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28 SEPTEMBER
2021

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Dr. Tarek Abboud

The Egyptian people, state, and institutions have recently been preoccupied with the developments of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) due to the significance of the Nile River to Egyptians.

The Nile River is considered the lifeblood of Egypt and its population, which now exceed one hundred million people. Therefore, any restriction on the Egyptians' share of the Nile water will constitute a threat to Egypt's national security, on the economic and social levels, through the political and military levels, and not ending with Egypt's reputation, civilization and history as a leading regional country, with respect to culture and leadership of liberation movements.

This paper highlights the importance of the Nile River for the Egyptian national security and the role of regional and international countries in fueling the dispute between the Nile Basin countries, particularly Israel. It also suggests why the United States stands by Ethiopia in this conflict, and addresses the role entrusted to the UN Security Council in bringing the views of the conflicting countries closer, in addition to discussing Egypt's military options in undermining this dangerous project.

Introduction

The Egyptian interpretation of the concept of national security is no longer based on the strategic aspect alone, but it extended to coincide with water security as well. Although water in general has been a subject of conflicts for a long time, it has recently emerged that fresh water is the subject of the current conflict, especially after the conflict over salt water (seas and oceans), was resolved through interstate agreements. However, the 1990s is considered the decade of conflict over water resources, particularly in the Middle East, amid limited water resources concentrated in major river basins such as the Nile River¹.

¹ Ashraf Mohamed Kishk, Egyptian Water Policy towards the Nile Basin Countries (Cairo: The Egyptian African Studies Program, Faculty of Economics and Political Science, 2006), p. 14.

In light of the regional and international changes that have taken place through the successive developments that the world has witnessed since the end of the eighties and nineties, Egypt faces a real challenge, amid the entry of new actors into the Nile Basin region, such as "Israel", the United States, and the World Bank, that launched new concepts, such as water pricing, water privatization, and water stock exchanges².

Importance of the Nile River to Egypt

The Nile River is of great importance to the economy of its basin countries, especially in the agricultural field. The floodplains of the Nile used to be the early areas in which man practiced the craft of agriculture, settled there, and established villages and cities. The Nile River waters were the main reason for the spread of urbanization in the Egyptian lands, which were considered desert areas. Also, many tourist centers and rest houses have been established along the Nile, where this sector has greatly developed in both Egypt and Sudan.

The Nile has also been used for transportation since ancient times, as some channels were established to link the Nile River and the Red Sea, where these channels were used as trade routes linking Asia and Africa, until this later developed into the idea of digging the Suez Canal that connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile Basin countries are: Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and Congo; and most recently South Sudan.

What is meant by water security?

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) defines the water, food and energy nexus as a comprehensive concept of the interconnected nature of the global resource system. This tripartite affects each other, and none of them can be realized or managed efficiently and effectively to achieve developmental and social goals and ensure ecosystem balance and sustainability, in isolation from the other. As the name suggests, the tripartite includes three main objectives: water security, food security, and energy security.

² Bashir Sherif Al-Barghout, Israeli ambitions in the waters of Palestine and the neighboring Arab countries (Amman: Dar Al-Jalil, 1986), p. 86

The three objectives belong to the scope of social infrastructure; which expands its effects and disseminates them through all channels of economic, social and political performance of the state, and highlights water security among them³.

Therefore, water security is considered the ability to sustainably provide, access and use water, where this water should be fit for drinking or for use in a number of areas.

This requires a set of measures taken by countries or organizations to provide water, in addition to improving the means of water delivery, transportation, use and rationalization, which means the need to develop a general water management policy aimed at avoiding waste of water.

What are the consequences of achieving water security?

When water security exists, many positive results will be achieved, including:

- Providing safe drinking water at reasonable prices to all members of society without exception
- Reducing the problems arising from climate change and its variability, and related phenomena such as desertification
- Providing a sense of security for the members of society, which is positively reflected on the activity of members of society in general, which leads to improving the economy and achieving political, economic and social stability in the state.

When will water security be achieved?

- Water security is achieved when there is an adequate amount of water for all individuals residing in a geographic area or country, as well as a sustainable supply of water to replace the water consumed by individuals.
- Water security also includes protecting community members from damages caused by unstable water supplies such as desertification, drought and floods.

³ Mohamed Abdel-Hadi, The Renaissance Dam: Dimensions of the crisis and confrontation between Egypt and Ethiopia, Al Jazeera Net., 4 November 2019.

- Water security can also be sought by implementing plans to secure water by unconventional methods such as desalinating sea or ocean water, withdrawing underground aquifers, or even waging wars for control of water resources in other countries.
- In the context of seeking to set a specific criterion to determine water security, where some developed the concept of "water security limit", which refers to the average per capita share in a country of fresh, renewable water resources to meet its various needs. Experts have globally agreed to consider the average of 1,000 cubic meters of water per capita annually is the minimum limit below which a country can be exposed to water scarcity problems; and that an average of five hundred cubic meters of water is considered water scarcity. Undoubtedly, there is a close organic relationship between water security and economic and political independence.

Renaissance Dam

It is known that the Renaissance Dam project has been on the table since 1926, and that it has only become a problem for the downstream countries with the emergence of water scarcity. The historical origins of the idea of the Renaissance Dam trace back to the forties of the twentieth century, when the US Reclamation Office identified twenty-six sites to build dams in Ethiopia, most notably four dams on the Blue Nile, including the current Renaissance Dam.

The Americans resumed interest in the Blue Nile dams in 1964, raising their number to thirty-four dams on that blue river alone, which some experts consider as a response to the late President Gamal Abdel Nasser's establishment of the High Dam in cooperation with the Soviet Union⁴.

The Renaissance Dam is located on the Blue Nile in the state of Benishangul-Qama in Ethiopia, near the Ethiopian-Sudanese border, between twenty to forty kilometers away. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is one of the largest dams in the world, as it is being built at the end of the Blue

⁴ Intisar Maani Ali, The Geopolitical Dimensions of Building the Renaissance Dam on the Downstream Countries, Journal of the Faculty of Education for Girls, (Volume 28 (1), 2017), p. 284

Nile River, with the aim of improving Ethiopia's ability to generate electricity and export it to neighboring countries⁵.

Pros and Cons

Both Egypt and Sudan are concerned about the impact of the Renaissance Dam on their water shares, especially as Egypt, which is actually among the water-poor countries, suffers a drop in its per capita water share below the internationally approved rate of water scarcity (about a thousand cubic meters per capita annually), with estimates indicating the possibility of Egypt falling under a water deficit of thirty-two billion cubic meters in 2025.

As for Sudan, its situation is somewhat better, with its share of 18.5 billion cubic meters of Nile water, and a per capita share that exceeds the international scarcity rate; where it remains outside the scope of water scarcity. However, with its dependence on the Nile for about 80% of its needs, Sudan remains exposed to the failure of its water resources to meet its current and future development needs, amounting to about 10 billion cubic meters currently, which will of course increase with the pressures resulting from the Ethiopian dam⁶.

This means the fragility of the water situation of Egypt and Sudan at the present time; which exacerbates the expected direct water impacts of the dam on both downstream countries, in addition to the geological and environmental effects, as well as casting a bleak shadow on its effects on food and energy together.

Egypt's concerns

Egypt's concerns about the Renaissance Dam, amid the lack of coordination with respect to its establishment and the failure to implement the recognized agreements, stem from the fact that the four proposed Ethiopian dams on the Blue Nile aim to fully control the waters of the Blue Nile, which

⁵ Dr. Faisal Hassan Al-Sheikh, The future of inter-relations between the countries of the Eastern Nile Basin in light of the water reality of the post-GERD period, African Studies No. 56, pages 28, 26, 25. 2016.

⁶ Sawsan Sabih Hamdan, The Impact of the Renaissance Dam on the Future of Water Resources in Egypt and Sudan", Al-Mustansiriya Journal for Arab and International Studies, Al-Mustansiriya University, Al-Mustansiriya Center for Arab and International Studies, Baghdad, Issue 51, 2015), p. 298

is the main tributary of the Nile water, and accordingly control Egypt's water share and cancel (or at least limit) the role of the High Dam in securing Egypt's water future, and that the Renaissance Dam alone, with its current design with a capacity of 74 billion cubic meters, will have violent negative effects on Egypt's water share, and on the production of electricity from the High Dam and Aswan Reservoir. Moreover, during periods of filling the GERD reservoir and then during its operation, these negative effects will intensify during periods of drought, as supplying Egypt and Sudan with sufficient water will conflict with maximizing energy production from the Renaissance Dam⁷.

A good follower of the Renaissance Dam crisis will find that the main goal that Egypt seeks to achieve in the negotiations with Ethiopia is to sign a "binding legal agreement" to preserve its water share from the Nile River, which we can call a strategic goal, not only in the negotiations with Ethiopia, but also in building its future policies with the Nile Basin countries.

However, the problem is deeper than the Renaissance Dam, where the real problem lies in the likely building of other dams in the future, which may directly affect Egypt. In the event that the Renaissance Dam is built without concluding a legal and binding agreement with Ethiopia, this will encourage the Nile Basin countries that are signatories to the Nile Basin Initiative to build other dams in the future.

Egyptian National Security and War Possibilities

Controlling the uses of water resources is an important and strategic goal of major countries. The state that controls water sources can affect the use of the river water by the downstream countries through the practice of pressure, or threatening to use the military and economic force.

Because the Nile water is a crucial issue for Egypt, its people, and its economy, several options are on the table, including military action against Ethiopia if matters reach a dead end. However, will war be the solution to this dilemma?

⁷ Essam Abdelshafy, The Renaissance Dam, the issue of water, and Egyptian national security, Egyptian Institute for Studies, 4/28/2020

It cannot be said that the possibility of a military operation against the Ethiopian dam is absolutely out of the question, given the nature of the Egyptian foreign policy orientations at the current stage, especially that the Egyptian government is still suffering from a legitimacy crisis, since the current regime came after a military coup against the elected government in 2013; and the fact that Egypt suffers from a state of political instability. Therefore, the war option is not only related to the balances of military forces, but it is rather related to the patterns of regional and international interactions and existing alliances, and the position of the Egyptian regime in these alliances, especially in the presence of a strategic alliance between Ethiopia, the United States and Israel, given that the latter two countries are strategic allies of the current regime in Egypt.

Therefore, the United States and Israel have a lot of pressure cards to control the external movement of the Egyptian government, unless they push the regime towards such confrontation, within the framework of a self-destruction of the Egyptian capabilities, which will remain Israel's first strategic enemy in the region, from the Israeli strategic perspective⁸.

Also, the military bases deployed in the Horn of Africa region also make a military operation in eastern Ethiopia very complicated, as there are approximately 19 military bases for 16 countries, in addition to four military bases likely to be established by Turkey, Russia and Saudi Arabia soon.

Egypt may face major challenges in case of taking the military path in the face of Ethiopia, including:

- 1- The fact that Ethiopia is located far from Egypt, in addition to the rugged geographical terrain.
- 2- The complicated and multilateral Sudanese internal situation
- 3- A likely Egyptian military action may lead to the imposition of international sanctions on Egypt.
- 4- The positive development of Ethiopian relations with its neighbors limits Egypt's chances of exerting pressure on it.
- 5- The large spread of foreign military bases in the Horn of Africa.

⁸ Ibid.

6- The absence of Egyptian military bases near Ethiopia.

7- The negative consequences that will be reflected on Egypt's relations with the Nile Basin countries and Africa⁹.

The role of regional countries in the dam crisis

Many regional countries have contributed to fueling the dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), especially Israel, to achieve political goals and interests.

Despite its close alliance with Egypt, Saudi Arabia also played a major role in encouraging and supporting Ethiopia in the Renaissance Dam project, in coordination with Israel, with the aim of weakening the Egyptian political position and forcing Cairo to implement certain political agendas. Reports confirm that the ambiguous visit paid by the advisor to the King of Saudi Arabia, Ahmed Al-Khatib, to the GERD site, accompanied by a high-ranking economic and political delegation, and then his meeting with then Prime Minister of Ethiopia Hailemariam Desalegn, coincided with visits by Israeli economic and military officials.

While some reports say that the support provided by Saudi Arabia for Ethiopia to expedite completion of the construction of the Renaissance Dam, estimated at \$13 billion, other reports say that new secret agreements were concluded between the Ethiopian and Israeli allies at the expense of Egypt, during Netanyahu's famous visit to Ethiopia in the summer of 2016.

The impact of the Israeli role on Egyptian national security

Israel's orientation towards African countries has always been part of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and part of the Israeli security theory based on military superiority, gaining legitimacy, domination and control in the region, encircling the Arab countries - especially Egypt - and depriving them of any influence in the African continent.

Therefore, the Zionist entity always tries to exploit and deepen Arab disputes with some African countries, and threaten the security of Arab countries that depend on the Nile in attempt to increase

⁹ Al Jazeera Net, the option of limited war and the Renaissance Dam negotiations

its influence in the countries that control the sources of the Nile waters, with focus on establishing agricultural projects based on water withdrawal from Lake Victoria.

Israel is investing in that historical hostility between Ethiopia and the Arabs, and its potential to influence African politics. In order to consolidate Israeli political and economic control, Israel supports cooperative regimes that are loyal to it in the African continent, and expands the role of opposition movements in countries that are not loyal to it to spread a state of political instability.

The Israeli-Ethiopian alliance at the entrance to the Red Sea and the sources of the Nile is based on many factors, foremost of which is the collapsing economic situation of Ethiopia, the successive defeats suffered by the Ethiopian army in the Tigray region and in Eritrea, and Ethiopia's need for Israeli weapons and cadres to confront such defeats in return for Israel achieving its long-term goals, and pursuit to blackmail Egypt, and pressure it to obstruct any role it may play in favor of the Palestinian cause and its developments¹⁰.

Following up on the Israeli role in fueling the issue of the Renaissance Dam between Egypt and Ethiopia during the period 2011-2020, there are many reports that confirm the following:

1- Ethiopia's allocation of an entire floor in the premises of the Ethiopian Ministry of Water and Electricity to Israeli water experts, who provide the negotiating and technical expertise to the Ethiopian teams. It is worth noting that the former Egyptian Minister of Irrigation and Water, Mohamed Nasr Allam, confirmed these reports. Also, Sudanese officials reiterated these reports. In addition, the Egyptian Deputy Chief of Staff Mohamed Ali Bilal in May 2013 confirmed the presence of large numbers of Israelis working in the dam construction, which is built with Western and American funding (the World Bank, Italy, and the European Investment Bank), the African Development Bank, China, and "Israel."

2- The activity of Israeli companies, especially those related to the construction needs of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, where Israeli companies, such as Solel Boneh Construction Company, are actively present in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda, in addition to Agrotop Agriculture and CORE for

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Diplomatic Research (Riyadh: 1992).

electronics, Motorola Israel for electricity and water, and Carmel Chemicals. Israel increased the volume of its investments in the energy sector in 2018 by \$500 million through Gigawatt Global, a company that has relations with ten Ethiopian universities. There are ten other Israeli institutions operating in Ethiopia. Egyptian MP Ahmed Al-Adawi stressed that Israeli activity in Africa, especially in Ethiopia, aims to affect Egyptian interests, most notably Egypt's share of the Nile through Israeli support for the Renaissance Dam project.

3- Israel realizes the importance of Ethiopia, as it overlooks the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, through which 20% of Israel's foreign trade passes, not to mention overlooking the Nile sources, where all these aspects are enhanced by cooperation in industrialization and military training. These relations are part of an accelerated Israeli activity in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. During Netanyahu's visit to Ethiopia in 2016, as mentioned above, he was accompanied by representatives of about fifty Israeli companies, where several agreements were signed with Ethiopia in fields of agriculture, tourism, and investment; and with Kenya in fields of health, irrigation, agriculture, and migration.

4- Israeli media and political incitement against Egypt: where Israeli newspapers have circulated reports that Egyptian water policies have harmed Ethiopian interests. For example, the Times of Israel stated in one of its articles that "the consequences of these Egyptian policies have severely damaged Ethiopia for decades; and that Ethiopia, which is rich in water, is shackled by legally binding agreements that do not allow it to use its water resources to provide drinking water for its own residents... which made it suffer long periods of drought and famine¹¹.

Israel took advantage of its rapprochement with Ethiopia during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie and exploited this relationship in order to threaten Egypt's water resources, where 85% of Egypt's water needs stem from Ethiopia.

Although the Israeli interest in water sources is focused mainly on the water flowing to it and its vicinity from the West Bank, Gaza, the Syrian Golan Heights, and the Jordanian and Lebanese waters

¹¹ Walid Abdel Hai, The Israeli strategy towards the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations, 6 August 2020.

through the Jordan and Yarmouk rivers; however, Israel's strategy is to acquire farther and more abundant resources, the Nile water. Since Israel has not succeeded during a whole century in achieving its dream of distributing Egypt's Nile waters, it began planning another strategy to pressure Egypt by following the strategy of "containment" to besiege the two downstream countries, especially Egypt. Israel's consistent goal from its presence in that region lies in its desire to obtain the Nile waters, and pressure on the Egyptian decision-maker due to the sensitivity of the water card within the Egyptian strategy, where Israel plays an indirect role in the water conflict between the Nile Basin countries, benefiting from its great influence on Ethiopia, Kenya, and Rwanda.

Israel also considers that the Egyptian water that is wasted in the Mediterranean in the winter (during the months of December and January) each year due to the demand for water for electricity and navigation purposes, should be utilized during a proposed project to transfer water to Israel through the so-called Peace Canal to the Negev desert, where Israel seeks to achieve this goal by putting pressure on Egypt in cooperation with Ethiopia¹².

Through its relationship with Ethiopia and the African countries in the Nile Basin, Israel plays a provocative role against Egypt and Sudan, arguing that they consume large quantities of water without needing it at the expense of other countries. In light of this incitement, American and Israeli companies have taken control of most of the water projects in the region, and undertook scientific research on water resources, where Israel built three water dams as part of an optimum program that aims to build 26 dams on the Blue Nile to irrigate 400,000 hectares and produce 38 billion kilowatt hours of electricity.

These projects will deprive Egypt of five billion cubic meters of water. Israel has also built a dam on the origin of one of the branches of the Blue Nile, which supplies the Nile with about 75% of the water to reserve half a billion cubic meters of water in exchange for Ethiopia's facilitation of Israeli presence on the islands of Dahlk and Fatima to establish military bases there¹³.

¹² Hamad Al-Hassan Abdel-Rahman, Israeli-Ethiopian Relations, Al-Rased Center for Research and Science

¹³ Hussein Khalaf Mousa, Ethiopia between the Egyptian presence and the Israeli presence in the Nile Basin, visions and problems, Arab Democratic Center, 20 April 2014

The decline of the Egyptian role in the Nile Basin

First: At the presidential level, there have not been enough interest in Africa, where visits were limited only to inviting African heads of states to Egypt, with no visits from the Egyptian side to African states, which has negatively affected Egypt's standing in Africa¹⁴.

Second: The poor role of the Egyptian state abroad, during the period immediately before the January revolution, and lack of active and convincing diplomacy, which created a gap between Egypt and Ethiopia, the main actor in the issue of concern¹⁵.

Third: Ethiopia saw the post-January revolution in Egypt as a historic and appropriate moment -amid Egypt's preoccupation with its internal affairs- and an opportunity to consolidate its position on the water crisis, which is part of a larger strategy where Ethiopia seeks an active role in the Horn of Africa and the Nile Basin under the American umbrella, which considers Ethiopia the main focal point of its policy¹⁶.

Conclusion

For Egypt, the Nile River represents a vital and strategic need, as Egypt relies on the amount of its water it uses to a large extent. Also, Egypt has not yet prepared itself for the stage of a significant decline in its water share, amid lack of diverse options. Therefore, any intervention by the Nile Basin countries, through construction of dams, is likely to lead to a major problem for Egypt, its agriculture and its economy.

All the Ethiopian assurances to Egypt regarding the Renaissance Dam have not relieved the frightening Egyptian concern. Despite dozens of agreements concluded between the Nile basin countries, most of them were ignored by Addis Ababa, with support from the United States and Israel.

¹⁴ Sobhi Kahala, *The Water Problem in Israel and Its Repercussions on the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Beirut: Institute for Palestinian Studies, First: 1980). p 45

¹⁵ Rifaat Sayed Ahmed, *The Water Conflict between the Arabs and Israel* (Cairo: Dar Al-Huda for Publishing and Distribution, 1st. Pub.: 1993), p. 19

¹⁶ Ibid.

Therefore, the Egyptians feel that their national security has been targeted, through the intervention of regional and international countries in helping Ethiopia build the dam.

Ethiopia took advantage of the chaos that occurred in Egypt after the January 2011 revolution, to accelerate the pace of building the dam, as Egypt was preoccupied with arranging its political situation after the fall of the regime of President Hosni Mubarak, and then the arrival of the Muslim Brotherhood to power, before the coup against them, which allowed the Israeli entity to practice pressure on Egypt by providing assistance and advice to the Ethiopians to move forward towards ending the construction and filling of the dam, with the aim of weakening and domesticating the Egyptian role in the region, in light of the strong presence of historical Israeli ambitions in the Nile waters.

The paper also found that Egypt's military options in undermining the Renaissance Dam are limited. Therefore, the Egyptians have no choice but to re-agree with Ethiopia on a realistic deal to share the Nile waters, in agreement with Sudan, and with the help of the major international powers allied to Egypt. But this solution does not meet with Ethiopia, which ignores all legitimate Egyptian concerns. Egypt should review its international alliances, especially with the United States, and reconsider the Camp David agreement with Israel, especially that the United States and Israel have proven they are siding with Ethiopia in confronting Egypt in a vital and strategic issue for Egyptian national security, the Nile waters.