



Egypt Sparks East African Water Conflict

Ethiopian American Council

March 24, 2021: The Horn of Africa has enough strife currently, with the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region, as well as the impact of waves of locusts and intermittent attacks by al-Shabaab. The last thing the nations in north-eastern Africa need at this point is an active conflict over water resources, but Egypt seems determined to spark one.

Apparently, Egypt still believes the Nile River water belongs to it, even though the waters they use to fill its Aswan High Dam mostly come from sources outside Egypt. In fact, Egypt is unique in that almost all of the water it uses comes through 10 other African nations rather from sources on its own territory.

Certainly Egypt depends on water from the Nile as it has for thousands of years. It is estimated that the Nile provides 90 percent of Egypt's water, and about 95 percent of Egyptians are said to live along the Nile. So important is the water from this river to Egypt that it has long been belligerent about any effort in nations sourcing the Nile using more of the water than they previously have.

The Blue Nile and White Nile are two tributaries that flow from the South into what is referred to as the Nile proper – the world's longest river. While the White Nile is the longer tributary, the Blue Nile is the main source of water and fertile soil. The White Nile arises in the Great Lakes region of central Africa, with the most distant source still undetermined, but is located in either Rwanda or Burundi. It flows north through Tanzania, Lake Victoria, Uganda and South Sudan. The Blue Nile originates at Lake Tana in Ethiopia and wends its way approximately 1,450 km through Ethiopia and Sudan and provides as much as 80 percent of the water in the Nile proper once the two tributaries unite in Sudan.

Egypt's claim on Nile River water rests on two treaties: one a 1929 treaty and a subsequent treaty in 1959, which gave Egypt and Sudan rights to nearly all of the Nile water. The 1959 agreement afforded no water to Ethiopia or any other upstream Nile source countries. Additionally, this agreement granted Egypt veto power over future Nile River projects.

However, in May 2010, five upstream Nile nations — Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda — signed a treaty declaring their rights to a share of the river's flow, rejecting the 1959 treaty drawn up by the British. One Ethiopian negotiator accused Egypt of seeking to turn his country into what he called a "hydrological colony."

The Egyptian response to others claiming more access to the Nile has long been belligerent. Egypt has often said any attempt by upstream nations to take what it regarded as Egyptian water would result in war. When a previous Ethiopian government proposed building a series of dams on the Nile in 1978, Egypt began issuing threats.

“We are not going to wait to die of thirst in Egypt,” said Egypt’s president at the time, Anwar Sadat. “We’ll go to Ethiopia and die there.”

When Ethiopia began the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project in 2011, Egypt was mired in its own internal turmoil and could do little except issue critical statements about the \$4.5 billion dam, which will be Africa’s largest, with a reservoir about the size of London. Ostensibly, Egypt is concerned about the rate with which the GERD is filled. Ethiopia wants to fill in four years, while Egypt wants a slower fill rate of 12 years or more. The GERD project is vital to Ethiopia’s plan for economic development, with which it would be finally effectively using the water resources at its disposal. Ethiopia is one of the world’s fastest growing economies, and the GERD provides the opportunity to become Africa’s largest power exporter. So the Nile is central to both countries’ development plans.

When Egypt constructed the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s, its aim was to increase the amount of hydroelectric power, regulate the flooding of the Nile and increase agricultural production – just like what Ethiopia plans to do. However, Egypt evidently believes its needs overrule those of its fellow African nations, despite its publicly collegial rhetoric.

Playing on international sympathies about its need for Nile water in a mostly desert country, Egypt downplays its economic benefits from Nile water. Each night on American television, commercials from the My Pillow Company tout “Giza cotton” sheets produced from an area in Egypt that is bounded by the Nile, the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, Egyptian cotton is the world’s best because of its long fibre that makes it softer and stronger. The silky soft cotton has been called “white gold.” The so-called Giza Dream sheets are promoted as “ultra-soft and breathable.” It is little remembered at this point, but the prominence of Egyptian cotton largely led to North African countries being excluded from the original African Growth and Opportunity Act in 1997 and in subsequent iterations.

Recently, the Egyptian government announced that it would support the expansion of cotton planting as a way to boost the national economy. Cotton production and exporting is a strategic sector of the Egyptian economy, contributing 26.4 percent of the gross industrial product and generating \$7 billion in annual exports. Egypt has a right to promote its agricultural sector, but not at the expense of Ethiopia’s plans for economic development. Agricultural production, of course, uses a tremendous amount of water, so all parties involved need to work out an equitable sharing plan.

Whatever the eventual outcome of Nile negotiations, Egypt needs to transition to modern technologies to more efficiently handle the water it receives, but it also needs to transition to non-agricultural manufacturing, such as a country like Rwanda has done. If Nile water is to be shared more than it has been, Egypt needs to diversify its economic output as other Nile source countries are doing. Farming and tourism will no longer be enough as Egypt moves forward.

Many world policymakers also seem unaware of Egypt’s poor stewardship of the water it receives from the Nile. Sewage flows into the Nile in Egyptian territory, and garbage clogs its irrigation canals. Various Egyptian governments have created schemes to tap into the Nile, including the current government, which is building a sprawling new administrative capital in the desert outside Cairo that experts say will diminish Nile water in Egypt further.

Criticism of Egypt’s handling of the Nile is not tolerated. Egyptian pop singer Sherine

was prosecuted in 2017 for mocking the Nile’s notoriously dirty water. She urged her fans to “drink Evian instead.” Fortunately, she was eventually acquitted.

Now that the Egyptian government seems to be in control again, it is taking its anti-GERD rhetoric further. Back in 2013, in an Egyptian television broadcast, the president at the time, Mohamed Morsi, discussed using tactics of subversion to prevent the dam from being completed or made operational, including the possibility of bombing the GERD. More recently, then-U.S. President Donald Trump, during U.S.-led Nile negotiations last year, also raised the possibility of Egypt bombing the GERD.

The war in Ethiopia’s Tigray region is distracting for the Ethiopian government and apparently makes Egypt think it now has the upper hand in Nile negotiations as there is blame concerning the conduct of the conflict being cast on the government in Addis. Furthermore, the flow of Tigray People’s Liberation Front rebel forces has led to Ethiopian incursion into Sudanese territory in pursuit. This has pushed Sudan, likely with Egyptian encouragement, to warn of measures to be taken if such Ethiopian military actions continue.

Sudan has benefitted from the previous Nile River water allocation treaties, but the potential of a greater flow of energy from Ethiopia puts that government in a difficult situation. Do they work to slow or halt the GERD project as Egypt would want and lose that benefit of increased access to electrical power, or do they stand by and hope the Tigray conflict doesn’t further spread into their territory? In any Egyptian bombing of the GERD, it would have to have Sudanese permission to fly over its territory since Ethiopian and Egypt do not share a border.

For now, Sudan is encouraging further negotiations, but the second phase of filling the GERD is set to resume in weeks during the next flood season, and Egypt is increasingly anxious that it maintain a constant flow of Nile water, which has gradually decreased over the years. Many issues associated with the filling of the GERD’s reservoir have been resolved, but there is still no agreement on the role that the dam will play in mitigating droughts. The agreement thus far states that “when the flow of Nile water to the dam falls below 35-40 b.c.m. (billions of cubic meters) per year, that would constitute a drought”, and Egypt and Sudan contend that Ethiopia would be required to release some of the water in the dam’s reservoir to deal with the drought. Ethiopia prefers to have the flexibility to make its own decisions on how to deal with droughts, but Ethiopian and Sudan are accustomed to having veto power over the use of Nile water.

Egypt and Sudan conducted joint military exercises last year. On a recent visit to Khartoum, the Egyptian military chief of staff cited the “gravity of dangers surrounding us,” and declared his country was “ready to meet Sudan’s requests in all fields.” Clearly, Egypt is encouraging conflict to forestall the completion of the GERD. Egypt has made its desperation to maintain some measure of control of Nile water, but it remains to be seen how far Sudan will go to force the issue.

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