

# Sudan and Egypt ' s hydro-politics in the Nile river Basin

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## INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPING ECONOMIES

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### IDE DISCUSSION PAPER No. 818

## Sudan and Egypt's Hydro-Politics in the Nile River Basin

Housam Darwisheh\*

March 2021

#### Abstract

Using material, ideational, and geopolitical power Egypt used to control the conduct of its southern neighbors, particularly Sudan, in the utilization of the Nile River waters. Recent regional and domestic transformations in the Middle East and Horn of Africa, particularly after the 'Arab Uprisings' of 2011, have undermined Egypt's influence and reshaped the hydro political landscape in the Nile basin. As a result, Sudan and Ethiopia are now influential actors in the Nile basin who play central roles in the Middle East-Horn of Africa relations. The academic literature and news coverage of the water dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia overlook the Sudan's strategic position as a midstream state that has accelerated the basin's hydro political shift in Ethiopia's favor. The paper argues that Egypt's loss of Sudan's unconditional and explicit support for its "water rights," recognized by the 1929 and 1959 water agreements, has changed the former's long-standing hegemonic position in the Nile basin in favor of upstream states. The paper contends that Sudan's changing position over the Nile hydro politics has been the result of three main major developments. First, the decline of Egypt's material and ideational power in the Middle East and Africa. Second, Egypt's foreign policy goals have been constrained due to its massive economic dependence on the Gulf oil-rich states that seek to improve their food security and regional interests through increasing their physical, political and economic presence in Sudan and Ethiopia. And third, Egypt's former hydrological veto power over construction projects on the Nile has ended as new power relations between upstream, downstream, and non-riparian states reconfigured the regional order of the Nile basin in favor of upstream riparian states.

**Keywords:** Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Hydro-politics

**JEL classification:** N57, N55, O19, Q25

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# **Sudan and Egypt's Hydro-Politics in the Nile River Basin**

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Using material, ideational, and geopolitical power Egypt used to control the conduct of its southern neighbors, particularly Sudan, in the utilization of the Nile River waters. Recent regional and domestic transformations in the Middle East and Horn of Africa, particularly after the 'Arab Uprisings' of 2011, have undermined Egypt's influence and reshaped the hydro political landscape in the Nile basin. As a result, Sudan and Ethiopia are now influential actors in the Nile basin who play central roles in the Middle East-Horn of Africa relations. The academic literature and news coverage of the water dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia overlook the Sudan's strategic position as a midstream state that has accelerated the basin's hydro political shift in Ethiopia's favor. The paper argues that Egypt's loss of Sudan's unconditional and explicit support for its "water rights," recognized by the 1929 and 1959 water agreements, has changed the former's long-standing hegemonic position in the Nile basin in favor of upstream states. The paper contends that Sudan's changing position over the Nile hydro politics has been the result of three main major developments. First, the decline of Egypt's material and ideational power in the Middle East and Africa. Second, Egypt's foreign policy goals have been constrained due to its massive economic dependence on the Gulf oil-rich states that seek to improve their food security and regional interests through increasing their physical, political and economic presence in Sudan and Ethiopia. And third, Egypt's former hydrological veto power over construction projects on the Nile has ended as new power relations between upstream, downstream, and non-riparian states reconfigured the regional order of the Nile basin in favor of upstream riparian states.

Keywords: Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Hydro-politics

The Nile River is inseparable from Egypt's very identity and existence. Not only are the river and its aquifers almost the only sources of Egypt's drinking and irrigation waters (Ashour et al. 2009), the Nile is pivotal to the unification of a highly centralized state along its fertile banks. Historically, Egypt controlled the Nile's upstream waters with a combination of material, ideational, geopolitical resources, and external support. Most of the upstream states could not use the Nile waters much except for Sudan with its vast agricultural potential. For Egypt, therefore, to control Sudan was to control the Nile. Until recently Sudan was Egypt's ally in managing the Nile waters, even when diplomatic relations between the two states were strained. Lately, though, Sudan has lessened its support for Egypt. In the wake of the 2010 Arab uprisings, geopolitical shifts in the Middle East and Horn of Africa reduced Egypt's capacity to dictate the regional Nile water agenda. Sudan decided that its water-resource management schemes and economic development depended on its cooperation with upstream riparian states. Egypt is presently isolated, struggling to replace its former 'hydro-hegemony' with a new strategy for the Nile basin. In the process, Egypt-Sudan relations have come under considerable strain.

The paper contends that Sudan's changing position over the hydro politics of the Nile has been the result of three main major developments. First, the decline of Egypt's material and ideational power in the Middle East and Africa. Second, Egypt's foreign policy goals have been constrained due to its massive economic dependence on the Gulf oil-rich states that seek to improve their food security and regional interests through increasing their physical, political and economic presence in Sudan and Ethiopia. And third, Egypt's former hydrological veto power over construction projects on the Nile has ended as new power relations between upstream, downstream, and non-riparian states reconfigured the regional order of the Nile basin in favor of upstream riparian states.

### **Egypt's Hydro Hegemony in the Nile Basin**

In the conceptual framework of hydro hegemony developed by Mark Zeitoun and Jeroen Warner (2006), hydro hegemony, or the control of water, is acquired, sustained, and transformed based on three key factors: (1) geography or riparian position (upstream versus downstream); (2) hard power such as military strength; and (3) material power, such as infrastructural, economic and technical capability which allow even downstream states to exploit river resources. Subsequent analysis by Mark Zeitoun

and Ana Elisa Cascão (2013, 27) based hydro hegemony on four forms of power: “geography; material power; bargaining power; and ideational power.”<sup>1</sup>

In the Nile basin, downstream Egypt has the least favorable geographical location. Its water resources originate outside its borders and enter its territory from Sudan. But Egypt’s disadvantage was offset by military, economic and technological superiority over its southern neighbors. Until recently, the Aswan High Dam (AHD), completed in 1970, allowed Egypt to regulate and utilize the Nile’s flow better than any other regional state. Within Egypt water security lay crucially in the vast water reserve of Lake Nasser. Having one of the largest armies in the region, Egypt could potentially respond militarily against any upstream state’s interference with the flow of the Nile. Yet Egypt did not use military power to protect its waters. As Nasser’s confidant, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, once wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, “fortunately, with the political conditions and technological limitations in Central and East Africa, this threat (tampering with the Nile waters) is unlikely to materialize. Politically friendly Sudan provides Egypt with an additional degree of security” (Heikal 1977, 715). In fact Egypt enjoyed influence and supremacy as certain upstream states suffered structural weaknesses owing to proxy wars, political instability, and lack of technical capacity and international support for economic development. In a sense, Egypt could have remained the Nile basin hegemon by profiting from the political instability in upstream states. It was long assumed, for example, that Ethiopia, the source of the Blue Nile, which supplies almost two thirds of the Nile water flowing through Egypt, was too embroiled in internal conflicts to be able to undertake any meaningful development. Through its Western allies, Egypt also ensured that international lending institutions would not support the development of hydraulic infrastructure projects in Ethiopia (Verhoeven 2015, 153). Unable to use the Nile River much, the upstream states effectively ceded a monopoly over their waters to Egypt. Presently, though, rapid population growth, urbanization and the need for economic development have led the upstream countries to assert their claims to the Nile River.

Previously Egypt could set the rules and agendas of the Nile’s management because of colonial agreements that went back to the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1902 that recognized Egypt’s “historical and natural rights” over the river waters (Crabittès 1929). Indeed Egypt’s bargaining power stems from its veto power inscribed in the 1929 and 1959 water agreements with Sudan and supported by powerful states and international financial institutions like the IMF, World Bank and African Development

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<sup>1</sup> Ideational power is mainly bound up with a narrative through which actors seek strategies to legitimize their ideas and defend their claims to the river waters.

Bank (Waterbury 2008). By deploying “securitization tactics” (treating water as an existential security issue), Egypt could mobilize regional and international support against any state that might tamper with the Nile waters (Jacobs 2012, 137, Rubin 2014, 90-91). This securitizing approach turned any debate over equal utilization of the Nile waters between riparian states into a matter of emergency politics. For decades, Egypt influenced the terms of negotiations and agreements because it offered incentives to weaker parties to comply with its goals. Besides, there was a knowledge gap between the riparian states and Egypt that enabled the latter to monopolize the production and dissemination of information on the Nile. Thus, Egypt had ideational power: it could impose its ideas and narratives and determine the agenda, discourse, and timing of negotiations and projects in the Nile basin (Awulachew 2012, 230).

No less crucial to Egypt’s hydro hegemony was the geopolitical and economic landscape. In particular, Sudan’s vast agricultural lands could tempt it to alter the flow of the Nile into Egypt. Hence, Egypt invested heavily in making water agreements with Sudan, and not with the upstream states such as Ethiopia. And a peculiar sociopolitical relationship between Egypt and Sudan, as examined in the following section, guaranteed the latter’s compliance with the water agreements.

### **Egypt and Sudan: A Peculiar Relationship**

Egypt once claimed Sudan as an integral part of its territory. The claim began with the Turco-Egyptian invasion and rule of Sudan in 1820 by Muhammad Ali Pasha who aspired to build an Egyptian empire. The goals of the invasion were to obtain slaves for military conscription, extract gold, and control the Nile Valley and the Red Sea trade (Sanderson 1963, Robinson 1925). Around 1820 Muhammad Ali made Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, a permanent military camp (Hamdan 1960). The first period of Egypt’s domination over Sudan ended in 1885 when Muhammad Ahmad Ibn Abdullah proclaimed himself the Mahdi<sup>2</sup> (Dekmejian and Wyszomirski 1972), led a Sudanese rebellion against Egyptian rule and established an Islamic state (1885-1898). However, Egypt restored its rule over Sudan following the Anglo-Egyptian invasion in 1898 that defeated the Mahdist state and imposed a joint regime, the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium in 1899. The Condominium, which “recognized Sudan as an Egyptian possession administrated by the British officials on behalf of the King of Egypt” (Johnson 2011, 21), ended in 1956 when Sudan gained independence. Until then, the control of

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<sup>2</sup> Literally, ‘redeemer of Islam’. Here, the Mahdist rebellion was a nationalist revolt against Anglo-Egyptian rule.

Sudan extended Egypt's influence from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea deep into Sub-Saharan Africa.

The Egyptian political elites had long thought that political and economic control of Sudan guaranteed their mastery of the Nile Valley and its resources (Crabitès 1934). Sudan's importance to Egypt's strategic interests was expressed by an Egyptian army general in 1949 thus:

No politician can ignore Egypt's interest in the Sudan. Its permanent and vital interest concerns Egypt's life. Egypt gets its water from the Nile which flows in the heart of the Sudan. The Nile to Egypt is a matter of life and death. If the water of the river were controlled by a hostile state or a state that could become a hostile state, Egypt's life is over. Of course, whoever controls the Sudan naturally controls the Northern Nile Valley. Egypt in this era of conflicting political doctrines cannot trust the neighbors of the Sudan. Today's friends may become tomorrow's enemies. For this reason, all of Egypt's efforts are to secure life in the coming future (Ismael 1969, 1).

In fact, Egyptian elites regularly demanded of Great Britain that Egypt and Sudan should be unified under the "Egyptian crown" (Abushouk 2010, 220). On 28 June 1924, the leader of Egypt's nationalist Wafd Party, Prime Minister Sa'd Zaghlul Pasha, stated in the Egyptian Chamber of Deputies,

This is our situation in respect to the Sudan: We spend money there, we shed blood there, we endure hardships there, and our fathers endured such before us, and we draw life from that river which pours forth from the highest reaches of the Sudan. In any case, it is impossible, unless we were a lifeless people, that we leave one speck of the Sudan for others (Mills 2014, 11).

John Waterbury (1979, 11) correctly notes that, "The Egyptian outlook on the Sudan has traditionally been colonialist... backed by its heavy military preponderance... [L]atent feelings of superiority and inferiority still underlie relations between the two states." Until the mid-twentieth century the two states could not have a genuine political partnership (Powell 2003) because a refusal to relinquish its control of Sudan was key to Egypt's geopolitical status. In fact Egypt continued to keep independent Sudan within its sphere of influence, manipulating the stability and, sometimes, the survival of Sudanese regimes.

Ironically its sole preoccupation with controlling Sudan undermined Egypt's ability to develop cooperation with all riparian states in a comprehensive policy for governing



the entire Nile system. Indeed, an absence of mutual trust between Egypt and Sudan preempted a hydro political alliance between them based on a long-term equitable share of the Nile waters. Consequently Egypt found itself disadvantaged when the upstream riparian states asserted their rights to use the Nile waters to develop their economies.

### *Egypt-Sudan Relations in Post-Colonial Era*

Post-colonial Egyptian-Sudanese relations were uneasy and at times antagonistic, partly a hangover from Britain's colonial policies that favored Egypt as an agricultural asset and relied on the Suez Canal to support the British economy and maritime power. For example, a 1902 treaty between Britain and Ethiopia to settle the Sudan-Ethiopia border forbade Ethiopia, without consent from Britain and Sudan, from constructing any infrastructural project on the Blue Nile that would limit the flow of its water. The Nile Water Agreement (NWA) of 1929 between Egypt and Britain on behalf of Sudan allocated 48 billion cubic meters of river water per annum for Egypt but only 4 billion cubic meters for Sudan. The same agreement gave Egypt the right to veto any project beyond its national border that was higher up the Nile. In 1937 the Jebel Aulia Dam was constructed south of Khartoum to store water for eventual use in Egypt<sup>3</sup> (Yihdego, Rieu-Clarke, and Cascão 2017). Britain's post-WWII decline left Egypt dominant in the Nile basin. When the Free Officers seized power in Egypt on 23 July 1952, they soon decided to build the AHD close to the border with Sudan without informing the latter. The dam reservoir, Lake Nasser, extended 150 km into Sudan (Negm 2017), flooding towns and villages. The revolutionary government of the Free Officers decided that securing the Nile flow and building the AHD (1960-70) quickly would gain the crucial support of the peasantry (*fellahin*).

Independent Sudan was a parliamentary democracy, albeit beset by severe political instability and deep north-south divisions (Hasabu and Majid 1985, Warburg 2003, Daly 2003). An unresolved dispute over the Halayeb Triangle (southeastern Egypt/northeastern Sudan border area) fed mistrust and resentment between Egypt and Sudan. In Sudan, the elites drew political capital, authority, and legitimacy from standing up to Egypt (1956 and 1958). With popular anti-Anglo-Egyptian sentiment behind it, the government announced its intention to assert its sovereign rights over the Blue Nile. The parliament wanted to abrogate the 1929 NWA and withhold consent from AHD. In Sudan's view its future water requirements were compromised by Egypt's water security.

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<sup>3</sup> The Jebel Aulia Dam was later returned to Sudan in 1977 after it became obsolete due to the completion of Aswan High Dam in 1971.

The standoff threatened the construction of AHD and a new legal water agreement that would meet the demands of the financiers of the AHD (Saleh 2008, 39-41).

The standoff ended in 1958. Egypt sent its military to the disputed Halayeb while in Sudan the pro-Egyptian General Ibrahim Abboud (who served in the Egyptian military before independence) overthrew the anti-Egyptian Umma government of Abdullah Khalil. A year later, the Nile Waters Agreement<sup>4</sup> was concluded which allocated to both countries the entire flow of the Nile as measured at Aswan, and granted Egypt the right to construct the AHD without regard of the interests of the other riparian states (Deng 2007). One outcome of the agreement was a sharp divide between upstream and downstream states. The 1959 Agreement effectively enforced the 1929 Agreement, granting Egypt and Sudan larger quotas of the river flow – 55.5 billion cubic meters (BCM) for Egypt,<sup>5</sup> and 18.5 BCM for Sudan,<sup>6</sup> out of a total 84 BCM, with 10 BCM lost to evaporation from the AHD's reservoir. The AHD and other projects on the Nile submerged the old Sudanese town of Wadi Halfa and displaced tens of thousands of people, mainly Nubians living on both sides of the state line (Wiebe 2001, 737).

With a total storage capacity of 162 BCM, the AHD paved the road to Egypt's national development, providing energy and regular water for its agriculture and protecting Egyptians against annual floods and droughts (Shama 2013, 27). The 1959 Agreement expanded Egypt's influence south of its borders and granted Egypt the power to monitor the use of the Nile water in Sudan and veto any water development project that would affect the flow of its water allocation (Deng 2007). Crucially, the Agreement secured Egypt's hydro-hegemonic position by reinforcing the concept of Egypt's "natural and historic" rights to the Nile and limiting Sudan's future demands for more water and irrigation development. The hydro political Egyptian-Sudanese alliance remained strong until the early 1990s.

Sudan-Egypt relations reached new heights when a Free Officers Organization staged a bloodless coup in Sudan on May 25, 1969 that brought Ja'far al-Nimeiri to power.

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<sup>4</sup> The Agreement was met with strong opposition in Sudan as the construction of the AHD entailed the flooding of Wadi Halfa region and consequently, the displacement of thousands of people (Spaulding et al. 2010, 110-111).

<sup>5</sup> In 1959, Egypt's population was about 27 million. Now it nears 100 million.

<sup>6</sup> Many Nile experts, such as Robert Collins and S.A.M Salman, are skeptical about Sudan's actual use of its 18.5 BCM water allocation. Salman notes that in 2011 the Sudanese Minister of Irrigation and Water Resources stated that Sudan has had only been using 12 BCM (Salman 2018, 90).

The Nimeiri regime modelled itself after Nasser's pan-Arab revolution. A special relationship flourished under Anwar Sadat when Sudan and Egypt signed the Alexandria Agreement in February 1974. The agreement sealed their political and economic integration, and defense and security cooperation, the strongest between Egypt and any other country (Khālid 2003, 173). A stalwart USA ally during the Cold War, Nimeiri's Sudan followed Sadat's Egypt in expelling its Soviet military advisors in June 1977 and replacing them with Egyptians, Chinese and Yugoslavs (Hoffmann and Fleron 1971, 498-499). Sudan was one of the three countries, along with Oman and Somalia, which stood by Sadat after Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel, on March 26, 1979. In 1983, Egypt and Sudan signed an Economic Integration Charter and convened a Joint Egypt-Sudan Nile Valley Parliament. When hostilities broke out between Libya and Sudan in March 1984, Mubarak sent military forces and advisors to bolster Sudan's defenses (Simons 1996, 303). A stable but weak pro-Egyptian in Khartoum gave Cairo leverage over the Nile water supply. Warm relations with Egypt, the USA, and Saudi Arabia made Sudan the second-largest African recipient of US aid after Egypt. But Egyptian-Sudanese relations deteriorated after Brigadier Umar Hasan al-Bashir ousted the civilian government of Sadiq al-Mahdi on June 30, 1989.

#### *Egypt and Revolutionary Sudan in the 1990s*

Unhappy with Mahdi's good relations with Libya and Iran, Egypt was the first state to recognize Bashir's government. Bashir, a graduate of the Egyptian military academy, needed Egypt's support to consolidate his rule. Later, however, the Egyptian leaders found that Bashir's coup was masterminded by Hasan al-Turabi's National Islamic Front (NIF) that evolved into the National Congress Party (NCP). The new regime established an Islamic republic that sought to undermine the Mubarak regime. Bashir's Islamist foreign policy led him to an alliance with Hasan al-Turabi, who took the Iranian revolution for his model (Burr and Collins 2003). A major part of the new regime's foreign policy was to support Islamic activism throughout the Muslim world. Egypt's fear of Sudan promoting its Islamist ideology coincided with a resurgence of the militant Islamic Group (*al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya*) in Egypt during much of the 1990s. As its tourism industry was devastated by a spate of attacks by militant groups, Egypt watched with alarm as Khartoum imposed strict sharia law on Muslims and Christians alike, hosted Al-Qaeda's Osama Bin Laden, provided refuge and training to militant Egyptian Islamists, and, under the pretext of *Jihad*, declared a brutal war on the south of Sudan (De Waal and Salam 2004).

Sudan under Bashir was isolated. It supported Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and lost US military and financial assistance. It turned to Iran for its most important ally and the two states reached a security pact by which Tehran provided Khartoum with oil, weapons, and financial assistance (Tekle 1996, 503-504). To counter Iran, however, Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia backed Eritrea in its conflict with Sudan. The anti-Bashir states in the region increased their support for the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the anti-Bashir forces in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) that was founded in 1989 (Hassan 1993). With material aid from the USA and its allies, the SPLA increased its military capacity and strengthened its political and military alliance with opposition groups in northern Sudan (Haywood 2014, 151-152). These developments cut the Bashir regime from its Arab and African neighbors, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and foreign investments (Kevane and Gray 1995, 274). Sudanese-Egyptian relations deteriorated when a Sudanese-backed militant Islamist group in 1995 attempted to assassinate Hosni Mubarak as he attended an African summit in Addis Ababa. Egypt accused Hasan al-Turabi of plotting the attempted assassination while the Ethiopian government severed diplomatic relations with Sudan. Egypt managed to have the United Nations Security Council impose sanctions on Sudan which the USA added to its list of State Sponsors of Terrorism (Woodward 2016, 30-31). Tension between Egypt and Sudan led to a flare-up of an old border dispute. In 1992, a Canadian oil company received a concession from Sudan to conduct oil exploration in the disputed "Halayeb Triangle" region. Cairo swiftly deployed its troops to annex the area (Bartrop 2011, 115). Egypt's material power and international alliances isolated Sudan throughout the 1990s. Sudan failed to restore its sovereignty over the disputed area despite threatening to interfere with the flow of the Nile River (Adar and Check 2011, 52). From January to April 1996 the UN Security Council, of which Egypt was a non-permanent member, compelled Sudan to extradite suspects in the attempted assassination of Mubarak, imposed travel and diplomatic sanctions on the Bashir regime and members of the Sudanese armed forces, and later enforced an air embargo on Sudan Airways, which shut Sudan off from airline manufacturing industries (Mikhail 2008, 99-100). Sudan's only challenge to the regional order maintained by Egypt was to undermine the security of the Mubarak regime by supporting Islamist militant groups and aspiring to build a united Islamic front.

Bashir soon found his alliance with Egypt's adversaries to be economically and politically unsustainable. He had no other way to manage Sudan's deteriorating economy and end its position as an international 'pariah' except to mend relations with Egypt and its allies. Only then could Sudan secure aid from the Gulf Arab states. Osama

Bin Laden and a number of Islamic groups and al-Jihad leaders were asked to leave Sudan. Relations with Egypt improved when Sudan ended its confrontational Islamist foreign policy. In 1999, Khartoum extradited a suspect in the attempted assassination of Mubarak to Egypt, cut its ties with Hasan al-Turabi and later arrested him. In 2000, Khartoum and Cairo exchanged ambassadors after a five-year break and Egypt resumed trade and restored diplomatic relations with Sudan. In September 2001, with Egyptian support, the UN Security Council lifted its sanctions on Sudan.<sup>7</sup> The removal of al-Turabi facilitated peace talks with the Sudanese People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) held in Kenya (De Waal 2004), that produced a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005. On its part, Egypt rallied the Gulf Arab states and other African countries behind Bashir's new alignments. Sudan re-established contact with the USA which unfroze the assets of Salah Idris, the owner of the El Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum that the USA bombed in 1998.<sup>8</sup>

For decades, Egypt constrained post-independent Sudan's political development. The latter, suffering prolonged civil wars, failed to maintain a stable, centralized state. Against Egypt's superior force, coercive diplomacy, and strong relations with world powers, Sudan had to comply with its obligations under their bilateral water agreements. The situation changed, however, as Egypt's regional influence declined due to domestic politics and geopolitical realignments in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa.

### **Egypt's Dwindling Hydro Hegemony**

In the past decade, Egypt's hydro hegemony in the Nile basin declined because of domestic economic and political instability, and long-term shifts in the regional balance of power. Several developments were especially important.

Firstly, with Nasser's death in 1970, Egypt departed from pan-African ideas of liberation. Nasser had advocated African unity, offered refuge to African exiles, and given African independence fighters material, logistic and political support (Akinsanya 1976). During the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt enlarged its pan-Arab anti-imperialist front against Britain. However, Egypt's anti-western and anti-Israel foreign policies depleted its economic and financial capital. Above all, Egypt forfeited its leadership of the Arab world after its humiliating defeat in the 1967 war against Israel. Moreover, domestic and regional actors questioned the very foundation of the Egyptian model of development in the face of widespread protests against high levels of poverty in Egypt.

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<sup>7</sup> "Security Council Lifts Sanctions against Sudan," *United Nations*, 28 September 2001.

<sup>8</sup> "US admits Sudan bombing mistake," *Independent*, 4 May 1999.

Secondly, a series of international events took a steady toll on Egypt's regional position. After the war with Israel in 1973, Anwar Sadat reoriented Egypt towards the West. He made peace with Israel and broke with the Arab and African worlds. He chose integration with the emerging US-led globalized economy, and Egypt gained economic aid and access to international financial institutions. As an Egyptian diplomat noted, "Sadat is a Westerner, his dream is that his country would become part of Europe. Belonging to Europe is more important than belonging to Africa or the Arab world" (Ajami 1979). Besides, the oil price shocks of the 1970s massively shifted wealth to the Gulf Arab states but deepened Egypt's economic dependence on the GCC economies. And the end of the Cold War marginalized Africa's position while Iraq's invasion of Kuwait divided the Arab world over the USA-led war against Iraq.

In the Nile basin, to stop the riparian states from tampering with the Nile waters, Egypt increasingly relied on coercive diplomacy which further undermined its soft power in Africa. Indeed Sadat threatened to use military force against Ethiopia in 1978 when he stated,

(A)ny action that would endanger the waters of the Blue Nile will be faced with a firm reaction on the part of Egypt, even if that action should lead to war. As the Nile waters issue is one of life and death for my people, I feel I must urge the United States to speed up the delivery of the promised military aid so that Egypt might not be caught napping (Kendie 1999, 141).

Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, was preoccupied with regime security and his hold on power. Mubarak's foreign policy was directed towards the status quo of an alliance with the US that would aid badly needed economic development at home (Shama 2013, 41-42). Egypt showed little enthusiasm for the African Union and viewed Africa through a security prism. After the attempt on his life in 1995, Mubarak did not attend African summits until the Abuja summit of 2005 (Landsberg and Van Wyk 2012, 245). At those summits, Ethiopia rallied the upstream Nile states to review the 1929 and 1959 Nile water agreements and get recognition of their right to equal share and utilization of the Nile waters. While the upstream states challenged the existing hydro hegemonic setting, Egypt was very inward-focused as Mubarak was preoccupied with grooming his son to succeed him.<sup>9</sup> The Egyptian leadership seemed to believe that the downstream states were too underfinanced to develop the infrastructure needed to increase their utilization of the Nile waters. Mubarak showed little interest in economic

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<sup>9</sup> Author interview with Michael Wahid Hanna, New York, *The Century Foundation*, 16 January 2020.

integration with African countries, and the Nile basin countries in particular (Tawfik 2016). Consequently Egypt barely had a role in negotiations that led to the secession of South Sudan in 2011, which Egypt had long opposed, fearing a threat to its water supply from a new riparian state (Prendergast and Mozersky 2004, 72).

Thirdly, a new order emerged in the Nile basin based on the power relations between the upstream and downstream states. The upstream riparian states raised their hydro political cooperation in legal and institutional terms. But Egypt refused to join new initiatives regarding the distribution and utilization of the Nile waters, which strengthened the collective bargaining power of upstream countries. The Nile basin Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), signed in 2010 by Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya, and Burundi, granted autonomy to upstream states to decide Nile projects without Egypt's prior consent (Salman 2013). In response, Egypt froze its membership in the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) that was formed in 1999 to develop the river in a cooperative manner. The NBI was the first cooperative agreement to include all riparian states along with Ethiopia and Egypt. But Egypt's action preempted cooperation or negotiation with Ethiopia, which annually supplies more than 85 percent of the Egypt's Nile waters. Egypt's apprehension over losing its "historical water rights" and veto power lies behind its reluctance to participate in new treaties that would equally recognize the water right of all riparian states. Egypt appears not to have noticed that the time had passed when its 1929 and 1959 agreements with Sudan allowed Egypt to be the hegemon of the Nile basin.

Meanwhile, the recent economic ascendancy and relative political stability of the upstream states increased their material power and capacity to utilize the Nile waters. They also bolstered their ideational power by collectively asserting their right to water utilization for development, which restrictive colonial agreements had suppressed but which was in fact Egypt's rationale for building the Aswan High Dam. The upstream states based their case on international water laws, in particular, the 21 May 1997 United Nations Watercourses Convention (Resolution 51/229) that calls for equitable and reasonable utilization of international water. They stressed the importance of the Nile for famine prevention. And they held out better prospects for peace and regional integration through hydropower projects that would bring electricity and prosperity to millions of Africans in the river basin and beyond. In the face of such collective mobilization, Egypt finds itself on the defensive, bereft of effective discursive responses and unable to enforce the old water agreements. The upstream riparian states have become the principal agents and forces shaping politics of the Nile River basin.

### *Egypt and Sudan since 2011*

Egypt's mounting political disruption during the last decade of Mubarak's rule culminated in a nationwide uprising on 25 January 2011. Mubarak's ouster on February 11, 2011 ended a long period of autocratic stability. But in a turbulent "transition", Egypt's first democratically elected government, headed by Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, was overthrown by the military on 3 July 2013. The military preserved and expanded its power with the election of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as president in May 2014 but without reforming its institutions. If anything, severe political and economic volatility and a restive population have made Egypt more vulnerable to external intervention and depended on its Gulf allies.<sup>10</sup> The regime could not end a Sinai Peninsula insurgency that was rooted in deprivation and local grievances (Aziz 2017). Nor could it demonstrate its importance to American foreign policy in the region. Indeed Mubarak was overthrown as the Barak Obama administration began to 'pivot to Asia' to rebalance its relationship with China. The USA was already scaling down its influence in the Middle East by withdrawing troops from Iraq in December 2011 and reaching the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

In the matter of the Nile basin the al-Sisi regime is unable to conduct a more active foreign policy, having to place regime security ahead of securing the Nile waters. Almost two weeks after Mubarak's fall, Burundi joined the Nile Cooperative Framework Agreement, which Egypt opposed (*Ahram Online* 10 March 2011). Egypt faced its most serious threat when Ethiopia announced plans in April 2011 to build the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the largest hydroelectric power project in Africa, located twenty kilometers from its border with Sudan. With a total storage capacity of 74BCM, GERD could generate 5,000 to 6,000 megawatts, three times more than the capacity of Egypt's AHD. Ethiopia had been preparing to construct a major dam for many years. Ethiopia's announcement of GERD without consultation with Egypt, just two months after Mubarak's fall and three months before South Sudan's independence,<sup>11</sup> marked a radical change in power relations between the upstream and downstream riparian states. A leaked audio recording shed light on Egypt's weak position on the Nile. When Mubarak was asked about Egypt's options with regards to GERD, he said, "I had

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<sup>10</sup> Whereas Qatar and Turkey gave strong financial support of almost \$8 billion and diplomatic backing to Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia pumped billions of dollars in the forms of investments and cash deposits to help stabilize al-Sisi's regime.

<sup>11</sup> Based on the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Bashir regime and the southern rebel forces of SPLM, Sudan was split into Sudan and South Sudan in January 2011.



then warplanes which made me able to hit the dam and destroy it in one strike.” But, that was no longer possible: “... you hit a dam now, you get in trouble with all Africans.” He added that “the whole world doesn’t take us seriously anymore. All the world knows we have become a weak nation. Although we held a lot of weight previously.”<sup>12</sup>

In late April 2011, a 48-member popular diplomacy delegation visited Ethiopia to get assurances that GERD would not affect Egypt’s waters. This was followed by Egypt’s Prime Minister Essam Sharaf’s visit to Addis Ababa on 13 May 2011. At these meetings, which excluded Sudan, Ethiopia and Egypt agreed to form an international panel of experts to review GERD. On 25 May 2011 the Egyptian Minister of Agriculture visited Sudan and notified it of the panel. The formation of the “international panel” was based on technical grounds without any legal framework that would guarantee the allocation of the Nile water shares before the completion of GERD. In response, Sudan’s chief negotiator and legal advisor, Muhammad Mufti, resigned from the Sudanese delegation as a legal consultant in the GERD negotiation in 2011, refusing to participate in the “international panel” without a legal basis. The subsequent failure of the international panel to meet regularly underscored Egypt-Sudan differences over the Nile basin affairs. From Sudan’s perspective, Egypt wanted a deal with Ethiopia that did not consider the Sudanese needs of the Nile waters.<sup>13</sup>

While he was president, Bashir supported the Muslim Brotherhood and gave refuge to many of its members in Sudan. Yet Morsi’s election as president in June 2012 did not substantially improve Egypt-Sudan relations. Amr Darrag, Minister of Planning and International Cooperation in Morsi’s government, argued that Morsi’s foreign policy was controlled by the military whose generals were worried about the shared Islamist background of the Bashir and Morsi governments and Bashir’s close ties with Iran.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Egyptian-Sudanese relations under Morsi soured after Khartoum protested at meetings by Darfur rebel leaders with Egyptian officials and accused Cairo of stalling the implementation of the Four Freedoms Agreement.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, faced with a restive

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<sup>12</sup> “Mubarak: No One Takes Egypt Seriously Anymore,” *Middle East Monitor*, 20 June 2017.

<sup>13</sup> “Nile water crisis places Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia on the brink of war,” Khalil Charles, *Middle East Monitor*, January 15, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Author interview with Amr Darrag, Istanbul, February 22, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Signed in Cairo and published in the Official Gazette on January 9, 2004, the Four Freedoms Agreement guarantees to Egyptian and Sudanese citizens freedom of movement and residence, right to work and property in either country without a permit. The Agreement has not been seriously implemented.

population and unable to consolidate his rule, Morsi did not address the issue of GERD until almost a year into his presidency. Ethiopia started diverting the course of the Blue Nile to construct GERD in early May 2013. To stop the construction, Egyptian politicians meeting with Morsi proposed hostile acts against Ethiopia, including support for Ethiopian rebels, and sabotage.<sup>16</sup> In June Morsi threatened to go to war if Ethiopia tampered with the Nile. At the Popular Conference on Egypt's Rights to Nile Water, Morsi stated that, "If our share of Nile water decreases, our blood will be the alternative," adding that "all options are open."<sup>17</sup> The dispute with Ethiopia gave Morsi an opportunity to rally Egyptians behind him ahead of an anticipated June 30 protest against his presidency and divert public attention from the worsening economic and social climate. Again, regime security was vital. Crucially, the Egyptian threat against Ethiopia allowed Sudan to declare its neutrality and to mediate between the two disputants.

Following Morsi's ouster by the armed forces on 3 July 2013, the Peace and Security Council (PCC) of the African Union (AU) suspended Egypt from its activities until the "restoration of the constitutional order"<sup>18</sup> (July 2013 – June 2014). In negotiating an agreement with Ethiopia over GERD, Egypt sought to reverse its suspension from the AU. Sudan's support for GERD in 2013 tipped the diplomatic balance in favor of Ethiopia and pushed Egypt to seek a negotiated settlement.<sup>19</sup> The installation of al-Sisi as the president reinstated Egypt in the AU and paved the way for active engagement with Ethiopia on GERD. However, without Sudan's support, Egypt was unable to counter Ethiopia's position. Indeed, a growing rapprochement and convergence of interests on GERD led Sudan and Ethiopia to establish a joint military force to secure their common border. In the end Egypt endorses GERD in order to cut its loss of power and influence over the Nile hydro-politics.

On 23 March 2015, Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia met in Khartoum and signed a new legal document, "The Declaration of Principles",<sup>20</sup> which accepted the GERD project and gave Ethiopia the legal right and legitimacy to build the dam (Yihdego,

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<sup>16</sup> "Egypt politicians call to sabotage Ethiopia's Nile dam project," *The National*, June 4, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> "Morsi: If our share of Nile water decreases, our blood will be the alternative," *Daily News Egypt*, June 11, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> See "Communiqué of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (AU), at its 384th meeting on the situation in the Arab Republic of Egypt," July 5, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> "No political motive" behind Sudan's support for Ethiopia's Nile dam: ambassador," *Sudan Tribune*, December 14, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> See "Full text of 'Declaration of Principles' signed by Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia," *Ahram Online*, March 22, 2015.

Rieu-Clarke, and Cascão 2016). The agreement did not refer to the Nile Basin Initiative and lacked mutually accepted mechanisms to ensure each signatory's adherence to its terms. More importantly, though, the agreement did not recognize Egypt's "rights" according to the 1902 Treaty and other treaties, or any defined water allocation or distribution policies vis-a-vis Ethiopia and Sudan after the completion of GERD. In short, the agreement had no clause that assured Egypt its interests in the Nile. Instead, Ethiopia reduced Egypt's agenda to negotiations over the timetable for filling its reservoir rather than Egypt's long-held discourse on legal rights, "water security," and water allocation. While GERD was being built, diplomatic negotiations and cooperation with Egypt and Sudan proceeded to regulate fair and reasonable use of water and resolve disputes in accordance with international law. Thus Ethiopia strengthened its position in international forums, assured of the political support of the Nile basin states and continued backing by China and Europe for its infrastructural projects.

#### *Sudan: Riparian Swing State*

Despite being one of Africa's biggest economies, Egypt has not translated its long hydro-political alliance with Sudan into strong economic interdependency and strategic ties (Tawfik 2019, 661). When Ethiopia contested Egypt's hegemony in the Nile basin, therefore, Sudan could wean itself from Egyptian influence to craft an independent foreign policy and expand its scope for maneuver in the Nile hydro-politics. As upstream riparian states enforce their control of the Nile waters, Sudan has backed away from its previous unconditional support of Egypt's "historic rights" to the River.

Significantly Sudan has improved its relations with Ethiopia. Against warnings from experts, a large number of Sudanese officials maintain that Sudan would benefit from GERD and deeper economic and political ties with Ethiopia,<sup>21</sup> whose GDP growth rate has been highest in Africa in the past decade. Sudan urgently needs financial support to stabilize its economy that is reeling from rising inflation, depreciating currency, and the loss of oil revenues after South Sudan's secession in July 2011. In addition, the outbreak of civil war in South Sudan in 2013 deprived Sudan of much-needed pipeline revenues. To offset the loss of oil revenues, Sudan seeks to raise productivity in agriculture, its only viable economic sector, and exploit other export possibilities, notably

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<sup>21</sup> Author interview with Elnour Hamad, a prominent Sudanese intellectual, Virginia, USA, September 11, 2018.

livestock.<sup>22</sup> Hence, Sudan needs the regular flow of the Nile and cheap energy supply from GERD that would alleviate the threat of annual floods and improve drought control in order to sustain year-round agriculture, and attract foreign investments from the Middle East and Arab Gulf states. Sudan's intensive agricultural projects, if fully materialized, would increase its usage of the Nile waters and eventually require building more reservoirs. This prospect worries Egypt more than the Ethiopian GERD. Regularizing the flow of water throughout the year makes it feasible to expand irrigated agriculture along the Blue Nile beyond Egypt. Sudan, looking to diversify its economy away from oil, hopes to expand its mechanized agricultural schemes to create employment and export its crops.<sup>23</sup> In this Sudan has more to gain from Ethiopia than Egypt.

Being a landlocked economy, Ethiopia has sought ways to boost trade and energy relations with its neighbors regardless of their geopolitical differences. Ethiopia's initiatives include concluding a UAE/Saudi Arabia-brokered peace treaty with Eritrea, exporting electricity to Sudan, Kenya and Djibouti, launching road and railway projects, and gaining access to Red Sea ports in Sudan, the Somaliland region of Somalia, Kenya and Eritrea. In particular, the geographical proximity to Ethiopia's northern region made the acquisition of Port Sudan, Sudan's largest and main sea gateway,<sup>24</sup> of vital importance to the Ethiopian government. Although feasibility studies are still needed, the joint Sudan-Ethiopia cross oil pipeline agreement of December 2019 should boost cooperation between the two states over a range of development activities.<sup>25</sup> Those deals have allowed Ethiopia to improve relations with neighboring countries, diversify outlets and reduce port fees, a strategic trade and development imperative. Ethiopia is even bolstering its maritime power by reconstituting its navy, which was disbanded in 1991 following Eritrea's secession. A naval force at the southern entrance to the Red Sea in Djibouti will give Ethiopia a bigger role in the security, economic and geostrategic sectors in the Horn of Africa. With a military presence in the Red Sea, Addis Ababa wants to assure its neighbors and international investors that it can protect maritime trading routes from piracy, maintain access to raw materials, and secure oil and commodity flows

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<sup>22</sup> "Sudan, Country Economic Memorandum: Realizing the Potential for Diversified Development," *World Bank Group*, September 30, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Author interview with EJ Hogendoorn, International Crisis Group's Africa Deputy Program Director, Washington DC., September 12, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> "Ethiopia to take a stake in Sudan's main sea gateway port," *Reuters*, May 3, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> "Sudan, Ethiopia to construct a joint cross-border oil pipeline," *Construction Review Online*, October 17, 2019.

from Africa and the Middle East. Not least, Ethiopia can use its diversification of military, diplomatic and economic relations to its advantage in future negotiations with Egypt over the Nile waters.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Rise of Non-riparian Actors in the Nile Basin*

Egypt now has also to contend with new powerful non-basin actors, namely, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These two states are expanding their influence to ensure Red Sea security and limit the scope of their rivals, mainly Qatar, Iran and Turkey, in the Horn of Africa and at major maritime chokepoints such as the Suez Canal, Bab el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz. Their long-term strategic objectives include achieving food and water security for their populations by channeling more financial resources to the region. The UAE's USD3 billion injection of aid and investments to Ethiopia in June 2018 is one example of growing GCC influence.<sup>27</sup> The commercial decisions by the Arab Gulf States to irrigate farms, grow export crops, and generate electricity in the Nile basin have significant implications for the hydro political landscape. In the wake of the 2007-2008 global financial and food crises, the Gulf States searched for ways to reduce their vulnerability to shocks in the global food trade. They planned foreign agro-investments and major land deals to develop Sudan and other riparian states as a 'breadbasket' of the Gulf region (Lippman 2010, Woertz 2013). By the extensive use of its water and land resources, Sudan seeks to develop massive agricultural projects in partnership with Gulf Arab capital (Verhoeven 2012). Sudan now ranks first in Arab Gulf investment in agricultural projects and animal-based industries. The Gulf States' investments in Sudan's agriculture gives the latter confidence to chart its Nile basin policy away from Egypt's concerns. The investments are chiefly drawn from the sovereign funds of the Gulf countries or collective funds like the Islamic Development Bank. Foreign countries, including China and the Arab Gulf States, are building regional influence by supporting major hydraulic projects in Sudan, including the Merowe Dam in 2009, the heightening of Roseires Dam in 2013, and food companies such as the Kenana Sugar Company, a joint venture between the Sudanese government, the Kuwait government, and other states and corporate partners (Verhoeven 2016).

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<sup>26</sup> "How Egypt reacted to Ethiopia's move on Red Sea," Khalid Hassan, *Al-Monitor*; and "Without a sea coast why is Ethiopia trying to reestablish a navy?", Tesfaye Tadesse, *The Reporter*, January 25, 2020

<sup>27</sup> "Abu Dhabi fund allocates \$3bn aid package to Ethiopia," *Arabian Business*, June 16, 2018.

Yet these investments have caused Ethiopia and Sudan to have tensions with Egypt, which fears that any overuse of the Nile upstream could reduce water flow northward toward its border. The former states assert their right to exploit the Nile waters for agricultural production and strengthen ties with the Arab oil producers. But that means less water for Egypt. The balance of power, affected by the Gulf States' rising interests in the Nile basin, now favors Ethiopia and Sudan. In fact, Saudi Arabia used GERD to pressure Egypt. In October 2016, when Egypt voted in favor of a Russian resolution on Syria in the United Nations Security Council, Saudi Arabia halted oil shipments to Egypt, leaving the latter scrambling to cover the shortfall. In the following month, high-level Saudi officials visited GERD and formed a joint committee for cooperation in renewable energy. The GCC has even examined the feasibility of importing power produced by GERD to diversify their energy sources and save their petroleum for export.<sup>28</sup> The riparian states' lack of regional institutions and binding agreements on the utilization of the Nile waters have made it easy for the Gulf States to expand their influence in the basin through bilateral deals. In turn this situation has accorded Sudan and Ethiopia greater leverage and bargaining power vis-à-vis Egypt in their plans to build more hydroelectric stations on the Nile.

Saudi Arabia and UAE have steadily used their political and financial clout to secure their interests in the Red Sea and headwaters of the Nile, both vital to Egypt's national security. The rise of Saudi Arabia and the UAE's leadership role in African-Arab joint actions was evident when Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia broke off ties with Iran in 2016 after the execution of the Shia cleric in Saudi Arabia and the resultant attack by protesters on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran.<sup>29</sup> In a bilateral maritime demarcation agreement in 2016 that sparked public protests, Egypt handed its sovereignty over two strategically located islands in the Red Sea, Tiran and Sanafir, to Saudi Arabia in apparent gratitude for the latter's support for Sisi's coup against Morsi, and for future Saudi loans and aid. The agreement also recognized the disputed Halayeb and Shalateen region, located at the Egypt-Sudan border on the Red Sea's African coast, as part of Egypt's maritime border. Shortly after that Sudan-Egypt border disputes flared. Sudan called on Egypt to negotiate the status of two port cities or to refer their dispute to the International Court of Arbitration. Bashir claimed that Sudan held documents that proved its

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<sup>28</sup> "Saudi Arabia eyes Ethiopian hydropower link to cut reliance on oil and gas," *Climate News*, September 27, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> "Why Saudi Arabia and Egypt are Competing for Influence in Africa." Ayah Aman, *Al-Monitor*, January 11, 2017.

sovereignty over the two “illegally occupied” cities.<sup>30</sup> With its stronger role in the Nile water disputes and Egypt’s regional weakness and economic dependence on Saudi Arabia, Sudan was emboldened to escalate border disputes with Egypt.

Moreover, the Gulf Crisis of June 2017, which pitted pro-Muslim Brotherhood Qatar against Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, also affected Sub-Saharan Africa whose countries were pressured to take sides in the conflict. Interestingly, Sudan and Ethiopia benefited from the crisis by staying neutral and continued to receive investments from both Qatar and the other GCC states.<sup>31</sup> Since 2011, Sudan has signed a number of defense and economic agreements with the GCC states, helped Libyan rebels overthrow Muammar Gaddafi, and deployed thousands of Sudanese troops to join the 2015 Saudi-led war in Yemen. In contrast, Egypt frustrated Saudi Arabia by limiting its participation in the war in Yemen to the symbolic deployment of air forces and naval ships. Egypt’s priorities are to fight against a protracted insurgency in Sinai and protect its western border with Libya.

Egypt also failed to influence Sudan’s foreign policy, including its strong alliance with Qatar and Turkey, two of Egypt’s adversaries that are linked by their support of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt and much of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Egypt has repeatedly accused Sudan of harboring members of the Muslim Brotherhood, classified by Egyptian authorities as a “terror group” in December 2013, who escaped from Egypt after Morsi’s fall. Tensions arose in May 2017 when Sudan banned the import of agricultural and animal products from Egypt and accused Cairo of harboring and supporting Sudanese rebels (*Reuters* 30 May 2017). In December 2017 Egypt was alarmed when Sudan signed a 99-year lease of Suakin Island to Turkey, a key port in the Red Sea. A few months later Qatar reportedly agreed to provide Sudan USD4 billion to develop Suakin (*Reuters* March 27, 2018). The lease allows Turkey, which already has military bases in Somalia and Qatar, to enhance its strategic position in the Red Sea and develop military cooperation between the two states. Crucially, the Turkish presence aggravates the Egyptian-Sudanese divide over the current Nile water dispute. Egypt sees Qatar, Turkey, and Sudan as pro-Muslim Brotherhood countries and believes that their alliance would lead to a growing Sudan-Ethiopia alliance that will pressure Egypt over to the Halayeb border dispute.

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<sup>30</sup> “Sudan complains to UN over Egypt holding elections in Halaib triangle,” *Egypt Independent*, April 19, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> “Ethiopia: Exploiting the Gulf’s Scramble for the Horn of Africa,” Awol Allo, *African Arguments*, August 13, 2018.

Sudan's geostrategic position makes it indispensable to Turkey. The former offers the latter an export market and fertile land. In November 2018 Turkey and Sudan set up a joint agricultural and live-stock company in Khartoum, a move that enhanced Turkey's regional influence as Sudan is an important gateway to Central Africa.<sup>32</sup> Besides being a valuable counterpoint to Egypt, Turkey relieves Sudan from relying too heavily on its unpredictable allies in the Gulf. In any case the war in Yemen and an insurgency in the Sinai have respectively prevented Saudi Arabia and Egypt from confronting the Sudan-Turkey alliance. In short regional strategic transformations have opened alliance-building opportunities that free Sudan from old water agreements with Egypt.

## **Conclusion**

Egypt's present position in the Nile basin reflects certain harsh geopolitical and economic realities. The academic literature and news coverage of the water dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia overlook the Sudan's strategic position as a midstream state that accelerated the basin's hydro political shift in Ethiopia's favor. For as long as Sudan unconditionally acquiesced to Egypt's "historic rights" to the Nile waters, Egypt enjoyed a water regime of near monopoly. In other words, control of Sudan gave Egypt control of the Nile waters. In recent times, however, Sudan has been desperate to replace revenues lost after its oil-rich south seceded by becoming an agricultural superpower. Sudan's new economic aspiration goes against Egypt's strategic interests in the Nile. Owing to GERD's proximity downstream Sudan, Ethiopia cannot easily draw water for irrigated agriculture. What makes Sudan such an important player in the Nile dispute is Khartoum's potential ability to expand its irrigated agriculture which would lower the volume of the Nile waters flowing into Egypt. Adding to the complexity of regional relations, the GCC sovereign wealth funds have enlarged their stake in irrigated agriculture and farming schemes in the Nile basin. The developmental projects these funds support may exacerbate existing water scarcity due to climate change and rapid population growth. Moreover, the regional order, from the Nile basin to the Red Sea, is being molded by new actors, notably, China, Turkey, and, above all, the GCC states, each with its own economic and security interests. Egypt's internal turmoil, from the 2011 uprising to the 2013 coup and beyond, and the rising power of the upstream riparian states have combined to allow Sudan to withdraw from its previous alliance with Egypt. In a new geopolitical landscape, Sudan has played different sides of the divides in the Middle

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<sup>32</sup> "Erdogan is deepening his involvement in Sudan," Zvi Mazel, *The Jerusalem Post*, December 9, 2018.



East and the Nile basin. Sudan's leaders are ideologically closer to Qatar and Turkey. But in practice, Sudan's cash-short government retains a strong alliance with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Politically, Saudi Arabia and the UAE want to prevent any re-emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. However, calculations of food security draw Saudi Arabia and the UAE closer to Sudan and Ethiopia which plan to utilize the Nile waters for energy, irrigation and the needs of growing populations. In a way, the Nile dispute is a classic diplomatic problem: every side to the dispute sees its security being bound up with the river waters. Yet negotiation and cooperation can resolve what self-aggrandizement would turn into a geopolitical zero-sum game.

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