

The Nile Basin Initiative and the Crisis of Collective Negotiations

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Feb 19, 2016

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There is no doubt that Egypt faces a slew of challenges and potentially dire consequences related to the Renaissance Dam that Ethiopia is currently constructing at the headwaters of the Nile. Some politicians and media personalities have attempted to characterize the construction of the Renaissance Dam as a side effect of the “January of misfortunes,” part of the false claim that the revolution of January 25, 2011 has brought Egypt nothing but misfortunes and calamity. But the documented reality is that Ethiopia began planning the dam in the early 1990s, and the Egyptian failure to prevent this eventuality has always been there since the idea's initial inception, when Addis Ababa started this project. Now, the project is finally coming to fruition after threats of military intervention and several international conferences.

Many Egyptians feel that Ethiopia's actions throughout the past few decades have demonstrated Ethiopia's indifference to the downstream countries that will be affected by the dam, namely Egypt and Sudan. Yet Sudan, with its diverse alternate water sources, faces a fate much less fraught than the disaster that threatens Egypt if the dam is completed. However, if Egyptians want to better understand how this dam came to be so they could mitigate or even prevent Egypt's losses, then they will have to recognize that their political leaderships have committed and continue commit many errors over the years in managing the Nile issue with Ethiopia. Such errors, intentional or unintentional, may amount to a betrayal of the Egyptian people.

An analogy with a similar water issue in the south of the African continent maybe useful. In 1998, the results of the parliamentary elections in the Kingdom of Lesotho, a landlocked enclave in the northern part of South Africa, resulted in allegations of fraud against the winning party. This triggered widespread disturbances and rumors of a military coup. South Africa, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, so often heralded as a promoter of peace, immediately took the initiative, issuing a resolution from the South African Development Community (SADC) to send South African troops representing the group to intervene in Lesotho.

While ostensibly intending to stabilize Lesotho, this South African intervention was realpolitik, intending to assure its control over the Kates Dam in the Maloti mountains that lies beneath Lesotho's capital Maseru and supplies water to the strategic Witwatersrand region of South Africa. Yet South Africa's military efforts to ensure water security for their people met with no international resistance – despite the fact that South Africa has substantial additional sources of water at the national level.

Of course, Egypt at present fares poorly in comparison to South Africa in terms of economic power, political stability, and military capability. Nor is it an immediate neighboring country to Ethiopia, as is the case with South Africa and Lesotho. What is significant about this comparison is that the possible disaster threatening a region—and only a region—of South Africa pales in comparison to the eminent disaster which threatens the whole of Egypt by tampering with its exclusive water source.

This example of South Africa is not a call to rush into military action, but it does help frame the current issue of water rights in the context of contractual agreement and historical regional expectations. Moreover, it raises questions about the way this issue has been managed by the Egyptian governments. Answering these questions may help develop the beginning of a path to understanding how Egypt has reached such a miserable state in the of water issue, as well as potential first steps forward if Egyptians are serious about looking for a way out. Egypt now faces the reality of the Renaissance Dam, with its unfavorable parameters imposed by Ethiopia on Egypt through the support and agreement of ten Nile Basin countries. More shockingly, Egypt also faces the tacit and latent support of this endeavor by successive political leaderships of Egypt.

To understand the history of the dam, one must first examine the Nile Basin Initiative, launched in 1999 as a successor to the Technical Committee for the Promotion of the Development and Environmental Protection of the Nile Basin (TECCONILE) of 1993, whose initial objectives were studying the feasibility of development projects and promoting prudent management of Nile waters. The Nile Basin Initiative notably included Ethiopia and Kenya, which had not participated in TECCONILE. The Egyptian government encouraged their membership in the name of inclusion and extending the benefit of the Nile's waters to all Nile basin countries. But with the inclusion of Ethiopia and Kenya, Egypt had effectively mobilized all the basin countries against itself on the negotiating table. Sudan was the exception to this all-against-one scenario, sometimes providing support for Egypt depending on the Sudanese government's volatile relations with the Egyptian regime.

The Nile Basin Initiative was a marked departure from Egypt's historic protection of the Nile for its national interests. The Egyptian government had long advocated that international law should govern relations relating to water issues between riparian states, assisted by bilateral agreements that conform to said international law. In the case of Egypt, the bilateral agreements that have long governed water quotas for the downstream countries are the same that demarcated the geopolitical borders of Nile basin countries, emphasizing the centrality of water to state identity and requirements. By initiating and supporting the Nile Basin Initiative, Egypt so markedly departed from its historical policy to which the country had committed itself for hundreds of years -- that no country should tamper with its minimal water quota keeping the country alive.

If negotiations relating to a dam at the head of the Nile River were inevitable, then the terms should have been negotiated through bilateral treaties that positioned the two countries on equal footing rather than the collective negotiations that Egypt ultimately sought, which placed it at a disadvantage as the one opposing voice among many.

As the Nile Basin Initiative became a collective negotiation, the international interest in supporting Ethiopian development placed Egypt at a further disadvantage. International financial institutions like the World Bank tirelessly promoted both the Nile Basin Initiative and the eventual Renaissance Dam, apparently in order to promote the commercialization of the Nile. To convert the waters of an international river into a commodity to be sold by the country at the river's headwaters to both Sudan and Egypt will provide Ethiopia with much needed revenue, but it represents a life threatening danger to Egypt. Egypt faces a financial catastrophe, and the agreements themselves represent an unprecedented and flagrant violation of international agreements which regulate the relationships between riparian states.

Some may seek to justify the Nile Basin Initiative by stating that its initial goals had no relation to the reexamination of water apportionments of Egypt and Sudan, the outcome it ultimately facilitated. It true that the Initiative was

theoretically launched to develop programs intended to provide proper guidance in the use of water for agriculture, electricity networks, and the development of Lake Albert's fisheries. It also hoped to explore other ecological questions, such as ways to combat the water hyacinth in the Kiera river and means of developing basins in Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Uganda. The Initiative was also intended to facilitate the establishment of the Eastern Nile program, which aims to develop a statistical planning model for the Eastern Nile in order to measure the impact of development projects.

These were the goals initially announced for the Nile Basin Initiative. But the principal objective that all parties involved have been aware of tacitly since day one has been the renegotiation of Nile waters and facilitation of the Renaissance Dam. Promoting the initiative, the Egyptian regime has been aware from the start that it has made Egypt lose the upper hand in these negotiation. To claim ignorance as an excuse falls under the heading of grave incompetence, perhaps reaching the level of treachery. That no one has been held accountable for the Egyptian allowance for the dam to move forward is another black mark for Egypt.

The issues presented here provide one piece of a puzzle that, if fully understood, might steer Egypt and the countries at the headwaters of the Nile onto a track that allows Egypt to avoid the potential disasters of water starvation. Were this to be accomplished, these countries might solve the most looming threat dangerous to peace and security of the African continent.

Yahya Ghanim is a journalist specializing in foreign policy and the former chairman of the board of directors at Dar al-Hilal. This item was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8653&lang=en#.VsnTHPkrLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8653&lang=en#.VsnTHPkrLIU). ❖

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