

Middle East Dialogue...Glorious Past, Uncertain Future

WATER AND WAR IN THE MODERN AGE: THE ENDURING HYDRO-POLITICS OF THE NILE

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On 23 September 2014, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan agreed to form a committee of water experts who would review the impact of Ethiopia's proposed Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the three countries. Egypt has expressed longstanding concern about this project, as any major alteration of the sharing of Nile waters – codified in longstanding and contentious agreements dating from the colonial era – could have catastrophic consequences for the Arab nation. Over 90% of Egyptians directly depend on the Nile as a water source. Sudan's political position has been less consistent but Khartoum has also sought to protect its interests regarding distribution of these waters, often working in tandem with its northern neighbor.

The gravity of the issue became even more apparent when in 2012 it was revealed via a Wikileaks document that Egypt and Sudan had at one point planned to build an airstrip that might be used to bomb the dam site, located within 25 miles of Ethiopia's border with Sudan. While conflict over the project is increasingly unlikely for the time being, the relationship between development and conflict in the region is well-established. An ambitious canal plan in the 1980s was a key reason for the outbreak of the second Sudanese Civil War. Egypt has vigorously sought good relations with the new state of South Sudan to ensure cooperation regarding the use of Nile waters, and to cultivate a possible ally against Ethiopia's broader ambitions.

The potential environmental and economic impacts of the proposed dam are not without controversy, and will be outlined in the presentation. Notably, the World Bank and IMF have encouraged caution on the project, as major investment in a public infrastructure project the size of the dam might discourage investment in Ethiopia's burgeoning but vital private sector. Egypt has also used its international influence to curb investment in the project, leading to the Ethiopian government's need to divert finances from domestic sources to fill the gap. There are worries that the sustainability of water resources – long protected in the colonial agreements favoring Egypt and Sudan – might be impacted detrimentally.

The influence of nationalism and identity upon Nile-related development will also be discussed. For Ethiopia, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, as its name implies, is seen as part of the larger “rebirth” of an ancient and diverse state that had by the late twentieth century been most closely associated with famine, radical Marxism, and instability. In recent years, Ethiopia has had the fastest growing economy in the world and its leaders hope to present this growth as only one facet of the still desperately poor country's rise to regional prominence. Egypt is still a state in transition after the Arab Spring, and nationalist impulses are also invested in safeguarding its traditional allotment of Nile waters. Cairo has used its influence to protect its interests and position as a crucial state in both Africa and the Middle East. As Egypt's new regime seeks to cement its legitimacy, Sudan's longstanding Islamist military junta hopes to secure itself against popular discontent. The role South

Sudan's 2011 secession has played in altering the geopolitical landscape on this issue will also be discussed.

Given the ongoing nature of the dam project, the importance of the nations involved in both regional and international politics, and the lessons that may be available for future conflict over scarce water resources, I believe this topic should fit in well with the Middle East Dialogue's greater objectives. The presentation should be twenty to twenty five minutes in length, with time for discussion afterward.

Justin Leach is the author of *War and Politics in Sudan* (I.B. Tauris, 2012) with a research and teaching focus on the Middle East and North Africa. He is an assistant professor with Troy University and lives in Washington, D.C.