

# **Diplomatic Implications of Diverting the Flow of Abay River by Ethiopia**

## **Bye, Bye Perceptions and Zero-Sum Games, Welcome Reasons and Dialogues!!**

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Ethiopia announced its successful diversion in the flow of Abay River (not in the course of the river as some media people wrongly use the term without considering its implications to international principles and diplomacy)<sup>1</sup> at the Renaissance Dam before two days. This news induced varied feelings among the audience particularly in Ethiopia and Egypt, the two historical protagonists on the River. Ethiopian officials used the event to reassure the world that the act by no means intends to affect adversely Egyptian interests both in theory and in practice.

Despite this, some Egyptian officials expressed policy statements swinging between the traditional Sadat's era lines of thought and traces of a civilized approach to the matter. The impression of the Egyptian ambassador to Ethiopia before two days, for instance, sounded logical at first where he said: 'once Ethiopia began materializing its plan of the Renaissance Dam, Egypt has to cope with the reality'. He, however, swerved on the morrow into a second thought in which he added the statement, 'so far as the diversion does not affect Egyptian interest'. On the other hand, President Morsi preferred a sober view and position of things where he moderately said he was confident that Ethiopians by the Renaissance Dam never do things that will harm Egypt. Next to this the Egyptian Minister for Water and Energy tended to reiterate still the 'only if' formula of his water diplomacy, like the second thought of the ambassador, adding that his 'country never allows a drop of water to go in a manner that will cause grievances among Egyptian farmers'.

There are also views on the Ethiopian side among private individuals, the press and refugees, etc, who express an approaching crisis that could mature into Egyptian attack against Ethiopia. These Ethiopians have been questioning Ethiopian military preparation for the imminent war. Of course, knowingly or unknowingly, both people in this category at the two sides of the counter are beating drums of war. I strongly argue that this is an unmistakable reflection of the hangover and persistence of past and obsolete views and expectations of the infamous Nile hydro politics.

If these are on the distorted side of the agenda, what is the meaning of perception that breeds them? What are the most likely and most acceptable diplomatic ramifications of the Ethiopian practice in the relations between the two countries?

### **The Past—Rule of Perceptions**

The past in the historical Nile relations between Ethiopia and Egypt reminds one that

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, Ethiopia did not divert the Nile River away from its natural course, as some media people in Ethiopia and outside are saying it mistakenly, but only its flow at the site of the dam just for functional purposes. Nobody can find such a statement as 'diversion in the course of international rivers' in the foreign policy document of Ethiopia. The Nile River will continue to flow beyond the Renaissance Dam by resuming its natural course.

'perception' was the unquestioned and monopolistic ruler of views and foreign policies. Unfortunately, the rule of perceptions reined in the mentalities of both Egypt and Ethiopia, at regime, government, and citizen's levels of thinking. The dominance of perception had had two structural sources that still survive, as we saw above, to challenge scientific and rational insights into the true Nile Utilization discourse. These are false impressions, which bred false and fallacious sayings persisting for more than forty centuries since the Genesis, and actual and practical concerns, at least, on the Egyptian side.

Among the most widely held false impressions that have come down from generation to generation is the one believed to come from the Greek historian, leaving by far the far-fetching effect. According to Homer, 'Egypt is the gift of the Nile'. This impression in its turn produced the historical false impression convincing both Ethiopians and Egyptians that Egypt no more exists without the water of Nile River. This probably went the wrong direction away from the intentions of Herodotus. For him, Egypt was the gift of Nile not in the material sense of bread winning (*Ingerism*) but in its contribution to the essence of Egyptian identity as the land of Pharaohic civilization. Of course, nobody on earth can deny this, which appeared to fit the high level of Herodotus' understandings of history as human civilization.

This false impression earned the additional support of forceful cementing factors with some acceptable truth held for over multiple millennia to solidify again Egyptian and Ethiopian divergent perceptions. Both entertain firmly the view that Egypt has never had any source of natural water other than the Nile River. While this is unquestionable, it already resulted in distorted interpretations. Egyptians find this argument fitting the fact that Ethiopia as a riparian state has perennial rainfall as a major water source for almost all its hydrological needs. The other acceptable factor still is that Ethiopia contributes 86% of the total Nile water that drains across Egypt into the Mediterranean Sea.

These perceptions have had also practical dimensions to the state of Nile affairs in the statuesque. Guided by the mentality of 'Nile means Egypt', Egyptian governments have historically spent a great portion of their wealth on water-based investments to date across Nile River. Egypt, for example, has been exploiting Nile waters for about 21 socio-economic activities and purposes. Irrigated agriculture feeding more than forty million households, fishery, maritime transport, urban water supply, industries, tourism, hydropower, and many others are evident. Egypt built a series of dams and a complex canal system since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with its largest dam being almost two times bigger than that of Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam. It has cultivated one of the biggest multidisciplinary technical staff in the generalized field of hydrology with a rough 1:140 ratio to Ethiopia.

These developments also supply additional reinforcement for the rule of perception across Egypt that Nile River actually means Egypt itself. The resultant impression again is that Ethiopia's possible utilization of Nile finally means loss of all these national sources of wealth guaranteeing Egyptian survival. The cumulative effect all these perceptions have found articulate expressions in the Egyptian policy of Nile, summarized as follows:

- Nothing else but Nile River has always been the ultimate measure of Ethiopian-Egyptian relations presently and in the future as enduring

- standard of diplomacy;
- Nile water for Egypt is not a matter of technicality but that of politics and security only;
- Ethiopia could never justify utilization of Nile water so that it could and should never try to draw a bottle of water from it;
- There is no any need today or any time in the future to enter into negotiations on Nile River with Ethiopia against this standard;
- It is Ethiopia's burden therefore to check and recheck several times any of its plans of utilizing Nile water for any kind of project before implementation, and not Egyptian responsibility;
- Such a negotiation with upper riparian states in general and with Ethiopia in particular means but extending formal recognitions to their demands for a share;
- Egyptian complete dependence justifies all measures it would take from diplomacy to naked military action;
- As compared to the major protagonist upper riparian state, Ethiopia, Egypt has had the reliable state capacity to insure the continuity of the statuesque that has prevailed for ages

Finally, this grew to be the center stage of Egyptian state mentality through out the ages that tempted the former president Anwar Sadat to remark in 1979: 'Egypt will fight hereafter a war only for water reasons.' The clearest message is this: Ethiopia moves to utilize Nile River only if the motivation behind is to endanger Egypt'

### **The Challenge**

Pre-1991 regimes and governments in Ethiopia undeniably contributed their shares in posing direct and indirect challenges to the above positions of Egypt. They, for example, invested on knowledge acquisition about the hydrology, sociology, and engineering of the Nile River. They refrained from signing any one-sided or politically driven international treaties that could have threatened Ethiopia's right over the utilization of the river. At the intellectual front, publications against the apparently fallacious and illogical grounds of Egyptian Nile policy entered the market, despite embarrassingly few.

A revolutionary breakthrough however came after 1991 specifically after 2002 following the publication of the unusually detailed and clear Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy document by the former Prime Minister, Méléés Zenawi. Inspired by this, the number of scholarly and other publications on the Nile River quadrupled. I myself met many scholars participating in a number of international conferences with the common agenda of Nile water and Ethiopia's right to equitable utilization. Together, Ethiopia's challenge to the credibility, scientific bases, and rationality of Egyptian traditional Nile policy has significantly mounted with the following key questions.

the Ethiopian side challenged whether the Egyptian traditional Nile policy based itself on a sound appraisal and synthesis of concrete, objective, and substantiated data or simply on established intergenerational perceptions. The Foreign Affairs Policy, for instance, came up with probably the first systematized and well-organized package of Nile arguments, even though the Egyptian government and its experts have not responded officially to them. These include, above all others, the following:

**A.** Is it true that Egypt is naturally and permanently the gift of Nile River or the gift

of its dynamic society? Will Egypt remain an agricultural economy forever or will it gradually grow into an industrialized and urbanized society less dependent on the Nile River?

**B.** Is it true that any kind of Ethiopia's utilization scheme of Nile Waters or any of its development projects actually harm Egyptian interests? How could one positively answer this question under situations where no practical step on Ethiopian side proves it true or false?

**C.** Is it true that Egypt is an ultimate beneficiary of Nile water in the absence of any move by Ethiopia to utilize the river even for power purposes, which are internationally a forgone conclusion for their nature-friendly and non-divertive effects at the flows along the natural course of rivers?

**D.** Even if Ethiopia wants to utilize Nile River with an assured harm against Egyptian interest, where and how can it do? Is there a sufficient size of cultivable land in the highland rugged landscape in Ethiopia around the Nile River that necessarily demands the diversion of the river? Does any water-based project in Ethiopia require an amount of Nile water that equals or exceeds the amount that Egypt wastes through evaporation?

**E.** Before meeting officially these policy and scholarly challenges, what are the reasons for some Egyptian government leaders to worry and grow pessimistic about the Renaissance Dam, for example? Why do they prefer 'only of it does not harm' statement in their policy explanations about the dam?

The answer is simple and already given that these officials have continued under the unchallenged rules of perceptions rather than reasons in tune with the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even more importantly, what measures are these Egyptian officials implying to take if the dam, for some reason, temporarily affects the volume of water reaching Egypt? Do they mean they will use force against Ethiopia to prevent this from happening? If they say 'yes', how, and at which military target they take measures while the five thousand or more Ethiopians at the site of the dam are civilians only serving peaceful development missions? Are they sure Egypt will be a beneficiary by war more than by peace and cordial cooperation?

### **Age of Reason**

Whether Egyptian officials of this category want and accept it or not, Ethiopians already supplied the ultimate scientific answers for the above questions at two critical levels: policy and practice. One could identify some of these answers at the policy level as follows:

Firstly, the policy document argues that no matter how Nile enjoys a strategic location in the economic life of Egyptians, empirical evidences and other experiences demonstrate that this is never an eternal law of nature. With an increased pace of Egyptian industrialization and urbanization, its dependence on Nile river gradually sinks. On the opposite pole, Ethiopia never remains an all-time prisoner of structural incapacity and deplorable poverty, which is beyond the control of Egyptians. Dynamism is a natural constant factor than dependence of independence from a river undeniably true for an average policy maker and decision giver of a state at the present modern age.

Secondly, the policy document argues, on the other hand, that not only Ethiopia's right but also its development interests of the Nile River suffer limitations for geo-topographic limitations than any foreign pressure. The rugged nature of the Nile landscape in Ethiopia reduces the potential of irrigated agriculture to far low size, only about 12, 000 hectares. This is extremely a negligible size, which confines Ethiopia's capacity and interest to other areas of development than irrigation. Due to still this geo-topographic factor, Ethiopia losses annually an estimate of 2000 tones of its fertile soil, which neither benefits, rather harms Egypt as it causes costly siltation at its dams. The erosion and migration of this soil aggravates environmental degradation in Ethiopia while it forces Egypt to pay considerable sums of money for silt clearance in a cyclic fashion

Thirdly, the policy provides three explanations why Egypt is a loser in a zero-sum game traditional policy over Nile water. Firstly, even though Egypt receives the lion's share of Nile Waters, it losses about a total of 12 billion square cube liters of them through evaporation for the major reason of climate as it is located in high temperature zone. Secondly, natural phenomena in the past several centuries have proven sufficiently that any environmental crisis in Ethiopia caused extreme irregularities in the flow of Nile River. Droughts in Ethiopia occurring only in 1975 and 1985 brought the value of Nile water far below the historical average. This, in its turn, induced a serious hydrological crisis in the management of Nile water on the Egyptian side. This is a big loss but, which human intervention could have alleviated substantially.

### **Diplomatic Ramifications**

The diplomatic ramification of the diversion in the flow of Nile River by Ethiopia is a principled extension of the above scientific arguments and explanations. Diplomatically speaking, the above Egyptian officials are at the crossroads in their foreign policy options about Nile as the diversion of flow forces them to consider three issues. The first is that the diversion took place in the absence of any international treaty between Egypt and Ethiopia. Secondly, the diversion sufficiently showed that neither force nor diplomatic barriers could prevent a committed state from a peaceful development engagement. Thirdly, the diversion represents a practical test, for the first time in the history of Nile politics, where perceptions and reasons stand in battle face to face.

If these officials decline to appreciate all those reasonable explanations in a manner that requires equally reasonable responses, they must progress to two the remaining diplomatic options. Wait-and-see is the first that demands of them coming to their senses to see patiently and willingly what the diversion before two days and the future Dam will actually cause against Egypt. This is still the last reasonable option that a civilized policy maker and modern diplomacy prioritize, as the evidence is empirical and measurable in numbers. If Egyptians officials in the 'no negotiation' diplomatic category volunteer to do this, I argue that they will convince themselves to drop their perception-born phrase, 'only if the dam harms Egypt not'.

Above all else, they find themselves before a mounting scientific challenge to show boldly how non-diplomatic options could change the march of history. This is more than critical at a time when interstate war itself became out of date, leave alone in the areas of low politics, river affair being at the top, even in matters of high politics.