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Smoothing the Waters

Part II of II: Nile Conflict

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It is in the best interests of the United States to use its influence among Nile Basin states to encourage the development of Nile waters as a whole, rather than only for its principal and most powerful user.

Full recommendations, page 4.

Summary: The hydropolitics of the Middle East have become heated due to the growing scarcity of fresh water within the region. As the population of the Nile Basin expands over the next twenty-five years, unprecedented demands on the fixed supply of water from the Nile will emerge. Among the ten independent states found within the Nile Basin, the desire of each to meet its national needs with such limited resources further raises the specter of conflict surrounding these waters.

The international community and its agencies are aware of the need for regulation in regards to this issue but have yet to reconcile national interests with hydrologic development. Extenuating circumstances such as questions of environmental, demographic, and political rights concerning to whom the Nile waters should be allocated will continue to complicate matters. It is therefore necessary to institute some form of *Nile Control* to encourage the development of these waters as a whole.



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IGCC is a multicampus research unit of the University of California, established in 1983 to conduct original research and inform public policy debate on the means of managing conflict and promoting cooperation in international relations. Policy Briefs provide recommendations based on the work of UC faculty and participants in institute programs.

Authors' views are their own.

The exploding population in the Nile basin will require leadership from the international community to develop its limited waters among those upstream, in Ethiopia and the Lake Plateau who have them, and those downstream in Egypt who do not.

As we approach the end of another millennium there will be a plethora of predictions that doomsday is upon us, despite nearly half a century without a global war or economic depression. The substantiated fact that the world's expanding population is rapidly consuming its available supply of useable water is very much a part of the spirit of Armageddon that historically accompanies the end of a thousand years. The growing populations in the next quarter century of 90 million people annually for a total of 8.3 billion people by 2025 will be hard pressed for a constant supply of fresh water that has no natural increase. Despite the forecast of impending disaster in conferences, scientific reports, and the more vivid literature from the prophets of doom, the public and their leaders appear to regard their hydrologic future with the resignation of historical inevitability.

The growing shortage of water is more severe in some parts of the world than in others, but among the observers of the Middle East, there is growing agreement that the next conflict will be over water, not politics or oil. The prospect of Arabs and Jews sharing water is as remote as their willingness to share land, but neither can ignore the reluctance of the United States to permit them to roll over the river Jordan.

However, except in Egypt, which must borrow dollars as well as African water, American paramountcy does not reside in the great basin of the Nile. South of Aswan American authority remains fragile, its policies confused, and its influence more symbolic than real among the nine upstream riparian states. Here African and Arab, Christian and Muslim, dictators and democrats are determined to protect personal and political self-interest by control of their own Nile waters, each drop of which daily assumes greater importance than any cup elsewhere in the world.

Praying for Water

The hydropolitics of the Nile waters are the most acute example of the growing scarcity of global, fresh water in contrast to the plentiful supplies of petroleum for the next century. Most

of the world's water (97%) lies in oceans virtually unfit for drinking, agriculture, or industry. The remaining three percent is fresh but frozen leaving less than one percent accessible for the six billion inhabitants on earth. Moreover, that one percent is currently being consumed at twice the rate of population growth and most certainly is not going to increase during the next quarter century.

Fresh water is created through the hydrological cycle, by which solar radiation transforms ocean water into precipitation (mostly rain) vicariously distributed across diverse geographical regions where that precipitation is often inadequate to support the population (thus requiring irrigation). Egypt of the Pharaohs and their successors is the most enduring and graphic example of this adversity. Scientists have devoted much energy to warn of cataclysmic changes in the earth's climate, but their ferocious debates about whether the cause be global warming or global climatic is academic to those who fearfully stand by the banks of the Nile to pray that the waters will flow.

The Nile is the longest river in the world, 4,238 miles. It has two sources—*Caput Nili Meridianissimumi*, the spring in the Kangosi hills of the Republic of Burundi, and the sacred spring of Sakala in the heart of the Ethiopian highlands. The Nile waters flowing north from Burundi and the great lakes of equatorial Africa disappear into the air by evaporation in the Sudd, great swamps the size of Belgium, that contribute only 14 percent to the total Nile flow. Without the annual flood carrying 86 percent of the Nile waters cascading down from the Ethiopia, Egypt would consist of only sand and rock and wind

There is no substitute for water. It can be stored. It can be moved from those who have to those who have not, but only at great cost and political agreements that compromise self-interest and state sovereignty. Few are available or agreeable to those Third World states who will soon have 95 percent of the world's new water consumers. The Nile Basin is the immediate worry, for its finite waters, which serve 250 million people today, must provide for 500 million in 2025.

This distinguishes the Nile from all other great rivers of the world. For thousands of years, the greatest fear in Egypt and the Sudan was that the Nile would cease to flow. Throughout the millennia from Pharaohs to Presidents, the rulers of Egypt have believed that it is not only possible, but probable, that

Ethiopia would obstruct its waters in times of drought competition.

Water as Power and the Need for Nile Control

Every president and peasant in Egypt understands the power of this paranoia. The inviolability of Nile waters is not a cause for war. It is a declaration. When the British occupied Egypt in 1882, they mobilized all of their diplomatic, economic, and military might to defend Cairo and the Suez Canal by securing control of all the Nile waters from Lake Victoria to the Mediterranean Sea. The Ethiopians were not consulted except to acquiesce under British persuasion in 1902 not to interfere in the flow of the Blue Nile. Under its imperial shield the British sought to plan for Nile Control, the development of the Nile Basin for the most efficient conservation of its waters. They failed, a failure made manifest by the defeat of the Anglo-French military expedition to reoccupy the Suez Canal in 1956.

Triumphant and sovereign, Gamal 'Abd al-Nassir sought a monument to the revolution and the security of Egypt through construction of the High Dam at Aswan (HAD). Completed in 1971, this massive edifice is the wrong dam, in the wrong place, resulting in enormous loss

of water from evaporation (15% of the total annual average flow of the Nile) and intractable problems of sedimentation, seepage, seismic, and scouring. Yet all of these environmental and hydrological concerns

cannot compromise the fact that the dam lies within the territorial boundaries of Egypt, creating the illusion that Egypt, for the first time in 5,000 years, was now freed from being held hostage by the upstream riparians.

The years of African independence, new states, and the increase in their populations have created strident and avaricious demands for Nile water. This does not disguise the doubling of Egypt's population every generation, to absorb even more water than can be borrowed, stolen, or stored behind the Aswan High Dam. Aware of their latent upstream advantage, anxious to meet the needs of their own expanding populations, and deeply distrustful of Egyptian desperation and power, their extensive negotiations over Nile Control have remained acrimonious and inconclusive. To the frustration of anxious observers, the 2002 conferences, devoted to the

development of water resources in the Nile basin, have been characterized by public protestations of cooperation that disguise the deep divisions between Egypt and riparians, particularly Ethiopia that contributes 86 percent of the water. National self-interest of implacable power inhibits rational development of the basin as a whole, favoring individual schemes for water usage within sovereign territory that once constructed can only be challenged by a diversion of water that sustains them. The demand to meet national needs with limited resources raises the specter of conflict for the waters of the Nile.

The international community and its agencies have become aware of the need for *Nile Control* but have yet to reconcile powerful national interests with the hydrologic development of a great basin that has finite resources made ever more scarce by the increasing demands upon it.

The Nile in Conflict

The rapidly expanding population in the Nile Basin during the next twenty-five years will create unprecedented demands on the fixed supply of water from the Nile. The Nile is the unique river of the world, for its most populous country, Egypt, is totally dependent upon its waters. Ethiopia contributes 86 percent, but the riparian countries of the Lake Plateau have great potential for new water from their equatorial lakes. The contemporary construction of extensive irrigation projects in Egypt will require enormous quantities of water that the upstream riparians expect to sequester for their own ambitions for agricultural and hydroelectric development.

There are ten independent states in the Nile Basin—Burundi, Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda—the largest number of independent states in any river basin of the world. They all have different interests in the Nile waters and different capabilities to develop them, but their sovereignty, hydrologic, and geographical location cannot be denied in any future disposition of its waters. Only the Nile riparians can ultimately decide cooperation or conflict. It is, however, in the best interests of the United States to use its considerable influence among the states of the Nile Basin, particularly Egypt, Ethiopia, and Uganda, to encourage the development of the Nile waters as a whole rather than for its principal and most powerful user. Those who do not drink the waters have no

Indifference is not in the long term interests of the United States in Northeast Africa and the Middle East

right to determine those who will. Only the riparians will ultimately settle the shares of this scarce resource. Agreement will not be a simple matter particularly in the next two decades when the demands will become increasingly acute. The international community and the government of the United States, which has substantial commitments in the Nile Basin, can only influence by informed and constructive diplomacy from a policy for the Nile that recognizes the interests of all its riparians.

Hitherto the Nile waters have elicited little interest within the agencies of the government of the United States that have been more concerned with immediate political and economic problems. The Nile will continue to flow so that the future insufficiency of its waters will be the responsibility of future administrations. This indifference is not in the long term interests of the United States in Northeast Africa and the Middle East. The fundamental issue of *rights is* and will be complicated by environmental, demographic, diplomatic, historic, and political

questions that should no longer be ignored by those responsible in Washington to advise as to its intentions and policies in the *Corridor to Africa*.



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How to head off Nile conflict:

1. Establish an Inter-Agency Working Group to investigate issues affecting the Nile waters.
2. Encourage Egypt, Ethiopia, and Uganda especially to develop Nile waters as a whole.
3. Develop a policy for the Nile that recognizes the interests of all its riparians.

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