



The Nile: The Politics of Survival

By: **Raouf Ebeid - Editor**

Published: July 12, 2010

At the sound and light presentation at the temple of Philae in Upper Egypt, we witness a dialogue between the Goddess *Isis* and the Nile. *Isis* is heard lamenting and scolding the *Nile*, father of life, for having rendered the land earth around its banks arid due to his subsiding waters. The Nile is heard comforting her and promising to overflow its banks again so that Egypt may prosper.

Since long before Herodotus in the 5th century B.C. called Egypt the “gift of the Nile” and continuing until today, there has been any doubt that this majestic river is the lifeblood of Egypt. The Egyptian population, which is approaching 85 million, is almost totally dependent on the Nile waters for survival. Internal and external developments now threaten Egypt’s critical



relationship to the Nile. *PI Online* examines the international and domestic politics that are shaping a natural resource crisis.

Internationally, the crisis came to a head this spring after more than a decade of quarreling between Egypt and the Sudan on one side, and on the other side most of the eight other countries bordering the Nile [Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Kenya, Eritrea and the Republic of the Congo]. Most of the upper riparian countries, led by Ethiopia, sought renegotiation of the existing Nile treaties, which date back to 1929 and 1959.¹ Those agreements allocate the almost total share of the Nile waters to Egypt and the Sudan. When Egypt and the Sudan rebuffed requests to renegotiate, five of the upper riparian countries² signed their own agreement last month despite the objections of their northern neighbors. The main contention of the new agreement is the elimination of the unilateral privilege that Egypt had to veto any project that other countries could undertake and that could alter Egypt's allocated portion of the Nile waters.

The three largest players in this drama are Egypt, the Sudan and Ethiopia, each of which claims that their current share of the Nile waters is insufficient to meet the needs of their growing populations. Egypt uses the major portion of the Nile waters, with more than 80% originating in the Blue Nile around Lake *Tana* in Ethiopia. Egypt maintains that the older treaties are binding and grant Cairo the right to veto any new project



¹ Under the 1929 and 1959 treaties, Egypt and Sudan have the right of use of 87 percent of the Nile waters, which is around 74 billion cubic meters, 55.5 billion for Egypt and 18.5 for Sudan.

² Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Kenya signed the new “Nile River Basin Cooperative Framework” on May 14th 2010 at the Lake Victoria hotel in Entebbe.

on the banks of the Nile. Thus, when a new hydro-electric power station built by an Italian company was inaugurated in *Tana Beles*, Ethiopia last month, Egyptian President Mubarak flew to Rome to meet with the Italian president, underscoring Egypt's serious concerns about such projects. Although the new Ethiopian power station will have negligible effect upon the waters of the Nile, Egypt sees it as the camel's nose under the tent – a harbinger of future projects that could significantly limit the flow of the Nile, depriving Egypt of a vital resource. The Egyptian president presumably felt that he was therefore compelled to take a stand.

Lately, Egypt has also tried to dispel the notion advanced by some writers in the Arab World and the West³ that a war with Ethiopia over the water resources of the Nile is unavoidable. It seems that, for now at least, Cairo has changed course, taking a less confrontational tone. Egypt's highest political delegation to Ethiopia this year headed to Addis Ababa⁴ last week to discuss with the Ethiopian prime minister peaceful resolution of the Nile crisis. The Egyptian delegation included the Foreign Minister, *Abu El Gheith*, and the Minister of International Cooperation, *Fayza Abu al Naga*. The addition of *Abu Al Naga* is believed to signal Egypt's willingness to cooperate economically with Ethiopia. Larger players like China are already expanding their clout in the Sudan and Ethiopia and, by comparison, it is doubtful that Cairo has the serious will to commit financial resources or that it possesses the technical capabilities to provide meaningful assistance to Addis Ababa.

Egypt is also well aware that an independent southern Sudan, which could come as early as next year, will remove the new nation from the Arab sphere and the country will likely unravel further along tribal lines, which would be chaotic for its neighbors and further complicate the Nile crisis. The negative repercussions for arid Egypt would be much greater than for the Sudan, which has other groundwater resources, albeit badly exploited. Thus, needing Khartoum's support, Egypt has singled out the Ethiopian project while turning a blind eye on much larger water projects being undertaken in the Sudan.

Ethiopia and the other upper riparian countries maintain that the issue is simply how all countries bordering the Nile can more equitably share its resources and respond to the needs of their growing populations. Commenting on the Egyptian delegation to Addis Ababa, *Osama Saraya*, the chief editor of *Al-Ahram*, summarized the situation in yesterday's front-page column. He described the approach of Egypt as a policy of maintaining "historical rights" granted in previous treaties, and the historical fact that for time immemorial they have used the waters of the Nile. He contrasted that with the view of the Ethiopian Prime Minister, which *Saraya* characterizes as based upon the notion of Ethiopia's "God given right", a divine right stemming from the fact that the main source of the Nile lies in Ethiopia.⁵ Egyptian politicians dismiss the Ethiopian claim and privately maintained that the present crisis is motivated by politics in the upper riparian countries, rather than true need.

Most analysts agree that there is some truth on both sides. Egypt's allegation that the upper riparian revolt is politically motivated rather than based on genuine urgent need seems, at least in the short run, to have some validity. The upper riparian countries presently depend on the water of the Nile for less than 5% of their needs, while for Egypt it is a matter of life and death with more than 90% of its water coming from the Nile. Thus, for Ethiopia the Nile issue is not a matter of an urgent need, but rather a matter of rights. The situation is exacerbated by the longstanding political animosity between Egypt and Ethiopia, which has often been tinted with religious tones. Ethiopia has often accused Egypt of courting Islamists in Somalia in order to extend its influence into the Horn of Africa and destabilize the Ethiopian regime by befriending Eritrea, which Ethiopia considers an enemy. Until this year, Egypt had done little to dispel this notion.

³ The Boston Globe, July 2nd, 2010

http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2010/07/02/the_threat_of_a_water_war/

⁴ Al Ahram, July 7th, 2010 <http://www.ahram.org.eg/220/2010/07/07/25/28258.aspx>

⁵ Al-Ahram, July 9th, 2010 <http://www.ahram.org.eg/222/2010/07/09/10/28614.aspx>

On the environmental side, water resource experts tend to agree that the increased demand generated by growth in industry and agriculture is unsustainable in the long run. And the populations of Egypt and Ethiopia rank 15 and 16, respectively, worldwide, with populations over 80 million each. Egypt believes that even its present share of the Nile will not be enough to cover the needs of its growing population beyond the year 2017. This week *Al-Ahram* was already reporting shortages of irrigation water for this summer's crops.⁶ On the other hand, in many drought-prone countries like Ethiopia, the level of population concentration is relatively high and cannot be adequately supported by rain-fed agriculture alone. Thus, where rainfall levels are not high or reliable enough to maintain rain-fed agriculture, water management systems are considered sound investments. Such investments, it is argued, help stabilise agricultural production and promote food security.

The abundance of water in the highlands of Ethiopia contrasts with the acute scarcity afflicting the vast low-lying region, which stretches south from the central Ethiopian Rift Valley to its border with Kenya. In this region only 42% of the population has access to adequate water supply and only 11% has access to adequate sanitation services.

Neglect and misuse of the Nile has also been a major internal problem in Egypt. Waste, pollution and lack of planning have aggravated the situation. The Egyptian government has been engaged for sometime in developing plans to rationalize the use of limited water resources and increase efficiency of land and water use for agricultural production. The pace of those efforts, however, has been inadequate to keep up with a burgeoning population that has little regard for water conservation, with almost as many leaky faucets as people in Cairo. The situation is no better in the Sudan, which has equally inefficient irrigation methods, destructive farming methods, and overgrazing of livestock. This neglect and misuse of the Nile by the countries that most benefit from its waters prompted an Egyptian poet, *Farouk Goweda*, to publish a poem in which the Nile is portrayed as rebelling against the tyranny of those inhabiting its shores.⁷

Politically, anti-government forces and religious extremists in Egypt and the Sudan have seized upon the crisis to promote their agendas. Most Arab writers, aside from those representing the official Egyptian press, blame Egypt for politicizing the problem. They claim that the level of neglect and contempt exhibited by Egyptian authorities for their southern neighbors over the years is the main cause for this catastrophe. Opposition writer *Fahmy Huwaidi* explains that, since the death of President Nasser in 1970, Egyptian foreign policy has neglected the African dossier. *Huwaidi* also takes the occasion to poke at the Egyptian government by noting that while an Egyptian African policy was non-existent, Israel was busy strengthening its relationship with several of the riparian countries, notably Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda.⁸ In the Arab world most problems are also eventually blamed on Israel and the Nile crisis is no exception. Sudanese academician *Hassan Makki* considers the situation a "commodity" problem⁹ created by Israel, which convinced the upper riparian countries that they own the water and should sell it, like any other commodity, to other countries, including Egypt. Apparently *Makki* cannot conceive that even such a basic idea could have originated anywhere but in Israel.

⁶ Al Ahram, May 31st, 2010 - <http://www.ahram.org.eg/183/2010/05/31/25/22815.aspx> and June 1st 2010 <http://www.ahram.org.eg/214/2010/07/01/29/27447.aspx>

⁷ Partial translation of the poem (last six verses) by Farouk Goweda published in Al-Ahram on June 11th, 2010 - <http://www.ahram.org.eg/194/2010/06/11/42/24402.aspx>

*Go back to your old love ... and teach
Your children to protect my shores
I gave you my life...but you showed contempt for my intimacy
I therefore raise my flag of rebellion
If I had known what the future was hiding
I would have chosen another land than yours to settle in*

⁸ Al Jazeera April 20, 2010 - <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/4C4E3EFO-2A51-4868-AC30-A7F5DDE04808.htm>

⁹ Al Jazeera, May 24th, 2010 <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/CCC8874E-9174-4265-8140-9CF58FD981B8.htm>

Political experts in Cairo, however, are concerned less about Israel and much more about China's role in the development of projects in Ethiopia and other African countries. While western nations, in deference to Egypt, may curtail funding for projects that may influence the flow of the Nile, China's ambitious expansion in Africa may take precedence over its relationship with or concerns for Egypt. For its part, the United States, which maintains good relationship with Egypt and Ethiopia, has avoided being dragged into the Nile crisis. Washington's neutrality may also reflect ambivalence about the unity of the Sudan. While the United States has supported the south, mainly because of its dislike of the Sudanese president, Washington is quite aware that a divided Sudan could spell chaos in the region.

It is unclear at this stage whether the intense diplomatic initiatives by Cairo on several fronts will bear fruit. Following their meeting this week, Egypt and Ethiopia were talking about finding a win/win solution. It remains to be seen how that goal can be achieved and whether it could replace the long held belief that only a zero-sum economic approach is possible regarding the distribution of the water of the Nile.

Return to: www.politicalislam.org

Political Islam Online holds copyrights in all translations & analysis presented on this site. Materials may only be cited or reproduced with proper attribution.