

Why Mike Pompeo Should Mediate the Conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia

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Brief Analysis

Last week the new U.S. secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, chose to visit the Middle East within hours of his appointment. He did not stop in Egypt, but the Middle East that the Trump administration aims to stabilize will not be achieved if Egypt becomes engaged in a war with its southern neighbors. For years, Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia have been facing a regional problem that needs an international mediator. This is the case especially now that even Turkey has begun to use this conflict to put pressure on Egypt by setting up commercial and military outposts on the coasts of neighboring Sudan and Djibouti. The absence of the United States will not just make it easier for other players like Russia to win another international battle in expanding its presence and power in the Mideast and Africa, but will also jeopardize international trade significantly -- the United States could find itself in the middle of a war between its allies. The success that the United States has had in its mediation between North and South Korean leaders must be emulated before we wake up to the news that Egypt has bombed Ethiopia.

Can the Egyptian regime bear a water crisis?

By way of comparative background, in April 2013, the Egyptian "rebellion" movement asked Egyptians to sign petitions to end the rule of President Mohamed Morsi. Among several reasons, Egyptians suffered during his term because of the lack of government services, such as security and electricity, with darkness that shrouded hospitals, schools, factories, and homes. Three months were enough for this movement to become the spearhead in cutting off the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. It was very hard to predict that Egyptians would take to the streets to demonstrate, especially with a potentially violent reaction from the political Islamic movements. Yet the protests swelled, the tanks followed and Morsi fell from power.

Still, one cannot compare a water crisis to any other crises that faced Egyptian society during Muslim Brotherhood rule. A serious water crisis in Egypt would mean not just major instability in the biggest country in the Middle East, but also brutal social protest movements that no regime, no matter how powerful and aggressive it is, can stop.

Mistrustful Negotiations

The seven years of arduous negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan have not resulted in an agreement. Negotiations began during a time when Egypt was responsible and patient, Ethiopia was ambiguous and procrastinating, and Sudan vacillated between using the Ethiopian dam as a tool of pressure over Egypt or acquiescing to its northern neighbor's views. Lately, though, these tensions have begun to shake Cairo's stability.

The story began in 2001 when the Ethiopian government announced its "national water strategy" to exploit the waters of its international rivers. Egypt and Ethiopia entered negotiations and agreed on the form and details of the dam in 2008. However, Ethiopia did not start construction until April 2011, taking advantage of Egypt's revolutionary internal situation. In May 2011, the Prime Ministers of Egypt and Ethiopia met to restart negotiations to reach an agreement. Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan agreed to form a committee of international experts in addition to local experts to study the structure, safety and possible effects of the dam. The committee, which was supposed to complete its work within six months, finished in a year and a half, and concluded that the dam had a number of structural and safety issues. Nevertheless, Ethiopia continued construction without proof of its commitment to the committee's recommendations.

Ethiopia entered the second phase of negotiations with a new condition: "forming a committee from local experts, with its recommendations not binding, but respected." Ethiopia agreed to limit the committee's responsibilities to focus on studying the capacity of the dam to store water. In 2015, the three countries entered a good phase of negotiation by signing "Khartoum Declaration of Principles," in which they agreed for the first time that Ethiopia would implement the recommendations of the International Commission of Experts, and rely on the studies of the second committee as a basis for first filling the dam and then operating it. Instead of delivering the report in three months, the second committee came in with its report after in sixteen months and, as usual, Egypt accepted the recommendation but Ethiopia rejected it.

In January 2018, Egypt asked the World Bank to act as a mediator to resolve the dispute over technical issues. Ethiopia and Sudan rejected the intervention of the World Bank. The three countries postponed the meeting because of Ethiopia's internal conflict and met in April in Sudan. Once again, the meeting ended without agreement. – for which Ethiopia and Egypt blamed each other. Egypt asked Sudan and Ethiopia for another meeting, but so far Ethiopia and Sudan have simply ignored Egypt's invitation.

Not Reaching an Agreement Leaves Egypt with One Option

In contrast to Addis Ababa's assertion that the dam will not harm Egypt, most studies have confirmed the opposite. The Egyptian Ministry of Water noted that "Losing one billion cubic meters of water will affect one million people and lead to the loss of 200 thousand acres of agricultural land annually." In addition, a study by the American Geological Society confirmed that Egypt would suffer a 25 percent shortage of its annual quota if the dam was filled in five to seven years. The same study confirmed that there is "a great danger to the Egyptian Delta" due to the lack of potential water as the Delta already is just one meter higher than the sea level. Another report noted that filling the dam in three years would "destroy 51 percent of the agricultural land in Egypt." If Ethiopia filled the dam in six years, 17 percent of the land would be destroyed. These facts did not change Ethiopia's strategy of imposing a fait accompli.

To be sure, in the past, Cairo was neglectful and careless about its use of water, and waste was significantly high. But more recently, the Egyptian parliament has improved its agricultural laws and gave the minister of agriculture the right to "ban the cultivation of certain crops in certain areas," as well as to impose prison sentences and fines on violators. In addition, the government cut its rice cultivation rate to half as much as last year, and Egyptian police have begun to arrest and enforce fines for farmers who violate the law. The Egyptian regime has also begun to expand the construction of desalination plants and has announced the construction of the largest seawater

desalination plant in the world. Although these policies will lead to the sound and more efficient use of water in a country already suffering from water poverty, their impact cannot offset the damage that would result if no agreement is reached between Egypt and Ethiopia.

Despite the fact that a main doctrine of the Egyptian regime is not to engage in external wars, a water crisis might change this. President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi himself commented on the possibility of war with Ethiopia by saying, "The people deserve the money that we might spend on wars." However, he has also proclaimed on several occasions that the ratio for Egypt of the Nile waters is a "matter of life or death for Egyptians" and "a red line." He added that his government "will not accept prejudice to its share of the Nile water." And lately, The Arab League expressed that they will not accept "Any shortage of Egypt's water ratio." Al-Sisi's words have been punctuated by several reports that the Egyptian government has sent troops to a military base in Eritrea. Also, in January, Juba Airport in South Sudan announced that the airport was completely closed except for an Egyptian military aircraft carrying out maneuvers.

The option of striking the dam is not new; former president Mubarak asked the Sudanese regime to use its territory land to strike the dam if Egypt couldn't reach an agreement with Ethiopia. Indeed, ever since Herodotus, the land of Egypt has been known as the "gift of the Nile." Egypt's rulers know that Egyptians can bear anything but lack of water.

Why the United States Should Engage and Mediate Between the Three Countries

Putting aside that U.S. disengagement has given more space for other players such as Turkey, Iran, and Russia to gain power in the Middle East and North Africa, preventing possible war between U.S. allies is a role that Washington must play to assure that peace and order are restored in one of the most unstable places on the planet. Another conflict in the wounded Middle East would allow more space for terrorism and expanding instability for the Horn of Africa. The Nile negotiations are now in a place where U.S. engagement is essential to prevent a war.

In 1969, an Egyptian movie called "A Taste of Fear," was produced. The movie is about a strong man who governs an Egyptian village with "fear and iron;" killing people was his first option if he glimpsed even tiny opposition to his decisions. He took their land, money, and dignity, and the village lived under him without complaining. The only thing that moved the village was a girl who decided to stand against him when he closed her access to water. Water alone moved the girl, and the girl alone moved into the village. Half a century later, this dire scenario, drastically expanded on a national and regional scale, must be avoided – and the U.S. has an urgent interest in rising to the occasion. ❖

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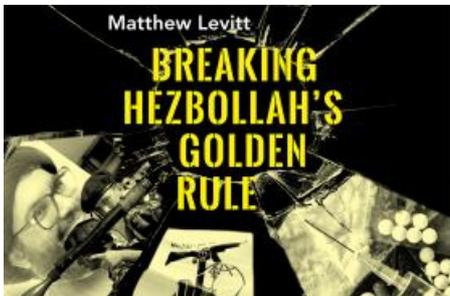
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