

Egypt and the Hydro-Politics of the Blue Nile River

By Daniel Kendie, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of History

Abstract

As early as the 4th century B.C., Herodotus observed that Egypt was a gift of the Nile. That observation is no less true today than in the distant past, because not only the prosperity of Egypt, but also its very existence depends on the annual flood of the Nile. Of its two sources, the Blue Nile flows from Lake Tana in Ethiopia, while the White Nile flows from Lake Victoria in Uganda. Some 86% of the water, which Egypt consumes annually, originates from the Blue Nile River, while the remainder comes from the White Nile. Since concern with the free flow of the Nile has always been a national security issue for Egypt, as far as the Blue Nile goes, it has been held that Egypt must be in a position either to dominate Ethiopia, or to neutralize whatever unfriendly regime might emerge there. As the late President Sadat stated: " Any action that would endanger the waters of the Blue Nile will be faced with a firm reaction on the part of Egypt, even if that action should lead to war. " ¹

In this respect, an acute observer of the Egyptian scene recently wrote: "Egypt is a country that has not abandoned its expansionist ambitions. It regards its southern neighbors as its sphere of influence. Its strategy is essentially negative: to prevent the emergence of any force that could challenge its hegemony, and to thwart any economic development along the banks of the Nile that could either divert the flow of the water, or decrease its volume. The arithmetic of the waters of the Blue Nile River is, therefore, a zero-sum game that Egypt is determined to win. It must have a hegemonic relationship with the countries of the Nile Valley and the Horn of Africa. When, for instance, Ethiopia is weak and internally divided, Egypt can rest. But when Ethiopia is prosperous and self-confident, playing a leading role in the region, Egypt is worried." ²

In response, Marawan Badr, the Egyptian Ambassador to Ethiopia wrote:

"Such political commentary, or more correctly, political trash, cannot come [except] from a sick and disturbed mind. Egyptian-Ethiopian relations are not in a crisis. We do not even have problems. There are serious issues, which need to be addressed." ³

Diplomatic evasiveness aside, one cannot claim that there is no crisis in the relations between the two countries. If the Blue Nile is the backbone of Egypt and equally crucial to Ethiopia's development, and if no less a person than Sadat declared that Egypt will go to war to prevent any tampering with the waters of the Blue Nile, how could one say that there are no problems between Ethiopia and Egypt? Given this background, let us raise some basic questions: why have not the two countries exploited the potential of the river for mutual benefit? Apart from fears stoked by misinformed nationalism on both sides, are there other problems that prevent them from doing so? How did Egypt manage to "guarantee" the normal flow of the waters of the

Blue Nile?

Geographic and Economic Facts

While the White Nile is 5,584 km long, the Blue Nile covers a distance of 1,529 km from its source in Lake Tana to Khartoum, where both join and then flow on to Egypt—a country where there is practically no rain, and where 86% of the land is classified as very arid, and the rest as arid. The exceptions to the extreme aridity are the narrow bands of the Nile Valley and the narrow coastal strip, where some 150-mm of winter rain falls. All this accounts for no more than 3.03% of the total land area of Egypt. As a result, 96% of the population is forced to live astride the Nile River, upon which the entire life of Egypt depends.⁴

Within Ethiopia itself, the Blue Nile is 960 km long and has an annual discharge of some 55 million cubic meters, constituting the major portion of the flow of the Nile. Lake Tana is situated at an elevation of 6,000 ft. above sea level. It is about forty to fifty miles square and reaches depths in the neighborhood of two hundred feet. The water as it flows from the lake contains no silt. According to the engineers, by blasting a deep outlet and erecting a dam, about six billion cubic meters of water could be stored at the lake, and can be ready for use when needed.⁵

Over the entire year, about 86% of the Nile's water originates from the Ethiopian Highlands, while the White Nile contributes only 14%. During the flood period, however, 95% of the water originates from Ethiopia, and only 5% from East Africa. The reason for this is that the White Nile loses a considerable amount of water to swamp areas at the beginning, and then to evaporation during its course through arid terrain.⁶ In its transit, the Blue Nile takes decomposed basalt, rich alluvial soil and silts and converts what would otherwise have been a complete desert into a rich agricultural area. It is not without reason, therefore, that the Greek historian Herodotus (c.486-425) observed that Egypt was a gift of the Nile. To this, the British of the 19th century, who intended to stay in that country, and who made Egypt's interests their own, added that he who controls the Nile controls Egypt.⁷

Broadly speaking, international rivers are often the subjects of treaties providing for their shared use. States sharing common rivers usually harmonize their policies for the purpose of establishing agreed regimes. Unilateral use of the waters of such rivers by any riparian state can cause considerable damage to the other states and can lead to serious international conflicts. However, discussions and negotiations leading to agreements for their shared use usually resolve such conflicts. Hence, because of the "dual sovereignty" over such waterways, unilateral actions affecting use by other riparian states are generally discouraged.⁸

As far as the Blue Nile goes, while Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Sudan recognize its international character, there is no agreed regime governing the actions of the three states. As a result, there is no integrated plan for optimum use and development of the waters of this river, which could have benefited all concerned. There have been meetings between the officials of Egypt and Ethiopia in particular, aimed at exploring the possibilities of cooperation between the two countries on the waters of the Blue Nile. While Ethiopia advocated the principle of negotiation on water sharing, Egypt's position was for limiting negotiation to cooperation in exchanging information in the area of hydrological study. These positions, however, do not go far enough to

address the other simmering problems. When one studies the development plans of these countries with regard to the use of the waters of the Blue Nile, one could say that future conflicts are possible.

The population of Egypt, which grows by more than one million per year, could reach 85 million by the year 2015. Since the annual increase in population (2.8%) exceeds the annual increase in food production (2.6%), Egypt's imports of food, currently valued at more than \$3 billion, absorbs most of its foreign currency earnings. Water shortage, which is forecasted to reach a deficit of 10,000 million cm. by the year 2,000, threatens Egyptian agriculture and industry. In the absence of agreements, therefore, if irrigation dams were to be built in either Ethiopia or East Africa, or if climatical change were to result in increased warming, or in droughts and increased evaporation, reduced water flow into the Nile would further exacerbate Egypt's problems, and the country could face an explosive situation.⁹

Some years ago, the lowering of the water level of the Aswan High Dam drastically affected agricultural and industrial output, reduced oil exports, and accelerated the depletion of what limited foreign exchange reserves Egypt had.¹⁰ Such events have led to serious food shortages and to severe dislocation of normal life. Export earnings and government revenues can diminish, leading to a substantial reduction of public services, as well as in essential imports and development programs. Since the situation would demand increased imports of food, it could result in an enlargement of the deficit in the balance of payments, therefore reducing the rate of savings and investment and, consequently, lowering the rate of economic growth. The fall of the water levels of the dams would also lower hydroelectric power supply, of which the Aswan High Dam alone provides 22% of national electricity.

Hydro-Politics

Among the Egyptians, it was widely believed that the Emperor of Ethiopia could shut off the waters of the Nile, as one would shut off a faucet.¹¹ For example, during the reign of Emperor Amde Zion (1314-1344), the Mamluk Sultan Al-Nasir Muhammad Q-alaurn began to persecute the Copts of Egypt and demolished their churches. The Sultan's actions brought forth a strong protest from the Ethiopian monarch, who sent envoys to Cairo in A.H. 726 (A.D. 1321) to ask Al-Nasir to restore the churches and to refrain from persecuting the Copts. Otherwise, he said, he would take reciprocal measures against the Muslims in his dominions and also starve the people of Egypt by diverting the course of the Nile.¹² It was, no doubt, this incident which caused Al-Umari to write that the Ethiopians claim that they are the guardians of the course of the Nile for its descent to Egypt, and that they further its regular arrival out of respect for the Sultan of Egypt.¹³

In more modern times, especially in the 18th and 19th century, Egypt's invasion and final conquest of the Sudan was largely motivated by its desire to secure control over the entire Nile system. Muhammed Ali (1769-1849), for instance, felt that the security and prosperity of Egypt could only be assured fully by extending conquests to those Ethiopian provinces from which Egypt received its great reserves of water.¹⁴ The objective of such a conquest was designed to impose Egypt's will on Ethiopia, and either to occupy it or to force it to give up the Lake Tana area. Hence, the conquest of the Sudan in 1820 served as a stepping-stone to the increased

appearance of Egyptian soldiers in the western frontiers of Ethiopia, and to the subsequent Egyptian occupation of Kasala in 1834, Metema in 1838, Massawa in 1846, Kunama in 1869, and Harar in 1875.¹⁵ Khedive Ismail (1863-1879), too, wanted to make the Nile an Egyptian river by annexing to Egypt all the geographical areas of the basin. To that end, the Swiss adventurer Werner Munzinger (1832-1875), who served him, had remarked: "Ethiopia with a disciplined administration and army, and a friend of the European powers, is a danger for Egypt. Egypt must either take over Ethiopia and Islamize it, or retain it in anarchy and misery."¹⁶

The decision was made to conquer Ethiopia. However, Khedive Ismail lived to regret that decision. The series of military expeditions which he launched in 1875 and 1876, resulted in ignominious defeats for Egypt. Between November 14, 1875, and November 16, 1875, more than 2,500 Egyptian soldiers were routed at the Battle of Gundet. Similarly, from March 7, 1876, to March 9, 1876, some 12,000 Egyptian soldiers were annihilated at the Battle of Gura.¹⁷ It may be interesting to note that two American military officers, Colonels William MacEntyre Dye (1831-1904) and Loring William Wing (1816-1886), who fought on the Unionist side in the American Civil War (1861-1865) and who were recruited by the Egyptians along with six other American soldiers, participated in the Egyptian military campaigns against Ethiopia.¹⁸ In the same year, the expedition led by Munzinger was decimated in northeastern Ethiopia by the Afars. Munzinger himself was killed.¹⁹ Yet, despite the enormous debacle, Egyptian raids against Ethiopia still continued. The raids were eventually brought to a temporary halt only when Britain occupied Egypt in 1882.

Water Agreements

The crucial importance of the Blue Nile to Egypt was not lost to Britain, which had made Egypt's interests its own. In 1902, London dispatched John Harrington to Addis Ababa to negotiate border and Nile water issues with Emperor Menelik. Article III of the May 15, 1902, Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty, which resulted from the visit, provides:

"His Majesty the Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia, engages himself towards the Government of His Britannic Majesty not to construct or allow to be constructed, any works across the Blue Nile, Lake Tana or the Sabot, which would arrest the flow of their waters into the Nile except in agreement with His Britannic Majesty's Government and the Government of the Sudan."²⁰

Ethiopia's legitimate reasons to exploit the waters in its own territory for development purposes should be understandable. This fact alone would be a sufficient ground for some to invalidate the binding force of the agreement. But it was never ratified, either by the British Parliament or by the Ethiopian Crown Council.

Another indication of British interest in the waters of the Blue Nile was the Anglo-Italian exchange of letters, which led to the secret agreement of 1926. Britain sought Italy's support for its plan to construct a barrage at Lake Tana, together with the right to construct a motor for the passage of stores, personnel, and so on. In turn, as a *quid pro quo*, Britain was to support Italy in its attempt to obtain from Ethiopia a concession to construct and run a railway from the frontier of Eritrea to the frontier of Italian Somaliland.²¹ Ethiopia denounced the secret deal and brought

the matter before the League of Nations.

There was also the 1929 Agreement between Egypt and Britain. It stipulated that "no irrigation or power works or measures are to be constructed or taken on the River Nile or its tributaries, or on the lakes from which it flows in so far as all these are in the Sudan or in countries under British administration, which would entail prejudice to the interests of Egypt."²² Since Ethiopia had never been a British colony, or of any European power for that matter, except for the five years (1936-1941) occupation by Fascist Italy, it maintains that this agreement has no legal effect on it.

Ethiopia had been a member of the League of Nations since 1923. Yet, when Mussolini invaded it in 1936, despite treaty obligations, the League of Nations remained indifferent to its plight, and sacrificed Ethiopia at the altar of political expediency. The apologetic view of some that Italy had legitimate grievances that needed to be addressed did not play. Mussolini was neither grateful nor appeased. If anything, he joined Hitler as an ally. Nevertheless, after five years of bitter struggle against Italian fascism, Ethiopia gained its independence. Following the restoration of Emperor Haile Selassie's government in 1941, it repudiated the 1902 Treaty on account of British recognition of the Italian "conquest" of Ethiopia.²³ Moreover, Ethiopia also declined to recognize the 1929 agreement arguing that it had never been a British colony. But more specifically, it declared that one party reserved for itself all the rights and privileges, leaving the other party without any *quid pro quo*. Ethiopia maintained that the whole exercise of the agreement was geared mainly to protect and to promote Egypt's interests without any reciprocity and that it had not renounced its own quantitatively unspecified but existing natural right to the Nile waters in its territory. It argued that the agreements, which made no reference to this fact, could have no binding force. Hence, as early as 1956 Ethiopia asserted and reserved, then and in the future, its right to utilize the waters of the Blue Nile without recognizing any limitations on its freedom of action. It also invoked its new economic needs as grounds for its release from old treaty obligations.²⁴

Similarly, Ethiopia declined to recognize the Agreement of November 1959 between Egypt and the Sudan on the division of the waters of the Nile. The agreement gave Egypt 75% of the waters of the river (i.e. 55.5 billion cubic meters) and 25% to the Sudan (18.5 cm³ billion).²⁵ The very agreement which allowed Egypt to receive three times as much water as the Sudan, refers to "full utilization" and "full control of the river", when it involved only two states. Needless to say that Egypt and the Sudan were both recipients and users, and, therefore, arguably cannot have the last word on the utilization of the waters of the river.

In an Aide Memoir of 23 September 1957 addressed to the diplomatic missions in Cairo, the Government of Ethiopia declared:

"Ethiopia has the right and obligation to exploit its water resources, for the benefit of present and future generations of its citizens [and] must, therefore, reassert and reserve now and for the future, the right to take all such measures in respect of its water resources."²⁶

Despite Ethiopia's protest, Egypt went ahead with the construction of the Aswan High Dam. The first dam on the Nile, the Aswan Dam, was built in 1902 and heightened in 1936. On the other

hand, the Aswan High Dam took seven years (1964-1971), and was completed with the help of the Soviet Union, at a cost of \$100 million, or 850 million Egyptian pounds. As far as Egypt was concerned, the Aswan High Dam helped to reclaim 650,000 feddans and brought some 800,000 feddans under permanent irrigation. As a result, agricultural production has considerably increased, and village communities have been provided with water and electricity. However, Lake Nasser, an artificial lake created by the damming of the Nile, has blocked the normal flow of the rich Nile, preventing the nourishment of agricultural lands farther down the river and destroying the fishing industry. Vegetation in Lake Nasser also grew so rapidly, resulting in the clogging of irrigation channels and in creating stagnant water that has become a breeding ground for a variety of disease-bearing insects and sea urchins. Hydrologists also estimate that each year the reservoir alone loses a staggering 15 cubic kilometers of water to evaporation.²⁷

Despite these negative aspects, the Aswan project has facilitated double and triple crop production, and the country's agricultural yields have soared. Egypt still uses far more of the river's annual flow of around 80 cubic kilometers than any of the other eight nations along its banks, which apart from Ethiopia and Sudan, also include Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, and the Congo. To be sure, out of an ultimate irrigable land of some five million hectares, Egypt has already managed to irrigate nearly three million hectares. But the question is this: what will happen when countries like Ethiopia begin to utilize their waters meaningfully and substantially?

Studies on the Blue Nile

Ethiopia had been exploring the possibilities of building a dam on Lake Tana for a long time. As a matter of fact, a number of engineers and experts had visited Lake Tana and studied the feasibility of building a dam at the source of the Blue Nile. For example, in 1927 Ethiopia reached an agreement with J.G. White Engineering Corporation of New York. The required feasibility studies were carried out for the construction of a dam at Lake Tana at an estimated cost of \$20 million.²⁸

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation also accomplished substantial work. Among other things, it surveyed the Blue Nile Basin (1956-1964), proposed four major dams on the Blue Nile with a combined storage of 51 km³, equal to the mean annual flow of the Blue Nile, with a hydroelectric capacity three times that of the Aswan High Dam. Of more immediate interest was the effect of the four dams on the natural flow of the Blue Nile and, of course, on irrigation in Egypt and the Sudan. The annual flood of the Blue Nile would be virtually eliminated, the flow into the Sudan becoming constant, and the total quantity of the Blue Nile water reduced by 8.5%. If all the projects were completed, the amount of land put into cultivation in Ethiopia would be equal to 17% of the current land under irrigation in Egypt and would require six km³ of Nile water.²⁹

Because the Blue Nile terrain favors the construction of dams to generate power, Ethiopia could supply electricity not only to satisfy most of its own needs but also to export to the Sudan and Egypt, as well as the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, the findings reveal that the Blue Nile has a power potential of 172 billion-kilowatts., twice larger than the combined national hydroelectric

output of both the Sudan and Egypt. Of the 35 multi-purpose projects that the survey identified, 16 were irrigation schemes for the development of 439,440 hectares of land to help settle 4 million farmers, and 12 were power projects, which could utilize as much as 12 billion cubic meters of water from the Blue Nile.³⁰ According to the experts, the amount of water available to the downstream riparian states would not be affected. Even if Ethiopia were to implement the Blue Nile Plan, drawing off six km³, Egypt and the Sudan would still benefit from the construction of the reservoirs within Ethiopia.³¹

Why has not Ethiopia utilized this development potential? The reason for this is in part because its agriculture is largely rain fed, and partly because the political strife, which as we will soon see, that Egypt helped to instigate had forced Ethiopia to divert scarce resources from development into security and defense. But now Addis Ababa has indicated its intention that it wants to do more. At present, using only 0.6 billion cm. of water a year, only five percent, or 200,000 hectares are being irrigated out of potentially 3.7 million hectares of irrigable land. With a population nearly the size of Egypt and facing the enormous problem of feeding itself, it will need to develop a large portion of this land for agricultural use. If, for instance, Ethiopia were to contemplate the development of 500,000 hectares, it would require 6.25 cubic kilometers of water. In this regard, Ethiopian government sources estimate that over the next half century, the country would need \$60 billion investment for irrigation and \$19 billion for hydropower development.³²

In response to Ethiopia's intention to use more Blue Nile water, Sudan's Minister of Irrigation, Sharif al-Tuhami, recently remarked that Sudan and Egypt have built all their civilizations on the Nile for 7,000 years. So both countries have priority over others. What about Ethiopia, which provides 86% of the water that these countries consume, but which has its own priorities of feeding its population? It is computed that by 2025, its population could be 112 million, double its present level.

Dr. Mohammed El Said Selim of Cairo University contends that Ethiopia's ambitious development plans, if implemented, will pose a grave threat to Egypt before the end of the century. His remarks are noteworthy in the sense that they reflect Egyptian official policy and imply that Egypt should take effective measures to prevent the threat.³³ We should note that Ethiopia has an average of 112 cubic km of water annually compared to Egypt, which has 55.5 cubic km per year and a projected demand of 65.5 cubic km, which, if successful, would even be higher than that of Ethiopia. The Sudan has 18.5 cubic km.³⁴

The End Justifies the Means

Egypt's foreign policy has, to a significant degree, been shaped by the hydro-politics of the Nile in general and the Blue Nile in particular. It is predicated upon the premise that Egypt should be strong enough either to dominate Ethiopia or to create the conditions to prevent the latter from building dams on the Blue Nile. With that end in mind, Egypt controlled the port of Massawa from 1865 to 1885³⁵ and occupied parts of present-day northwestern Eritrea from 1872-1884³⁶ with a view to using these areas as basis for military operations against the rest of Ethiopia. As noted earlier, Egypt's military adventures were brought to a halt, at least temporarily, by its disastrous defeats at Gura and Gundet. By using its occupation of certain parts of what was to

become Eritrea as proof of historical legitimacy, as early as 1945 Egypt instigated the Arab League to declare its intention to put Eritrea under the Trusteeship of the Arab nations. Moreover, at the Paris Peace Conference of 1946, Egypt also advanced an outright claim to Eritrea. In fact, on April 15, 1950, when the U.N. Commission on Eritrea visited Cairo to consult with the Egyptian Government, Foreign Minister Salah El-Din maintained: "Italian expansion in Africa was inaugurated by an encroachment upon the rights of Egypt. Egypt has been in Eritrea and in Massawa long before the Italians had driven it out, and at a time when power was the dominating factor over rights."³⁷

The historical accuracy of the above statement is certainly debatable. Italy did not drive out Egypt from Eritrea. A. Caimi, who occupied Massawa on behalf of Italy on February 3, 1885, proclaimed: "The Italian government, in accord with the English and Egyptian governments, takes possession of Massawa."³⁸ What is note worthy in the Egyptian position is this: Ethiopia had successfully resisted the invasion of the Ottoman Turks and had evicted them from its Northern Provinces but had failed to dislodge them from their strongly fortified position at Massawa. Despite the fact that they had occupied the port of Massawa for some time, the Ottoman Turks still recognized it as Ethiopia's historical outlet to the outside world.³⁹ Since Massawa was an active outlet of the Red Sea slave trade of the time, in 1865 the Ottoman Sultan leased it to Egypt, its vassal state, at the latter's request. In approaching the Sultan for the lease of the port, Khedive Ismail argued that because of distance, Istanbul would not be in a position to check the slave trade, whereas Egypt could.⁴⁰ As might be expected, the most important naval and commercial power of the day- Britain- supported Egypt. There were two reasons for this: First, the American civil war threatened the supply of cotton to British textile mills. Hence, in order to ensure the continued supply of cotton from Egypt, for what could be described as enlightened self-interest, Britain supported Khedive Ismail in his negotiations with Istanbul. Secondly, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1868, the Red Sea had also assumed a special role in Britain's world-wide communications network, and therefore, it wanted the safety of the sea route to India. Hence, what took place at Massawa was simply a peaceful transfer of administrative authority from the Egyptians to the Italians under British supervision.

With regard to the Italian take over of Massawa, we should also note that competition between the European colonial powers was a familiar feature of the late 19th century. Italy was invited by Britain to take over the port of Massawa. In doing so, Britain was encouraging Italy's colonial ambitions with a view to using it as a counter-weight to France, which had already taken over Djibouti and was threatening British interests in the area. Ethiopia perceived the takeover of Massawa by the Italians as a violation of the Adowa Treaty of June 3, 1884, between Britain, Ethiopia, and Egypt.⁴¹

What was the Adowa Treaty? Stated briefly, the Mahdist uprising in the Sudan had put a severe strain on Egypt. As a result, its soldiers were trapped and besieged in that country. According to the treaty which was signed in the Ethiopian city of Adowa, for the help that Ethiopia would give to relieve the Egyptians and for providing them safe conduct through Massawa, Egypt agreed to "restore" to Ethiopia the northern Ethiopian provinces such as Keren that it had occupied in the 1860s and 1870s. Free passage was also to be allowed to Ethiopian trade through the port of Massawa, in effect, making the port revert back to its historic status as Ethiopia's outlet to the sea. Consequently, pitched battles were fought between Ethiopia and the Mahdist forces. The

besieged Egyptian garrisons were relieved and given safe conduct through the Port of Massawa. In that way, Ethiopia fulfilled its part of the agreement. Egypt too carried out its part of the bargain, by restoring Keren and the other provinces to Ethiopian authority. What about Britain? Instead of carrying out its commitments, Britain invited Italy to take over Massawa. Italy then attempted to expand inland to take over the hinterland of Massawa. In the process, there were a series of military engagements between Ethiopia and Italy, which soon developed into pitched battles which led to Dogali (1887) and the historic Battle of Adowa (1896), on both counts of which the Italian army was routed.⁴²

Nevertheless, thanks to British support and Menelik's acquiescence, Italy consolidated itself in northern Ethiopia and named the northern Ethiopian province of Medri Bahri as Eritrea-the Greco-Roman name for the Red Sea. Having colonized Eritrea from 1890 to 1941, Italy was defeated and evicted from the area in 1941. From 1941 to 1952, Britain administered Eritrea.⁴³ In 1947 the Allied Powers - the USA, the Soviet Union, Britain, and France sent a Four-Power Commission of Investigation (FPCI), to Eritrea. Among other things, the Commission reported that the majority of the people of Eritrea favored re-union with Ethiopia.⁴⁴ Since there was no agreement between the four powers, Britain submitted the question of Eritrea's future to the United Nations. The U.N. in turn established its own commission of inquiry composed of the representatives of Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan and South Africa. Since the majority of the members of the U.N. Commission also reported that the majority of the people of Eritrea favored association with Ethiopia, the United Nations decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia.⁴⁵

Ethio-Egyptian Relations

When Egypt's outright claim to Eritrea failed, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had come to power subsequently, launched a campaign for the unity of the Nile Valley. However, his "unity" proposal gave the impression that it was aimed at bringing Ethiopia, Eritrea, the Sudan, Somaliland, Somalia, Uganda and Kenya under Egypt's control.⁴⁶ In any case, the proposal failed to materialize with the re-unification of Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1952, and the independence of the Sudan in 1956 and Somalia in 1960.

Since the years when Nasser was stationed in the Sudan as an officer in the Egyptian army, he has had contacts with Haile Selassie. In 1941, for instance, during the Ethiopian liberation campaign when the emperor was re-organizing the anti-Fascist forces from the Sudan, Nasser went to see him.⁴⁷ After he took power in 1952, Nasser repeatedly extended official invitations to Haile Selassie to visit Egypt. The emperor had repeatedly declined the offer. In fact, in December 1956, he instructed his ambassador to the Sudan, Melesse Andom, to discuss matters with Nasser, who had not given up on the idea of the unity of the Nile Valley countries. Melesse Andom did not mince words:

"You claim to be an Arab and to lead the Arab world, but you interfere in the affairs of your Arab neighbors, and have tried to cause trouble for the Governments of Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, and the Sudan. We Ethiopians do not belong to your world, although like you we drink of the water of the Nile. You have military objectives. We do not know exactly what they may be, but we have no confidence in the strength of your armed forces."⁴⁸

After this showdown, Nasser appears to have begun his effort to undermine and to destabilize Ethiopia. Egypt has never publicly admitted that one of its foreign policy objectives had been, and continues to be, the destabilization of Ethiopia. To do so, would be a violation of international law. To be sure, the Egyptian authorities would classify any evidence to this effect. However, there is ample documentation that clearly demonstrates that the question of the use of the Blue Nile waters has been an overriding concern of Egyptian governments.

The broadcasts of Radio Cairo started to remind Ethiopian Muslims where their "primary loyalties" lay. Providing scholarships to Muslim Eritreans at Al-Azhar University followed suit, and soon, Cairo became the center for the Eritrean Student Union in the Middle East. In 1958, a small military training camp for Eritreans was also opened near Alexandria, where some of the future military commanders received their initial training. Idris Mohammed Adem, the former President of the Eritrean Parliament, Ibrahim Sultan, Secretary General of the Islamic League, and Wolde ab Wolde Mariam, President of the Eritrean Labour Unions, and others were encouraged to go to Egypt. Wolde Ab was given a special radio program and began to broadcast to Eritrea from Radio Cairo. He sought to undermine Haile Selassie's Government and urged Eritreans to take up arms and to struggle for their independence.⁴⁹

No sooner had Haile Selassie's government made Eritrea Ethiopia's 14th province by dismantling its United Nations-sponsored federal status in 1960, than Egypt took advantage of the situation to establish an office in Cairo, for what came to be known as the Eritrean Liberation Front, ELF. The front started the most protracted militarily and economically debilitating civil war Ethiopia has known in recent memory. The struggle, which ensued, pitted Eritrean Muslims against Eritrean Christians, highlanders against lowlanders, the ELF against the EPLF, and most of the Eritrean elite against governments in Addis Ababa and contributed strongly to political instability, economic decline, and social turmoil. Cairo's overt and covert role in the creation of the ELF was fairly obvious. In fact, even two years before the outbreak of the rebellion, the idea that the ELF was preparing to launch its military campaigns was an open secret in Egypt. Moreover, the Ethiopian Embassy in Cairo had warned the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Egypt was behind the preparation of the military insurrection of the ELF.⁵⁰

Thanks to the good offices of Egypt also, the April 1962 conference of the Arab League promised the ELF its full solidarity and support, because it was allegedly claimed that the Eritreans were Arabs and overwhelmingly Muslims, that they were struggling against the forces of Zionism, American imperialism, and Ethiopian colonialism, that in violation of its status as a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, Ethiopia had provided the United States with military bases to spy on the U.S.S.R. and the Arab countries of the Middle East, that Ethiopia had provided Israel access into some of the strategic islands of the Red Sea like the Dahlack, where Israel had allegedly built military bases to undermine the peace and security of the Arab world, and that the Red Sea should be considered an Arab lake, because all the states surrounding it are Arab. The major objective of the last strategy was designed to impede Israeli navigation on the Red Sea and also to make Ethiopia land locked by helping its Red Sea province, Eritrea, attain its independence and join the Arab League. These and similar other reasons were provided to justify Egyptian assertiveness and malevolence and the involvement of countries like Syria, Iraq, Libya, Kuwait, Yemen and others. By internationalizing what was essentially an Ethiopian domestic affair, Egypt, therefore, succeeded in converting the Eritrean problem into an extension of the

Arab-Israeli disputes, and exploited Ethiopia's predicament to its advantage.⁵¹

Given the imperatives of "cold war" rhetoric and power politics, undermining the pro-American and pro-Israeli government of Haile Selassie was important for Egypt. But its interest in the waters of the Blue Nile figured prominently on its political agenda. Few would doubt that Egypt's overriding motivation was the perceived need to have enough leverage to force Ethiopia to abandon some of its activities on the river, and to thwart the threat that Ethiopia posed to the Nile waters. By promoting the Eritrean insurrection, Egypt made sure that Ethiopia would divert both its efforts and its resources into quelling the Eritrean uprising-resources that could have been utilized in tapping the waters of the Blue Nile for development purposes. By providing the necessary military, ideological, political, and diplomatic support for the insurrection, Egypt effectively undermined Ethiopia. As a result of the insurrection, which lasted thirty years, thousands of people were killed, thousands were uprooted and displaced, and millions of dollars worth of property was destroyed.⁵²

Needless to say that the ensuing turmoil and instability was beneficial for Egypt. Cairo was able to use these advantages to secure the flow of a disproportionate amount of water to its territory, and also to force Ethiopia to squander its scarce resources, and in the process, to ally with the USA and Israel at one time, and with the Soviet Union, the Socialist countries of Eastern Europe, and Cuba at another time, with all the attendant consequences that such alliances entailed.

Further Exploitation of the Nile

The development of irrigated farming in the Sinai is a particularly prominent project. In December 1975, Egypt announced that it would open pipelines to carry water across the Suez Canal to the Sinai desert for irrigation. The project was supposed to commence with irrigation of some 5,000 feddans, to be increased later to provide support and livelihood for 100,000 refugee families from the Gaza Strip. Additionally, Egypt commissioned studies of the possibility of piping the Nile waters to Jerusalem for pilgrims visiting the Holy places. This extension would add 240 miles to the length of the Nile, and is further evidence of the potential and controversial downstream uses of water. From the legal point of view, one could ask whether consideration by all basin states before inter-basin transfers are effected is required.⁵³

Moreover, with Egypt's full support, planners had also begun work on a \$2 billion project which was to have diverted 4.5 million liters of water an hour from the Atbara river to the Red Sea port of Port Sudan and from there across the Red Sea to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. According to the plan, Sudan would have benefited in two ways: The large barren area to the east of Atbara would have come under irrigation, and by the utilization of the resultant waterfalls near the Red Sea coast, more than 7,000 kWh of electricity would have been generated. The Saudis would have compensated Sudan and Egypt for their loss of irrigation water with investment capital for agricultural and industrial projects.⁵⁴

In the 1970s and 1980s, drought had repeatedly struck Ethiopia, causing great loss of life, much human suffering and considerable loss of property. In order to reverse the situation, the government of the time had begun to take some remedial measures. To that end, in 1978, when Ethiopian engineers and economists started to carry out irrigation feasibility studies in the Lake

Tana area, the late President Anwar Sadat declared: "Any action that would endanger the waters of the Blue Nile will be faced with a firm reaction on the part of Egypt, even if that action should lead to war. As the Nile waters issue is one of life and death for my people, I feel I must urge the United States to speed up the delivery of the promised military aid so that Egypt might not be caught napping."⁵⁵ No sooner had Sadat finished his threatening speech against Ethiopia than he visited Haifa and announced his plan to construct the Suez Canal tunnel and said to the Israelis:

"After the tunnel is completed, I am planning to bring the sweet Nile waters - this is the sweetest of the four big rivers of the whole world - to the Sinai. Well, why not send you some of this sweet water to the Negev Desert as good neighbours?"⁵⁶

The contradictory irony of the situation should not escape our attention. On one hand, Cairo warns Addis Ababa that if Ethiopia builds dams on the river, Egypt said that it would go to war. On the other hand, Cairo offers Israel the "sweet" waters of the Nile, even without Israel asking for it. The Egyptian Minister of Irrigation, Abdul Azim Abdel Atta, repeated the same threat when he said: "Egypt would never permit Ethiopia to exploit the waters of the Blue Nile," and concluded by appealing to Arab countries to shoulder their historical responsibilities-a code message which lends itself to different interpretations. In all likelihood, he may have been appealing to the other Arab countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Kuwait, and others, to continue to follow Egypt's example and support the Eritrean insurrection in order to destabilize Ethiopia. But the Ethiopians were not impressed by Sadat's ferocious rhetoric. They quickly countered by accusing Egypt of expansionist ambitions, of creating the so-called "Eritrean Liberation Front," of training and arming the terrorists assembled in that organization to help Cairo achieve its designs at Ethiopia's expense, of a dream to control the sources of the Nile, and of beating cold war drums to use first the Soviet Union and then the United States for the realization of its sinister agenda.⁵⁷ It should be noted that in the days of Gamal Abdel Nasser, since Egypt was an ally of the USSR, the name of the game was fighting "Zionism and American imperialism." When Sadat who served as Nasser's deputy came to power, Egypt's policy changed 360 degrees, and yesterday's anti-imperialists became champions of western democracy and free enterprise. In both cases, cold war drums were beaten, but the drums served as a convenient musk to conceal one essential truth-preventing Ethiopia from building dams on the Blue Nile River.⁵⁸

Despite the de-stabilizing effect of the Eritrean conflict, the first phase of Ethiopia's \$300 million Tana Beles project began in 1988. The project aimed at doubling Ethiopia's hydroelectric power and to provide irrigation for a settlement scheme that would take water from Lake Tana to the Beles River across which five dams were to be built. Some 200,000 farmers were to be settled after the completion of this project. However, Egypt blocked a loan from the African Development Bank because Cairo feared that the Tana Beles project could consume too much Blue Nile water.⁵⁹

Blocking a loan or not, to the dismay of the Egyptian authorities, the Nile Delta was going through an unprecedented winter drought which was seriously jeopardizing the country's wheat crop and its cotton exports. Water Resources Minister Abdul Hadi Radi informed a stormy parliamentary session in Cairo that the drought was due to meager rainfall in Ethiopia and not to the diversion of the waters of the River Nile. Indeed, the long drought in Ethiopia had lowered

the water in the Aswan High Dam's Lake Nasser to levels that threatened complete stoppage of the turbines.⁶⁰

While moving to impede Ethiopia's expanded use of Blue Nile waters, Egypt has recently begun an expanded use of its own. Digging has begun for the Salaam (peace) Canal-a \$1.4 billion project aimed to carry 12.5 million cubic meters a day of fresh water from the Nile into the Northern Sinai, by traversing the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, in order to irrigate 400,000 acres of new farmland. It is aimed to open the way for three million or more Egyptians to eventually populate a region that is now home to only some 250,000. It is the second largest public works project in Egypt's history - second only to the Aswan High Dam.⁶¹

The massive project entails constructing a canal from Lake Nasser to carry water 186 miles to the northwest. The project could cost as much as \$90 billion. By 2000, it is supposed to bring under cultivation 500,000 acres of land around the Baris Oasis. "We must expand beyond the narrow valley we have lived in for centuries. Our population is now 60 million, and there are only 8 million acres of agricultural land," says Hosni Mubarak.⁶² Even Egyptian scientists like Farouk El-Baz oppose the project on the ground that the waters of the Nile are not inexhaustible. Tony Allen of the University of London calls the plan "a national fantasy."

According to the Ethiopian Government, the several ambitious Egyptian agricultural projects begun within the last few years are part of an Egyptian attempt to secure even more water and disregard the needs of other countries. Egypt is doing this in violation of the obligation to keep the Nile within its natural basin, and it is trying to create the conditions in which it becomes the sole beneficiary of the Nile. Ethiopia has been consistent in this policy position. At the U.N. Conference at Mar Del Plata in 1977, for example, it asserted its rights to the waters of the Blue Nile, and in June, 1980, at the OAU Economic conference in Lagos, Nigeria, Ethiopia charged Egypt with planning to divert the Nile waters to the Sinai illegally.⁶³

Egypt's policy of hostility to it, said Ethiopia, was also visible in its attempt to convert the Red Sea into an Arab Lake,⁶⁴ with the intent to make it land locked. Egypt's unfriendly acts, it says, are also manifested in other areas as well. According to the constitution of the Arab League: "The League of Arab States is a voluntary association of sovereign Arab States designed to strengthen the close ties linking them and to coordinate their policies and activities and direct them towards the common good of all the Arab countries."⁶⁵ The people of Somalia and Djibouti do not consider themselves to be Arabs, and no anthropologist has argued otherwise. Given this fact, it would be reasonable to ask: Why did Egypt sponsor their membership in the Arab League? Could it be religious solidarity? Granted that the majority of the people in the two countries are Muslims, religious solidarity alone would not appear to be a sufficient justification for membership. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, for example, are all Muslim states, but none of them are members of the Arab League.

The truth is that Egypt has a long established involvement in the affairs of Somalia. The official Egyptian line is that its role has been solely to promote cultural and educational exchanges and to work for peace. But a closer analysis suggests a very different motivation. If as advanced previously, Egypt's policy was designed to prevent the use of the waters of the Blue Nile, Cairo's intervention on the side of Somalia and to subsidize Somalia's attempts to annex a good portion

of eastern Ethiopia, which Somalia claims, was certainly not inconsistent with such a policy objective. Thus, in the series of armed conflicts, which raged between Ethiopia and Somalia in 1960, 1964, and 1977-1979, Egypt was involved in support of Somalia. Since Somalia also laid claim to Kenya's territory as part of what it calls "Greater Somalia", Kenya announced that it would fight side by side with the Ethiopians to beat back what it called Somali "aggression".⁶⁶ In May 1978, Egyptian planes, which were carrying weapons for the Somali army to continue the war effort against Ethiopia, were forcefully landed at Nairobi international airport by the Kenyan Air Force.

No doubt, from 1964-1978, Somalia received extensive military aid from the Soviet Union. But Egypt also provided military training and weapons in order to help Cairo maintain leverage on Ethiopia, and to prevent Ethiopia from achieving stability. For example, in 1978 Egypt gave Somalia millions of dollars worth of Russian equipment. Sadat is also quoted to have said that in addition to sending arms, Egypt might send troops to help Somalia.⁶⁷ According to Ethiopian Government sources, 100,000 fully equipped Somali soldiers armed with very sophisticated modern weapons attacked Ethiopia from 1977 to 1979. As a result, Ethiopia argues that thousands of defenseless people were killed, and thousands were uprooted and made destitute. It observed that development projects worth millions of dollars in eastern and in the southern parts of the country were destroyed. Schools, hospitals, bridges, farms, power plants, water supply systems, industrial plants, and even UN financed settlement projects for nomads were not spared. Whole villages and towns were razed to the ground.⁶⁸

Recently, the Siad Barre regime of Somalia has fallen, plunging that country into a tragic civil war, where anarchy and the establishment of clan fiefdoms have become the order of the day. The northern part of Somalia has declared itself the independent state of Somaliland. Presently, Cairo is investing a lot alongside Libya in setting up a new administration in the province of Mogadishu in Somalia.⁶⁹ To that end, the Egyptian press published an official statement by the Egyptian Foreign Office, contending that Cairo would be willing to organize, arm, and actively assist military action against Somaliland, if the objective of reconciliation and unity between the factions becomes successful.⁷⁰ In response, the President of Somaliland, Mohammed Ibrahim Egal, said: "We must react to the statement of the Egyptian foreign office for the sake of the safety and security of the Republic of Somaliland. We see the Egyptian statements as a declaration of war against Somaliland, and we resolve to defend ourselves in every way and by all means."⁷¹ The Ethiopians claim that apart from presenting itself as a leader of the Arab/Muslim world, Egypt's objective is to arm a united Somalia state to wage war against Ethiopia.

The regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia, too, has fallen, leading to the independence of Eritrea—a small state that is attempting to shoulder tasks which are clearly beyond its capabilities.⁷² It is at loggerheads with Yemen, Djibouti, Sudan, and now, Ethiopia. There is presently, a border dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In this recent dispute too, there is evidence that Egypt is involved. For example, according to recent global intelligence sources, it is alleged that Egypt is already supporting Eritrea with arms and expertise. Ethiopian newspapers have also reported that light and medium arms and explosives captured from Eritrean forces were manufactured in Egypt and were paid for with Egyptian, Libyan or U.S. money. Egypt claims that it has not armed Eritrea, and that the military equipment made its way to Eritrea through

third parties. However, sources close to the opposition in Eritrea claim that Egypt is providing the Eritrean regime with military advice and intelligence through military experts masquerading as diplomats at Egypt's embassy in Asmara and Egyptian spies in Addis Ababa.⁷³

Likewise, Ethiopian newspapers, no doubt, reflecting public opinion, contend that Egypt needs and loves the Nile so much that it has a predisposition for hating the people inhabiting the land from which this great river originates. Since geography prevents Cairo from expressing directly this hatred in practical terms, it has to resort to assisting all forces bent on undermining Ethiopia.⁷⁴

It was also reported recently that two Somali factions accused the government of Eritrea of sending five planeloads of weapons to warlord Hussein Mohammed Aided to arm Ethiopian dissidents. The sources describe Egypt as the architect, Libya as the financier, and Eritrea as the executor, and the Somali factions as instruments in a design targeting Ethiopia.⁷⁵

To the Ethiopians, these seemingly unrelated acts reinforce the wider objective of securing Egyptian hegemony in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa region. They say that Ethiopia is indeed the main target within this larger regional strategic scheme, and that in the eyes of the Egyptians, Ethiopia was to have been encircled and destroyed by the Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti.

A Step in the Right Direction

According to Marawan Badr, the Ambassador of Egypt to Ethiopia, "Egypt recognizes that each state has the right to equitable utilization of its waters in accordance with international law. Egypt further recognizes that existing water agreements do not hinder the utilization of the Nile waters by any of the riparian states. Egypt is ready to cooperate with Ethiopia in exploiting its huge hydro-electric power potentials, and did not object to the construction of small scale water dams."⁷⁶

If that is so, the qualification of "constructing small dams" notwithstanding, there seems to be a change of policy. But has Ethiopia's attitude also changed? Ethiopia repeatedly declared that it did not regard itself bound by treaty obligations with regard to the Nile waters, arguing their inadequacy and irrelevance since they go contrary to the present exigencies of development. It has argued that its territory is the source of some six-sevenths of the waters of the Nile, and that its waters have nourished Egypt for centuries without it getting any compensation, and that billions of tons of top soil are being eroded each year which sustains Egyptian livelihood, and that Ethiopia will need a lot of investment to rehabilitate the ecology of the land through reforestation and soil preservation schemes.

Nevertheless, if Ethiopia is to exploit its river resources, it will have to develop the necessary civil and irrigation works, which will require a decade or more of effort and investment. In order to bring this about, Ethiopia's economic situation and its economic and political relations externally, especially with Egypt-a neighboring country with which it shares strong historical ties, cultural affinity, and economic, political and strategic relations - will have to be transformed. The two countries should not continue to look at each other through the prism of

distorted lenses. Egypt and the Sudan in turn would have to be convinced that by cooperating with Ethiopia, they could achieve reciprocal benefits. After that, it will be necessary for the states involved to devise a framework for evaluating regional water budgets and the benefits and costs of upstream development in both economic and resource security terms.

Egypt has been living beyond its water means. So far, it has attempted to solve its economic problems by playing the game of hydro-politics, and by the political device of subordinating its regional position to the United States, in return for the provision of the means to obtain commodities to fill its food gap. But Washington may not have the economic strength, or will, to take on additional burdens on the scale of Egypt. Egypt could also be outliving its usefulness to Washington in both political and strategic terms. The Sudan will certainly run out of Nile water in ten or twenty years. In such a situation, Ethiopia could very quickly fully develop an internationally acceptable volume of Nile water.⁷⁷ So what is the way out?

Nile waters appear to have a convenient unity. If Egypt's diversion attempts were to be brought to a halt, and if politics would allow the overall resource to be considered as a whole, then a number of economically rational and environmentally sensible decisions could be made, which would maximize the returns to the limited water resource of this international river.⁷⁸ Exploiting the resources of the river require a new and imaginative approach by all states concerned. An integrated approach is required that will bring about studies of the environment as well as of appropriate institutional, political and legislative arrangements, which will enable mutually agreed upon water management policies.

If agreements were to be reached on the regulation of water and power generation, Ethiopia is the natural place to regulate the Blue Nile flow. The construction of dams and barrages in the Ethiopian highlands would increase the total amount of water deposited on the door of Egypt.⁷⁹

If properly managed, water stored in the four Blue Nile reservoirs could be released in May to Egypt when its water requirement is the highest without sustaining the great loss by evaporation now experienced at Aswan. Egypt, however, would no longer be beneficiary of additional water in years of high flood, which would be stored and regulated in the Blue Nile reservoirs. Moreover, lowering the level of Lake Nasser in order to limit the evaporable loss would concomitantly reduce the hydroelectric power, but in return Egypt would receive additional water for irrigation.⁸⁰ But by then, Egypt would be receiving electricity from Ethiopia.

Positive Developments

Water Ministers from the Nile Basin countries met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in May 1999 for talks focusing on shares of Nile water, and on ways to exploit the underutilized Nile tributaries, and the estimated 40% rainfall in the region that is currently not exploited, and on more cooperation in joint water projects.

As a result, the Nile basin countries-Burundi, Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda have agreed to unite in common pursuit of sustainable development and management of the Nile. To that end, they have established a Nile Basin Initiative Secretariat at Entebbe, Uganda. The secretariat will be the nucleus for planning and coordination of activities.

It serves both the Technical Advisory Committee and the Nile Council of Ministers. The chairmanship of the council is rotated annually. Since the development of the Nile waters will require substantial external funding, member states have called upon the international community to provide support. As a result, donors include the World Bank, UNDP, CIDA, FOA, Italy, Netherlands, Britain, Germany, Norway, and Sweden.⁸¹

Egypt, Ethiopia and the Sudan have also agreed to design a project that will enable them to jointly utilize the Tekeze, Baro, Akobo and Nile rivers to effectively and equitably use the rivers. They have established a committee charged with the task of formulating the project.

In the power sector the interests of Egypt, Ethiopia and the Sudan are compatible. The energy that is available would be so huge that Ethiopia alone does not have the absorptive capacity. With regard to water, there is the problem of evaporation loss, which is 3% in Ethiopia, and 12% in Egypt.⁸² If present trends continue, Egypt will have to seriously look at the problem of increased evaporation and seepage losses of 10 billion cm³, and silt loss and associated channel erosion problems. The building of the dams in Ethiopia can mitigate the problem.

Hence, reduction of evaporation and transmission losses, availability of regulated flow, control of flood hazards, possible development of river transport, increased water storage facilities, and generation of surplus energy for the benefit of the three countries are some of the advantages of cooperation.

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Biographical Sketch

Daniel Kendie graduated (M.SC. honors, Economics), from the University of Prague, and then from the International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands, (M.A. Sociology & Political Science). Subsequently, he was awarded a three-year Fellowship by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, New York, where he completed a major study on the problems of peace and development in Africa. Having been granted a scholarship and a fellowship by Michigan State University, he completed his Ph.D. there, specializing on the modern history of the Middle East, Africa and Russia/the Soviet Union.

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