

# Untold Realities About the Hydro-Politics of the Nile River. Is Ethiopia Considered the “Water Tower” of the Region?

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*The Blue Nile, the primary contributor of water in the Nile basin, directly influences life in Sudan, Egypt, and Ethiopia, which have a combined population of more than 260 million (World Bank, 2021). This number does not include the people inhabiting the White Nile areas of South Sudan and the Central and East African Great Lakes states.*

*The population in eastern African countries, which includes almost all riparian countries except the DRC, will constitute almost half of Africa’s total.*

*With this population bulge, it is expected that consumption of water, food, energy, and other essential commodities will surge.*

*Trans-boundary river basins are under increasing pressure due to population growth, agricultural and industrial developments, climate change, and river pollution. Water scarcity is on the rise due to the increasing gap between demand and supply.*

The Nile Water Agreements and the upstream-downstream polemics express clearly that the downstream actors are firm in their positions and political-military maneuvers that the upstream nations should stay away from any substantive use of the water resources (Yacob, 2007: 198). Scholars like Yacob and Nowrath (1920: 32-41) boldly state about the Egyptian historical attempt to control the source of the Nile waters. And they wanted to do it through war. The Egyptian leader Khedive Ismail Pasha had an extremist vision of unifying the Nile Valley countries under his leadership.

According to Yacob (2007) and Kiefe (2004), the relations among the countries of the Nile Basin have been unequal, which has been exacerbated by the actions of Britain since the late 19th century. For such reasons, an equitable share of Nile waters could not be acceptable to Egypt.

Ethiopia, which is 86% of the Nile's water source, has indicated its interest in utilizing the Nile's water since the 1930s (Kinfe, 2004). In the late 1920s, the Ethiopian government discussed with the American diplomatic mission the possibility of conducting a physical survey on the Blue Nile River. Upon the agreement, the US government sent a company called White Engineering, and a feasibility study was conducted. But Ethiopia lags behind by years before it can undertake any project on the Blue Nile River.



Map of the Nile River (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)

### Comparison of Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt

Annual freshwater consumption (2000 est.) Ethiopia (5.56 BCM, 72 CM/capita), Sudan (37.5 BCM, 807 CM/capita), and Egypt (68.3 BCM, 923 CM/capita).

Alternative water resources (other than the Nile): Ethiopia (some rivers, but they only account for 30% of the total), Sudan (the White Nile, huge groundwater reserves), Egypt (the White Nile, huge groundwater reserves, and sea water).

Contribution to the Nile:

Ethiopia (86%); Sudan (0%); Egypt (0%). Population 2020: Ethiopia (114,963,588), Sudan (43,849,260), Egypt (102,335,000).

Access to electricity (% in 2017):

Ethiopia (44.3), Sudan (56.5), Egypt (100).

Access to potable water (% in 2017):

Ethiopia (41), Sudan (60), and Egypt (99).

Egypt and Sudan have huge reserves of groundwater in the Nubian Sandstone Aquifer System (NSAS). They should learn from Libya's great man-made river instead of sticking to their historical rights on the Nile. The NSAS is estimated to have 150,000 BCM; Libya currently uses 2.4 BCM (70% of its total consumption). If Egypt uses 10% of the reserve, they can have sufficient water for 220 years.

## Water Resource Development in Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan

### Egypt

Aswan Dam on the Nile in Egypt (1898–1902), the High Aswan Dam (also known as Nassir Dam) on the Nile in Egypt (1960–1970/76), El Salam diversion to the Sinai, Toshqa to the Western Valley, Hamam Canal diversion, Komombo Canal diversion in upper Egypt

### Sudan

Sennar Dam on the Blue Nile in Sudan (1925), Jabal Awliya Dam on the White Nile in Sudan (1937), Khsham El Girba Dam on Atbara in Sudan (1964), Rossaries Dam on the Blue Nile in Sudan (1966, 2013), and Merowe Dam on the Blue Nile in Sudan (2009).

### Ethiopia

Fincha Dam on the Abbay/Blue Nile tributary in Ethiopia (1970), Abobo Dam on the Baro-Akobo/Sobat in Ethiopia (1980s), Tekeze Dam on the Tekeze in Ethiopia (2009), Tana-Beles Diversion (2010), Chara-Chara in the 1990s, GERD on the Abbay/Blue Nile (under construction 2011–), and 33 projects anticipated (1958–64).

## Egypt's Illogical Arguments and Colonial Period Agreements on the Nile River

The 1891 Treaty of Rome (April 15, 1891) was signed in 1891 between Italy and Britain. Based on such a protocol, Italy pledged to not conduct irrigation projects on the Tekeze River.

By signing this treaty, Italy acceded to British demands and agreed to sign an article referring to the river. At the time of this pact, the Italians had already established

themselves in Eritrea but not in Ethiopia. According to Tesfaye (2001), the vague phrase “sensibly modify” limits neither the utilization of the river nor the fair share of the Nile’s waters. Had the treaty even excluded the usage of the Nile water by Ethiopia, which was not the case then as it is now, it should have ceased to have any relevance after the demise of the British and Italian colonial rules in the region. The Treaty, however, exemplified the British motive in safeguarding their colonial subjects, the Egyptians, as early as this period.

The 1902 treaty was signed between Britain and Ethiopia during Emperor Menelik’s regime in Ethiopia. It was basically an agreement that states the need for British consultation on any water projects Ethiopia wants to undertake, especially on Lake Tana. The above agreement was instigated as part of a grandiose British stratagem to fully control the Nile waters.

To do this, Anglo-Egyptian forces first conquered the Sudan in 1898 and then resorted to striking a deal with independent Ethiopia by way of a treaty.

According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs report from September 1997, the pact, which is said to have an Amharic version that is different from the original English text, has never been ratified by both the Ethiopian and British parliaments to this date. The debatable phrase is “not to arrest the flow of Nile water.” The Egyptian negotiator at the GERD negotiation table always raised this issue. But on the ground, the real definition of the debatable phrase in that treaty means Ethiopia cannot stop the river from flowing downstream to riparian nations.

The 1906 tripartite treaty was signed among Great Britain, France, and Italy. This treaty acknowledges Ethiopian territory in the Nile basin and, in return, marks the French and Italian spheres of influence within the Ethiopian boundary (Knife, 2004; 85).

The 1929 agreement was signed between Great Britain and its former colony Egypt. By this agreement, Egypt has been given the right to take all the water, supervise the river basin, and have the British recognize its “historical” and “natural” right to the Nile’s water. The agreement went further by giving Egypt the right to veto any project on the Nile that could adversely affect its interests. But this agreement could not have any binding effect on Ethiopia for two reasons: it was a bilateral agreement and did not include Ethiopia, and it was struck by a colonial power, which makes it null and void as stipulated in the Nyerere Doctrine that was stipulated in 1961.

In the 1959 agreement, Sudan and Egypt agreed to the full utilization of the waters of the Nile. Based on the yearly runoff of the water, which is 84 BCM, they allocated 55 BCM of water for Egypt, 18.5 BCM for Sudan, and they left the remaining 10 BCM for losses due to evaporation (Nebiyu, 2013: 3-4). The 1959 Agreement created a watershed in the hydrological and environmental history of the Nile Valley in the sense that it invigorated a monopoly on the waters of the Nile by Egypt and Sudan. By implication, the agreement has literally set up a zero-sum game in the Nile Basin by ignoring the natural and legal rights of Ethiopia to the bounty of the Nile’s water resources. Ethiopia never participated in that agreement and cannot be punished by any legal means.

**Is Ethiopia considered the “water tower” of the region?**

It is a water-stressed country with a per capita renewable freshwater resource of about 1200 m<sup>3</sup> per year.

Annual rainfall in Ethiopia is estimated at 848 mm (936 BCM). But because of its high spatial and temporal variability, accessible freshwater is only about 13% (124 BCM).

There are 12 major lakes in Ethiopia, which collectively store about 87 BCM of water. This amount is a little more than what the GERD will retain (74 BCM).

Groundwater potential at the national level is estimated to be in the range of 12 and 30 BCM. But more study is needed!

Groundwater is mainly used for domestic and industrial purposes. Egypt argues that Ethiopia is full of rivers and water supplies and thus should not touch the Nile.

This argument doesn't hold water due to the following reasons: To begin with, it is not the business of any country, including Egypt, to enlist the natural resources that Ethiopia within its own territory possesses, as that will entail a breach of national territorial integrity. Ethiopia may have adequate water supplies in certain parts of the country.

However, Ethiopia has been hit by repetitive and severe droughts in the past and currently is also one of the drought-affected Horn of Africa nations if this argument is true. But the fact of the matter is that Ethiopia has been struggling to free itself from the cycle of drought, poverty, and backwardness for the last decades. This is why Ethiopia, and for that matter, the other riparian countries, are determined to exploit their natural resources, including the Nile, in order to produce adequate food for their growing populations, to light millions of their households both in urban and rural areas, to power their emerging factories and industries, and in general to enhance their economies and improve the livelihoods of their poor people. The total hydropower potential of Ethiopian rivers is only about one-sixth of Japan's current (2014) electricity production (1,061,000 GWh/yr), but Ethiopia is only using less than 10% of it.

## Importance of Building Dams in Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt

Many scholars wrote about the values and importance of dams in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. In 1945, a British hydro-geologist in the service of the Egyptian Ministry of Public Works, Harold Hurst, published "The Future Conservation of the Nile," proposing dams at the outlets of the great lakes and Lake Tana in Ethiopia, which would provide reservoirs of minimal evaporation for every year, or "Century Storage." (Erlich, 2009, *The Cross and the River*, pp. 2-3). In 1958, H.A. Morrice and W.N. Allen, British experts representing the government of Sudan, proposed dams and hydro-electric stations on the Blue Nile and the Baro in their "Report on the Nile Valley Plan." In 1964, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation published the results of a five-year study ordered by the Ethiopians, "Land and Water Resources of the Blue Nile Basin: Ethiopia," which envisioned twenty-six projects in Ethiopia, including four dams designed to turn Lake Tana and the Abbaye gorge into the primary all-Nile reservoir and to supply electricity and irrigation for Ethiopia while significantly enlarging and regulating the amount of water flowing to Sudan and Egypt. Founded on all the above suggestions of scholars, Haggai Erlich commented, "But for such all-Nile solutions to materialize, a unified action was needed." In other corners of the globe, around other trans-boundary rivers, such unity and cooperation have been occasionally achieved. But the mysterious Nile, since its beginning, has never experienced such human unity. Behind the failure to reach equitably shared use of the Nile River is Egypt's sticking to historic rights and colonial period agreements. But, in reality, there is no such thing as historical right but only historical facts.

## The Masks of Egypt's Water Security Policy

Egypt's "water security" policy is based on the Nile River obsession, an attempt to block all avenues that can lead to a fair and equitable distribution of the Nile's waters.

Whenever any basin country lays out a plan to use the Nile water in its own territory, the Egyptians have often reacted by making threats of war and conflict-laden statements.

Conversely, when they are asked to renegotiate the distribution of water in the basin, they put up conditions by saying colonial and postcolonial treaties are non-negotiable and we can discuss anything outside of these limitations. "As Egyptians, we think that the other riparian's have real plans to utilize the waters of the Nile." Ethiopia already did this by launching and constructing the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

The current geopolitical reality in the Nile Basin cannot carry over colonial-period agreements. The Egyptian Hegemony in the Nile River Basin was time frozen.

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*Featured image: The Blue Nile Falls fed by Lake Tana near the city of Bahir Dar, Ethiopia (Licensed under FAL)*

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