

# **EGYPTIAN APPROACHES TO THE NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NILE POLITICS: WATER DIPLOMACY OR WATER WAR? WHICH WAY?**

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The politics of the Nile is full of tension, mistrust, anxiety, mystery and diplomatic confrontation among the downstream and upstream riparian countries since time immemorial. The basin has never seen cooperation until recent times. However, there has been cooperation between the two downstream countries (Sudan and Egypt) with the decoration of the 1959 water sharing agreement. The upper riparian countries (Tanzania, DRC, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Eritrea, and Ethiopia) which generate 100% of the Nile waters had been neglected from any negotiations and agreements on the utilizations of the river by the colonial powers.

Historical records have shown evidences that demonstrate the occurrence of diplomatic struggle and direct military confrontations between the upstream and downstream countries. This is partly because of the unfair distribution and utilization of the Nile waters among the basin countries. Egypt has been attempting to ensure the continuation of the zero-sum game politics on the Nile waters by undermining the rights of the lower riparian states. Especially the relations between Ethiopia on the one hand, and Sudan and Egypt on the other hand have been characterized by love and hate depending on the continuity and the change of the colonial status quo on utilization of the Nile waters. Besides, their foreign policy orientations have been drastically shaped and reshaped by the political dynamism in the Horn region generally and in the Nile politics particularly. In fact, the upstream countries have exploited the Nile water resources for their socio-economic developments by calming the 1929 and 1959 colonial agreements and by weakening the upstream states. The net effect of these treaties was to deny the rights of the upper riparian countries from using the waters of the Nile without prior approval of Egypt. What is surprising is that these colonial agreements have excluded and downgraded the right of Ethiopia which contributes 85% of the Nile waters from getting its legal share from the Nile. The 1959 agreement has allocated 55.5 billion cube meters of water to Egypt, 18.5 cubic meters for Sudan, and 10 cubic meters to evaporate in the Sahara desert to keep the ecological balance of the environment. This has been the status quo of the Nile politics in the past. However,

due to geo-political, security and environmental transformations in region, the colonial status quo has been challenged in a way that generates mutual benefits to the basin countries. Hence, the basin countries have strengthened their cooperation for regional joint planned growth under the frame work of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) for the last the decades.

The NBI provides a wide-basin framework to fight poverty and to promote socio-economic development among the ten Nile basin countries. It is a historical phenomenon in the Nile politics in the sense that it is the first institutional regime on a shared and equitable use of the Nile Waters and for meaningful negotiations as well. Apart from real negotiations, the signing of the Comprehensive Framework Agreement (CFA) by the upstream countries in 2010 became instrumental in bringing new dynamism in the Nile politics that significantly changed the colonial status quo and the zero-sum game politics. This dynamism which challenged Egyptian apartheid policy on the utilization of the Nile waters has lead to new political and diplomatic development. Especially issues surrounding Nile has become the agenda of Egyptian public after the official announcement of the diversion of the normal flow of the Nile water by Ethiopian government. Following the redirection of the water, discussions among Egyptian politicians and policy makers in Egypt indicated possible foreign policy strategies and approaches to the Nile to quickly respond to the new dynamism. These possible foreign policy and security strategies that Egypt will put in place have direct or indirect implications to Ethiopian. Egypt may resort either water diplomacy or water war or the combination of the two strategies simultaneously to tackle the new development in Ethiopia.

### **Egyptian Strategies**

Egypt, in spite of its geographical location in the Sahara desert and its absolute dependence on the Nile waters for its very existence, has been following a foreign policy and security strategies that ensures the uninterrupted flow of the Nile waters. The Nile water has been a key national interest concern of Egyptians and thus has been taken to be the central element in the circle of Egyptian foreign policy towards the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia as well. With the recent diversion of waters by the Ethiopian government, Egypt may take the following foreign policy and security strategies which have solid messages to the people of Ethiopia.



### **Water Diplomacy**

Diplomacy has been described as the weapon of weak and poor states. In fact, it is important to transform the emotions and positions of opponent parties by imposing all possible diplomatic pressures. This includes sanctions at political, economic and diplomatic levels. Many states use to apply diplomacy in their matters concerning national interests before resorting to war. In this regard, hard diplomacy has been frequently used by Egypt to ensure the perpetuation of the zero-sum game politics in the Nile basin. However, Ethiopia has been insisting a win-win approach in dealing with the matters of the Nile.

Egypt may use hard diplomacy to react to the current diplomatic and security developments in Ethiopia as part of their propaganda. For instance, it may:

- Attempt to divert the diplomatic negotiations on its side by presenting a distorted image about the dam and by magnifying its negative socio-economic and environmental impacts. Egypt may also present the construction of the dam to the Arab world and the international community at large as a planned Ethiopia's strategy to damage its national interest. By doing so, it will create confusion and ambiguity.
- Take the matter to the Arab League using its influential position being the seat of the League so as to impose diplomatic sanctions on Ethiopia and to reduce the flow of foreign

currency income by disconnecting its trade ties. It may also convince the Arab countries not to export oil which gradually aggravate inflation and living expenses and could be translated in to political crises.

- Submit the case to AU, UN, UNSC and ICJ arguing that the construction of the dam severely reduces its “historical share” of the water for the sake of bringing hard diplomatic pressure on Ethiopia.

### **Water war**

Successive Egyptian governments have had negative perception to Ethiopia and have been engaging both in diplomatic battles and proxy wars to damage the economic and political potential of Ethiopia not to exploit its resources. This negative perception is rooted in their idea that “peace in Ethiopia means war in Egypt”. As a result, they never want to see economically strong and politically unified Ethiopia. This is because they fear that strong Ethiopia will deny Egyptian access to the Nile waters.

### **Proxy war**

Evidences have shown that destabilizing and weakening Ethiopia through proxy war has been one of the Egyptian security strategies in the past in order to ensure the sustainable flow of the Nile waters from its source. To this end, instead of directly confronting Ethiopia militarily as it did during the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV in 1875 and 1876 at Gundet and Gura respectively, it has opted to support anti-Ethiopian government dissident forces operating in Somalia and Eritrea. Needless to say, Egypt has been extending its diplomatic and financial assistance to Islamic extremist groups and opposition political movements in Somalia and Eritrea. Above all, Egypt never wanted to see the formation of pro-Ethiopian government in Somalia which is committed to amicable relations with Ethiopia. Because peace in Somalia will have its own trickle-down positive effect on Ethiopia.

Egypt feared that any peaceful relationship between Ethiopia and the government of Somalia would negatively affect its regional interest. Thus, it has actively involved in the Somali politics directly or indirectly to turn the outcomes of peace negotiations on its side. Moreover, it has been working to change the political equation of the Somali politics to counterbalance Ethiopia’s influence in the region. To mention “Egypt was the main lobbyist in the Arab world in favor of

granting financial assistance to al-Ittihad” as Medhane Tadesse clearly stated in his book “*Al-Ittihad: Political Islam and Black Economy in Somalia* (2002)”.

I strongly argue that Egypt will continue backing, training and equipping heavy military weapons to dissident political movements operating in Somalia and Eritrea to put Ethiopia in the bottle of challenges and to divert its development energies to war. Even the current public debates in Egypt reinforced that Egyptians politicians have the interest to attack Ethiopia by supporting rebel movements. Associated Press and BBC reported that radical pro-Morsi Islamic Wasat Party leader, Abu al-Ila Madi, suggested a rumor that “Egypt planned to destroy the dam could scare the Ethiopians into cooperating with Egypt on the project”. Other liberal politician, Ayman Nour, proposed spreading rumors about “Egypt obtaining refueling aircraft to create the impression that it plans an airstrike to destroy the dam”. This clearly proves that Egypt has intentions to attack Ethiopia through proxy war. I don’t think that Egypt will keep its hand away from Ethiopia as long as there are political forces that are willing to attack Ethiopia. Hence, Somalia and Eritrea could be used as a spring board.

Therefore, the government of Ethiopia has to continue its positive contribution in the construction of peace and political stability in Somalia in order to counter balance Egyptian influence. In addition, it has to strengthen its trade and commercial ties than ever before in a way that integrate the two countries economically. Supplying cheap electric power and connecting the people of the two countries by establishing infrastructures can also be one way of keeping its diplomatic and political relations fresh. This eventually minimizes the possibility of threats coming from the side of Somalia. But the position of Eritrea has to be seen very thoroughly since the government officially recognizes the “historical rights” of Egypt to use the Nile waters even after the signing of CFA. As a result, the government in Asmara may give a green light to Egypt to use its territory to attack Ethiopia. Eritrea may consume this opportunity as an advantage to revenge Ethiopia and to externalize internal tension and instability. Thus, we need to rethink our relations with Eritrea.

### **Military Attack: Political Suicide**

Declaring war and launching military attack on Ethiopia could be one of the possible Egyptians strategies in approaching the new developments in Ethiopia. In fact, it seems obsolete to think of



war among the Nile basin countries in the 21st century. In the era of globalization Egypt may not be successful to secure its water interest permanently by directly launching military attack unless it colonizes and controls the basin countries as the colonial powers did. But it would destabilize the political networks of Ethiopia and able to divert its attention by keeping it fighting with dissident groups. Nevertheless, war has never achieved its objective other than human misery and chaos as the American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan has proved. Yet our historical relations with the Egypt demonstrate elements of war and military confrontation in their attempt to control source of the Nile. History reveals that Egypt had fought more than 15 wars with Ethiopia with the aim of controlling the source of Nile but its ambition was aborted when it was devastatingly defeated at the battle of Gundet and Gura. In fact, it was successful in controlling Harar for ten solid years. This was an indication of Egyptian appetite to attack Ethiopia by waging war.

Egypt may consider the diversion of the water and the construction of the Dam as a declaration of war and thus may take military actions to destroy the dam and to attack Ethiopia. If Egypt does so, the consequences will be result in political suicide. Egypt could justify its pre-emptive military actions by arguing that the construction of the Renaissance Dam not only affects its

socio-economic development but also its survival. States under international law have the right to defend themselves from any external threat which damage their territorial integrity and political sovereignty. One of the legal instruments that the government in Cairo may use as weapon for its pre-emptive military action could be Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.

This article states that “Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security”. In fact, the Charter gives utmost priority to mechanisms of peaceful settlement of disputes such as negotiations, mediation, conciliation, arbitration and the like. Nevertheless; states opt to use war as a last resort to self-defense and acts of aggression. For instance, America launched a pre-emptive strike on Iraq in 2003 claiming Article 51 of the UN Charter as a legal justification. Ethiopia also intervene in Somalia in 2006 following the declaration a jihad war by some Islamist fundamentalist groups; and attacked terrorist groups operating in Eritrea 2012 relaying on the above article. In the same manner, Egypt may attack Ethiopian on the basis of this justification. But the consequences of military action will be very severe for Egypt at least for one reason- its action will provoke public hunger in Ethiopia and may compel the government and the people of Ethiopia to take more radical actions even to the extent of stopping the flow of the river.

Generally, the current political development in Egypt concerning the Nile which are reflected through Egyptian medias after Ethiopia’s diversion of part of Nile water clearly witnessed that Egyptians has intention to use either water diplomacy or water war or the combination of the to stop the construction of the dam or to attack Ethiopia. Thus, the Ethiopian government has to be aware of the changing foreign policy and security strategies of Egypt and should adjust its foreign policy orientation visa-vis the new geo-political and security development in the Horn region generally and to Egypt particularly. In addition, it has to give considerable attention to the possibility of military confrontation with lower riparian countries (Sudan and Egypt) either directly or indirectly through proxy and has to strengthen our military apparatus so as to avert potential dangers. These enable the government of Ethiopia to take pro-active measures. Knowing Egyptian approaches to the current political and diplomatic crises in the Nile politics will help us to rethink and reevaluate of our positions and the foreign policy strategies we have

been adhering towards the Horn region for the past two decades. Finally, I would like to suggest the some pro-active policy actions to be taken by Ethiopian government to handle new developments in the downstream countries.

- Strengthen internal cohesion and economic development which could be used as a bargaining power in negotiating with the lower riparian states.
- Building internal military capacity to quickly respond to any anticipated surprise attack from downstream countries, if any. We should not be too idealistic. The possibility of water related war between Ethiopia and downstream countries should not be neglected from political and academic discourse. This is because we cannot avoid war by simply wishing to be eliminated.
- Organizing public discussion to make sure that the people are aware the current developments on the Nile politics and to consolidate national unity.
- Inviting opposition political party leaders, civil society representatives, university intellectuals and influential personalities to discuss on report of the International Panel of Experts as the lower riparian countries did; and Egyptian positions to frame foreign policy directions and to create common national stance.
- Sending diplomatic mission to selected Arab League member states to dispel fears and confusions regarding the dam's potential impacts, stressing the project would ultimately benefit all the riparian states. This will also counterbalance Egyptians hard water diplomacy.

To conclude, the only solution to the Nile is a win-win approach. The late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, in his interview with the Egyptian TV in 2010 clearly told the Egyptian people that “utilization of the Nile waters is not a zero-sum game. It does not mean that if the upper riparian states benefits, Egypt and Sudan should lose. It does not mean that Egypt and Sudan benefit, the upper riparian countries should lose. There is a win-win alternative and the only solution to the Nile is a win-win solution”. He also underlined that “Ethiopia do not accept the principle that some people have which says the Nile water belong to Sudan and Egypt and Ethiopia and the rest will not have a share in the Nile. That concept is a 19<sup>th</sup> concept. Egyptian must accept that the source of 85% of the Nile water must benefit from the Nile unless they accept this principle, then the win-win solution will be closed.”This is the concept that Egyptians

failed to recognize. They are living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century while thinking in the 19<sup>th</sup> century mind setting.

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