries, including Egypt, adopted a new vision that seeks to achieve sustainable economic and social development through unbiased and equitable use of the Nile waters. The negotiation process continued until the framework cooperation agreement was reached in 2010, which was rejected by Egypt and Sudan because it did not stipulate the natural and historical rights of the two downstream states in the Nile waters. Moreover, this initiative resulted in the withdrawal of Egypt's veto power, which it has historically enjoyed with respect to the water projects of the Upper Nile countries.

#### **4. Transformation in the regional 'balance of power' equation**

It is not difficult to understand the prior transformations that led to the union of the Upper Nile countries under the leadership of Ethiopia, in the face of both Egypt and Sudan and rejecting the principle of relying on the Nile River's legal system inherited from the colonial era. This leads us to distinguish between three types of change and the transformation witnessed by the dynamics of interaction within the Nile Basin region.

The first change was the shift in the regional balance of power in favour of Ethiopia with the decline of Egypt's and Sudan's power. The secession of South Sudan and the re-partitioning of Somalia served as a strategic adversary of the Arab regional system in its African expansion, and at the same time was a strategic addition to neighbouring non-Arab states such as Ethiopia and Kenya, also from Upper Nile region. It can be said

that the effects of the Arab Spring and the American and European war on terrorism, have strengthened Ethiopia's regional standing as a strategic ally, that can be relied upon by the United States and Europe in the Horn of Africa and East Africa. On the other hand, Egypt has resigned itself and suffered from the absence of political consensus at home as well as a lack of vision in its foreign policy, which signaled its retreat as the regional player 'to be reckoned with.'

The second change was the shift in national governance systems in the Nile Basin countries. There has been a kind of relative political stability with a gradual increase in economic growth rates. Ethiopia presents a striking example of this. The ruling front has been able to resolve the question of national identity through the adoption of the federal formula of government and statehood since 1991 and has achieved great success in imposing security and achieving reasonable rates of economic growth. Ethiopia is, therefore, seeking to exploit its water resources not only in the production of electricity, but also in providing a large water supply that can be relied upon throughout the year in agriculture, thereby limiting the negative impact of climate change. This transformation would change Ethiopia's typecast from a state dependent on foreign aid to an energy-exporting state, thus reinforcing its regional standing.

The third alteration was the shift in the issue of financing the dams and building them through various international mechanisms and institutions without relying on the traditional financing mechanisms monopolized by the World Bank, the African Development Bank or other international institutions, which required Egypt's prior approval for water projects in the Upper Nile states. The Ethiopian government has been able to promote its own dam building program through its green environment-friendly development approach to strengthen ties with the United States and Western countries. China's entry in

this scene as an important player in the financing of water infrastructure construction projects in the Nile Basin countries added further complications to the Egyptian position, in the face of these new regional challenges.

The most serious of all is the transformation of public opinion in the Upper Nile countries with regards to water and the need to redistribute it among all the riparian countries of the Nile. It is striking that there are hostile tendencies against the downstream countries, especially Egypt, to the point of accusing the Egyptian policy of not taking into consideration the interests of other basin countries. As a result, the Egypt is in dire need to further analyze and reflect on the causes and justifications of these changes, to cultivate a constructive way of dealing with these developments.

## **5. Assessing the GERD from a different perspective**

It is interesting that most of what has been written or reported on regarding the effects of the GERD on Egyptian national security was not without exaggeration or understatement. The figures and estimates expressed are merely judgments that may reflect a particular political vision or misunderstanding on many occasions. Interestingly, the Ethiopian decision to build the GERD is not surprising in itself, since Ethiopia has already built a number of dams and hydroelectric power stations on the banks of some of the tributaries and rivers in its territory. One of the most striking examples is the Gibe III Dam along the Omo River. However, these dams are not comparable to the GERD, which is expected to generate 6,000MW of electricity. This dam, if completed, will become one of the top ten dams in the world, raising Ethiopia's regional profile and placing it in the ranks of emerging African powers.

This may explain the secret of popular cohesion and political determination to move ahead with the implementation of the Ethiopian Dam package. Ethiopia's national spirit emerged with the purchase of the instruments for financing the dam by citizens from both inside and outside Ethiopia, which resulted in the extension of the financing process towards the construction of the dam itself. Interestingly, these moments of Ethiopian nationalistic pride are a reflection and a reminder of the atmosphere during Nasserite Egypt with the construction of the Aswan Dam. According to the vision of the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the GERD will achieve the interests of both Sudan and Egypt by preventing floods and providing land for irrigation. Thus, in his view, both Egypt and Sudan should contribute to the costs of building the dam by 20% to 30% each. However, according to Zenawi "due to the lack of justice in the water system of the Nile Basin countries, Ethiopia will bear alone the costs of building the dam."

Perhaps the most difficult situation that Egypt will face is the process of filling the reservoir dam, which depends on the varied rates of rainfall. If the rates of rainfall are high, the process of filling the reservoir may take two years at most. In the case of drought and less rainfall, the filling process will take longer. Not only that, but the amount of water in the dam reservoir will have a significant impact on the flow of Nile water. In effect, the rate of water flow in the Nile will be affected at varying degrees, that is, Egypt's share of Nile water.

Ethiopia seems to be aware of the magnitude of the problems that may occur when the dam's reservoir is filled. In order to avoid this, the process of filling the reservoir in a responsible manner and without preventing or detaining water from the downstream countries should be done, as it would be unacceptable according to the rules of international dealings, and would be lacking on moral grounds. The implication here

is the impossibility of predicting the scopes of reservoir filling, as well as other adverse impacts of dams on the environment, such as high salinity, pollution and soil erosion in the surrounding areas. All of this may lead to the need for dialogue and negotiation amongst all parties. However, the danger of building the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam is not part of the Nile Basin Initiative, the Framework Cooperation Agreement or any bilateral agreement between Ethiopia and Egypt. It is just an Ethiopian project that is part of a national strategy to build dams and use water resources. The lack of coordination between the Nile Basin countries, especially Ethiopia and Egypt with regard to the use of water, will cause great harm to the downstream countries.

Although there are some reports warning about future water wars, historical evidence does not support this trend, as water should be a source of cooperation, not conflict. If some Egyptian leaders have threatened to use the military option to control the sources of the Nile and ensure the continuation of Egyptian hegemony, it would be very difficult to execute, as it will do more harm than good. The late President Anwar Sadat had declared that he was ready to use military force to destroy any water installations in Ethiopia that could harm Egyptian water security. Diplomatic leaks also reported that former President Hosni Mubarak asked for a military base to be built south of Khartoum, to enable Egyptian forces to hit Ethiopian water targets on the Blue Nile. In any event, any direct military action against the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam could lead to floods and landslides, as well as incalculable consequences that would harm the Egyptian-Ethiopian relations in particular and the Egyptian-Ethiopian relations in general.

A review of prevailing folklore emphasizes the concepts of competition and hostility. The biography of Saif bin Yazan, an essential figure in Mamluk culture and history, indicated the

predominance of war and confrontation between the Arabs and Ethiopia. The complex location and population explains the Ethiopian public's perception of fear towards Arabs and the Arab world. Ethiopia is a landlocked nation and has a heterogeneous mix of population, which has been enshrined as "an island of Christianity amidst a sea of Islam." Moreover, the Arab stance in support of Eritrea's independence may have reinforced this Ethiopian fear, with most Ethiopians seeing that they have lost legitimate access to the sea, particularly the Port of Assab<sup>[14]</sup>.

However, in the early seventh century, Abyssinia was the refuge and sanctuary for Muslims whom the Prophet (PBUH) had ordered to migrate there, because there was a righteous king in whose presence no one was wronged. Thus, the land of Abyssinia was a middle world (*Dar al-Hijra*) between the world of Islam and the war, in the history of Arabs and Muslims. In the future, Ethiopia would represent unmistakable symbolic connotations in the march for unity and the African struggle for liberation and renaissance, which reflects its embrace of the most important institutions of African common action. This means that there is a dire need for a strategic dialogue between Egypt and Ethiopia, in which all issues of common concern are discussed, as well as thinking of contemporary models and frameworks for building balanced relations between the two parties.

In any case, Egypt must adopt a clear strategic vision to deal with the Nile water issue, for the purpose of meeting the challenges of water security, in light of the remarkable transformations witnessed by the Upper Nile countries over the last ten years. The Egyptian response should be thought-provoking, as non-traditional alternatives and policies should be used, including the consideration of other projects to increase Egypt's water resources. This may necessitate the

adoption of a conciliatory political and media discourse vis-a-vis Ethiopia and the Nile Basin countries, as the language of escalation and threats has always proven counterproductive. Conceivably, the best discourse is to focus on the Nile water as a source of cooperation and sustainable development for all people living on both ends of the river.

The resort to the discourse of historical interests and lack of respect for the urgent developmental demands of the Upper Nile countries is unrealistic and does not take into account the changes of geo-strategic formulation in the new Nile basin. In today's world, the most acceptable slogan should be "no harm done and no harm bestowed" in water interactions between the Nile Basin countries.

## **Conclusion**

We should stand against the rhetoric that calls for the drums of war and uses scare tactics when it pertains to the Nile waters and threats to Egyptian presence, by saying that we are facing a war of survival. Similarly, we reject the hate speech and incitement against Egypt adopted by some writers and officials in Upper Nile states. We must all rise above, and adopt the values of dialogue and tolerance to promote the common interests and benefits of the peoples of the Nile Basin. As the wise Imam Ali, may God have mercy on him, once said: O Malik, people are two types, either your brother in religion or your counterpart in creation."

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## **Endnotes**

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