

THE GERD DISPUTE AND DE-EGYPTIZATION OF THE NILE RIVER

Serhat Orakçı



INSAMER
İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

To cite this article: Orakçı, Serhat. "The GERD Dispute and de-Egyptization of the Nile River", INSAMER, 03.08.2020.

 Analysis

The Nile River is a lifeline and source of richness for millions who live around the riverbank. However, as one of the longest rivers on earth, the Nile nowadays is also a source of a dispute between Egypt-Sudan and Ethiopia. Ethiopia's mega-project nearby the Blue Nile's source called the GERD (Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam), which began its construction in 2011, is almost complete. Although the first level of the filling process of the huge reservoir has been finalized, the dispute between Egypt-Sudan and Ethiopia remained hot and unsolved despite the US and African Union mediation trials.

Along with Egypt's Aswan, Sudan's Merowe, and Ethiopia's Sennar and Rosaires dams, the GERD is the fifth dam project on the river line starting from Lake Tana to the Mediterranean Sea. Once the project is completed the GERD's reservoir is going to collect 74 billion m³ of water, which is about 1.5 times the average

annual flow of the Blue Nile. The process of filling the GERD's reservoir is going to cover a minimum of 5-7 years if it continues level by level.¹ Being the biggest hydroelectric power plant in Africa, the \$5 billion dams will generate 6.000 Megawatt-electricity. This will definitely increase energy-hungry Ethiopia's current capacity of power supply.

As well known, since ancient times Egypt has been dominating the river where the first civilizations emerged thousands of years ago. During the colonial era, the British also guaranteed Egypt a monopoly over the Nile water. The 1929 treaty between Egypt and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan gave Egypt veto right and complete control over the Nile water. It allocated Egypt 48 billion m³ of water and Sudan 4 billion m³ of water annually. Another treaty in 1959 between independent Egypt and Sudan increased water allocations to 255.5 and 18.5 billion m³ respectively. With



INSAMER
İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

these two treaties, Egypt definitely established its hegemony over the Nile.ⁱⁱ However, Egyptian domination on the Nile water has been on the retreat since Ethiopia started the Nile Initiative that included 10 African countries located on the Nile Basin. The step reminded the international texture of the River Nile, being earth's longest. It seems that the GERD is one of the steps of *de-Egyptization* of the Nile River. Most of the countries in the Nile Initiative have been supporting the GERD. Nowadays, it became one of the pan-African symbols reflecting the development and self-reliance of Africa.

As known, Egypt heavily relies on the Nile water for thousands of years and has no alternative source other than the Nile water. It is especially a principal source of Egyptian agriculture and electricity production. Although the giant project may regulate Nile's seasonal floods it might also reduce the amount of water available from the Blue Nile, which provides 80% of the whole water of the Nile River. Downsizing the amount of water might bring huge economic burden for the farmers that use irrigation in Egypt and Sudan. Hence downstream countries' concern over water availability is just and legitimate. Any negative impact in the new situation might damage so many sectors in Egypt and Sudan. For that, an agreement reflecting the protection of mutual interests for the tripartite countries and regulating water flow over the river is vital and necessary.

The controversial project has already created a significant regional controversy amongst Egypt-Sudan and Ethiopia. Egypt combined with Sudan fears the negative effects of the GERD on the Nile's water flow. Contrary to Ethiopian official discourse, the new dam might create irregularities in the flow and decrease of water amount due to evaporation. This explains

why Egypt takes the issue as national security and domestic instability perspectives.ⁱⁱⁱ On the opposite side, Ethiopia is also taking the issue from the angle of sovereignty and national pride. To attract support from the rest of Africa the project has always been presented as a success story by the Ethiopian side.

The rise of the GERD dispute accelerated regional and international diplomacy as well. While Egyptian and Sudanese officials called UN Security Council and the African Union for a peaceful solution, regional diplomacy became vital for the disputing countries. Egyptian officials have recently visited Eritrea and Somaliland to strengthen pressure over Ethiopia. In response to Egypt's maneuvers in the region, Ethiopia's officials visited Eritrea and Somaliland as well. Ethiopia also seeks support from non-African actors such as Turkey. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Special Representative and former President of Ethiopia Mulatu Teshome Wirtu visited Turkey and met Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu for bilateral cooperation.^{iv} The regional tension and the GERD were likely high priority topics at the Çavuşoğlu-Wirtu meeting.

Hydropower diplomacy on the Nile Basin is on the rise and it seems that regional tension caused by the GERD will preserve its importance until a decent agreement is reached by the tripartite. Once the filling process is completed the tension will also evaporate amongst the conflicting sides and it might be a source of cooperation again. However, the GERD will not be the last issue as long as modern development in the region keeps going. Energy shortages of Nile Basin countries will definitely lead new mega-dam projects on the Nile River in a near future.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Damien Zane, “Ethiopia’s River Nile Dam: How it will be filled”, BBC News, 16 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53432948>
- ⁱⁱ Hala Nasr & Andreas Neef, “Ethiopia’s Challenge to Egyptian Hegemony in the Nile River Basin: The Case of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam”, *Geopolitics*, 21/4, 2016, 969-989.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hala Nasr & Andreas Neef, a.g.m.
- ^{iv} Zühal Demirci, “Turkish foreign minister hosts Ethiopian representative”, Anadolu Agency, 17 July 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkish-foreign-minister-hosts-ethiopian-representative/1913261>