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## **The Political Economy of Egypt's Hydrohegemony in the Nile Basin**

Housam DARWISHEH\*

February 2023

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Much of scholarly literature on transboundary water relations focuses on conflict and cooperation with insights from both neorealist and neoliberal international relations theories. While neorealists emphasize the overall material distribution of power between states, neoliberalists highlight how international law and institutions may shape state preferences toward international cooperation. Other scholars have used the conceptual framework of hydrohegemony to understand the power asymmetry between states, examining how different dimensions of power among riparian states shape transboundary settings. These approaches to transboundary water interaction focus on the state as the primary unit of analysis and assume that foreign policy decision-making primarily aims to serve national interests. However, the preoccupation with a state-centric approach to transboundary water relations has often led scholars to overlook or downplay other critical variables within the domestic political realm. These include the political economy of authoritarian rule and salience of regime security as a unit of analysis. This paper argues that the decline of Egypt's hydrohegemony in the Nile basin can be best explained by tracing Egypt's political economy of regime consolidation. This approach clarifies the changing place of the Nile in the domestic and foreign policy priorities of the ruling elite and the forces and actions that have and continue to shape Egypt's hydropolitics in the Nile River basin.

**Keywords:** Egypt, the Nile River, hydropolitics, hegemony, political economy, agriculture

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\* Researcher, Middle Eastern Studies Group, Area Studies Center, IDE (Housam\_Darwisheh@ide.go.jp)

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**INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPING ECONOMIES (IDE), JETRO**  
**3-2-2, WAKABA, MIHAMA-KU, CHIBA-SHI**  
**CHIBA 261-8545, JAPAN**

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# The Political Economy of Egypt's Hydrohegemony in the Nile Basin

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## **Abstract**

Much of scholarly literature on transboundary water relations focuses on conflict and cooperation with insights from both neorealist and neoliberal international relations theories. While neorealists emphasize the overall material distribution of power between states, neoliberalists highlight how international law and institutions may shape state preferences toward international cooperation. Other scholars have used the conceptual framework of hydrohegemony to understand the power asymmetry between states, examining how different dimensions of power among riparian states shape transboundary settings. These approaches to transboundary water interaction focus on the state as the primary unit of analysis and assume that foreign policy decision-making primarily aims to serve national interests. However, the preoccupation with a state-centric approach to transboundary water relations has often led scholars to overlook or downplay other critical variables within the domestic political realm. These include the political economy of authoritarian rule and salience of regime security as a unit of analysis. This paper argues that the decline of Egypt's hydrohegemony in the Nile basin can be best explained by tracing Egypt's political economy of regime consolidation. This approach clarifies the changing place of the Nile in the domestic and foreign policy priorities of the ruling elite and the forces and actions that have and continue to shape Egypt's hydropolitics in the Nile River basin.

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## 1. Introduction

Maintaining control over the Nile River is arguably essential for Egypt's existence as an independent state (Hassan and Rasheedy 2007, 26). Being mostly composed of the Saharan desert, about 95% of the Egyptian population lives in 5 percent of the territory along the Nile Valley. For the population, their main source of fresh water comes from the Nile, which originates beyond Egyptian borders from Lake Victoria in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (the White Nile) and Lake Tana in the Ethiopian highlands (the Blue Nile). Irrigated agriculture, an important source of economic wealth for the country, uses almost 80 percent of the Nile. Egypt is highly dependent on the annual overflow of the River, owing to minimal rainfall and limited groundwater (Gouda 2016, 39).

The Nile has influenced and shaped many aspects of the social, political, and economic life of the country over the centuries. Hassan and Rasheedy argue that “[T]he Nile River is the principal artery of life in Egypt. It is life itself. This fact does not apply to the same extent to other riparian states...No doubt one of the major strategic threats to Egyptian national security is in essence the existence of vital water sources lying beyond the Egyptian borders” (Hassan and Rasheedy 2007, 26). No Egyptian leader, regardless of ideology, can ignore the importance of the Nile, and the even greater significance of securing its flow. In a speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2019, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi reiterated Egyptian interests in the Nile by emphasizing that “the Nile water is a matter of life and an issue of existence for Egypt.”<sup>1</sup> Owing to its importance, Egyptian rulers should focus on ensuring the smooth and uninterrupted flow of the Nile and maintaining Egypt's upper hand in the Nile basin. The importance of the Nile to Egypt reinforces the widely held view among scholars, politicians, and analysts that securing the Nile dictates the conduct of Egyptian foreign policy in the basin.

Despite its critical importance, the Nile River is often missing in conventional analyses of Egypt's foreign policy. Almost no scholarly research has inclusively examined Egypt's contemporary Nile strategy. While Egypt's survival depends on the Nile, its foreign policy is often examined relative to the Arab world, the Middle East, and the West in general (Hinnebusch and Nael 2014, Hinnebusch 2015, Shama 2013, Lorenz 2021) while neglecting its relations with the

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<sup>1</sup> “Nile water is a matter of life and an issue of existence for Egypt,” says Al-Sisi at UNGA74” *Daily New Egypt*, September 24, 2019.

Nile basin states and Africa. Furthermore, contemporary Egyptian rulers, and statesmen have not formulated explicit strategies to maintain smooth access to the Nile. Why is the Nile River absent from Egypt's foreign policy agenda? This study argues that while the Nile is essential for Egypt's survival, it is not as important for the continued survival of the ruling elite. Basically, the ruling elite prioritize their own survival over securing the Nile for the country. Hence, situating the analysis of Egypt's Nile policy within conventional IR theory, particularly the realist, and liberalist perspectives, overlooks other important explanatory variables of water politics that do not adhere with state-centric accounts. These include the political economy of regime consolidation/security and its impact on foreign policy priorities.

In his book on Egypt's foreign policy, Nael Shama argues that ruling regimes since 1952 have always been primarily interested in their own survival in the face of multiple potential threats and challenges (Shama 2013, 239). Shama contends that as the political elite is preoccupied with maintaining its power, insecurity—and not national interest—becomes central to understanding the domestic and international behavior of the state. Therefore, analyzing Egypt's foreign policy in the Nile basin requires a deeper understanding of leaders' priorities and objectives in reinforcing their authority and regime security. In this way, Egypt's rise, and decline as a hydrohegemon in the Nile basin can be better understood. The paper argues that the political economy of regime security is key to understanding the priorities of Egyptian foreign policy. The relationship between the political economy of authoritarian rule and hydropolitics needs further exploration. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute toward building a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that have shaped Egypt's water politics. By tracing the objectives and policy priorities of Egypt's monarchical and republican regimes, this study demonstrates that the ruling elites' own priority to preserve their regimes and leadership, rather than doing what is best for the country, has informed the direction, and character of their hydropolitics. This study's findings help provide a better understanding of Egypt's declining hydrohegemony in the Nile basin from a political economy of regime security perspective.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 examines the political economy of regime consolidation and the factors that led to the rise of Egypt's hydrohegemony under the rule of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805–1848), the founder of modern Egypt. Section 3 explores how the economic interests of Great Britain cemented Egypt's legal control of the Nile and deepened its dependency on its waters. Section 4 investigates how Egypt began losing its

control over the Nile when the Egyptian monarchy was overthrown in July 1952 and the republic was created in June 1953. Section 5 concludes the paper by discussing these findings.

## **2. Egypt's Hydrohegemony in the Nile Basin**

Egypt's rise as a hydrohegemon in the Nile basin began during the reign of the Ottoman viceroy Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805–1848). This coincided with the slow decline of the Ottoman Empire. In 1801, Ali Pasha was sent to Egypt by the Ottoman sultan to expel Napoleon Bonaparte's troops, who invaded the country in 1798. After assuming power in 1805, Ali sought to consolidate his rule by building a powerful state. He established a centralized government and a top-down irrigation system, marking a turning point in Egypt's agricultural history. Boosting agricultural production by shifting Egyptian agriculture from basin to perennial irrigation was a cornerstone of Ali's project of turning Egypt into a major world cotton exporter (Hanna and Allouche 2018, 83-84). Ali's efforts toward modernizing the basin irrigation system in pursuit of an independent dynasty involved full commoditization of the Nile River and placed the agricultural property in the hands of the state. He aimed to fully exploit the resources of the Nile, recognizing that control of the Nile and its vast delta region afforded him an unusual source of power. Controlling the Nile would allow him to secure his regime, gain independence from the Ottoman center in Constantinople, and defend his dynasty against growing Western powers. Additionally, agricultural development enhanced Ali's control over the countryside and augmented his government (and his own) revenues at a time when European merchants were penetrating the rural areas and aiming to divert resources into their own pockets (Hunter 2000, 146-147).

Ali launched a widespread and extensive public works program to change the irrigation system from basin-based subsistence crops (e.g., wheat and barley) to perennial irrigation of cash crops (e.g., cotton, and sugar). He built factories, railways, roads, and networks of dams, barrages, and irrigation canals to discharge the low-level summer supply of the Nile and expand cotton cultivation and its transportation by land and water from the village to local markets. For instance, the digging of the 72 km Mahmoudiyah Canal in 1819 linked Cairo with Alexandria and boosted the latter's commercial port. This brought the whole country closer to the Mediterranean trade (Batou 1991, 193). Ali also launched a land management program that focused on reclaiming flooded and fallow lands. Alleaume notes how “[w]ork progressed slowly upriver from north to south which in time made the Nile the exclusive force of hydraulic regulation” (Alleaume 1999,

338). Almost 18 percent of the annual budget was allocated to Ali's investment in irrigation and agricultural infrastructure. Moreover, an additional 4.7 percent of the annual state expenditure was "spent for building locks, weirs, barrage, and dykes." The area of cultivated land increased by 26.2 percent between 1813 and 1840 (Panza and Williamson 2015, 94-95). From the 1860s onwards, cotton comprised 80 percent of Egypt's total exports (Tvedt 2011, 39).

For Ali, systematic exploitation of the Nile through extensive development of large-scale irrigation schemes and expropriation of the agricultural surplus was key to accumulating the higher levels of local wealth needed to finance domestic textile manufacturing. Hence, agriculture was the backbone of his dynasty's economic and financial systems. To fund his army, Ali increased land tax and introduced large-scale cultivation of valuable water and labor-intensive cash crops for the global market (e.g., long-staple cotton). Developing Egypt's economic and administrative resources required an agrarian revolution. In turn, this entailed further development and construction of irrigation works and firm control of land and Nile water resources to boost agricultural production for export. Ali aimed to establish a state-controlled industrial base and relied on state monopolies in foreign trade to bolster the state finances necessary for funding large projects. Basically, the financial health of Ali's realm depended on his ability to firmly control and manage Egypt's water resources and extract revenues from agricultural commodities trade with Europe to build a strong army. This enabled Ali to conquer new colonies and expand his export market and command productive resources. Ali succeeded in turning Egypt into a grand plantation for his commercial interests and dynastic objectives (Ismael and Ismael 2012, 441). Basically, Ali's consolidation of power largely depended on increasing the economy's competitiveness and agricultural productivity by exploiting all the water and human resources of the country. Agricultural productivity was key to Egypt's economic progress and essential for sustaining and consolidating his rule. Therefore, Ali highly prioritized investing in the Nile to finance his projects as "[a]griculture was the chief source of revenue. Hence, his problem was in increasing both the productivity of agriculture and the "surplus" that could be extracted from it to meet expenditures for administration, capital investment, and the military"(Penrose 2019, 251).

Ali's consolidation of his authority and the security of his rule required transforming Egypt from an Ottoman empire province into an expansionist power (Blumi 2017, 31). Territorial expansion into the lands of the White and Blue Nile was crucial to obtain the necessary resources and accelerate the broader industrialization process of the Egyptian economy. Emulating the

European state model, Ali aimed to amass military force and capital to build his dynasty with very strong European influences in constructing his military. Fahmy notes that establishing a strong army was central to all of Ali's reforms, "the different schools, factories and hospitals were all founded to serve it and it was their main *raison d'être*" (Fahmy 1998, 421). Ali established a European-style conscript army, enforced tax collection by modernizing and centralizing the bureaucracy, developed the educational system, and spearheaded industrialization programs. He began a program of sending selected officers to study in France and return to teach at the new schools. He introduced an economic system that would pay for all this—a monopsonist system (monopolies) wherein the Egyptian government became the only buyer of agricultural products, such as wheat, which was Egypt's main product then. The state would set the price for purchasing the wheat and sell it at a greatly inflated price on the international market, which was starved for wheat because of the Napoleonic wars. Agricultural proceeds paid for Ali's construction of a large army, building factories to produce military goods, uniforms, and weapons.

He sought to limit the growing influence of European powers in the region by acquiring new territories and manpower resources in the Levant, Western Arabia (the Hijaz), and the Upper Nile Valley. In 1820, Ali invaded Sudan to acquire slaves for his army, extract gold, and gain control of the Nile Valley and the Red Sea maritime trade (Sanderson 1963, Robinson 1925). Sitting at the confluence of the Blue and White Niles, Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, was founded in 1821 by Ali's son Ibrahim Pasha as a permanent military camp (Hamdan 1960). By recruiting Sudanese slaves, Ali avoided needing to conscript Egyptian peasants to gain higher agricultural output for export. For Ali, Egypt's security, and prosperity could only be assured by controlling the Nile water resources.

Ali's policies, which prioritized expanding agricultural productivity and military expansion up the Nile Valley, should be understood in the context of growing trade with Europe and Egypt's integration into the European economy as a supplier of raw materials and agricultural goods (e.g., cotton, and flax). Egypt's economy became more closely linked with Europe's industrial economy. Entirely imported, "cotton was the most important raw material of the industrial revolution that created our modern world economy"(Baptist 2016, 113). By mid-1860s, Ali's grandson, Khedive Ismail Pasha, brought Egypt's cotton economy to its peak and focused his foreign strategy on further expansion of agricultural programs. The American Civil War (1861–1865) starved the European textile mills of cotton, leading to high Egyptian cotton prices. By becoming the main



cotton supplier to the British textile centers, Egypt developed economically, and benefited from the American Civil War. Simultaneously, however, cotton increased Egypt's dependence on the Nile and its economic dependency on the West. This made the country vulnerable to fluctuations in world prices and increasingly dependent on food and fertilizers from foreign markets to finance the cotton infrastructure (Beckert 2004). The Nile Delta then became the focus of land reform to increase the export of cotton to European factories and allowed the Egyptian ruler to build factories to process clothes from cotton and produce food and other goods. By the end of the 19th century, cotton had become "the major source of income for almost every proprietor in the Delta" for Egypt (Owen 1969, 24). Basically, the ruling elites' future became increasingly dependent on the productivity of Egypt's soil and the extension of agricultural fields through intensive exploitation of the Nile.

As securing the resources of the Nile was paramount to Egypt's political elites, Khedive Ismail (1863–1879) aimed to bring the entire Nile River under his rule, controlling the African Great Lakes through a series of military expeditions. Ismail sent expeditions to secure the resources of the White Nile and establish his authority over the equatorial regions of central Africa. He chose the English explorer Samuel Baker, who discovered Albert Lake. His area of control extended from Gondokoro, which was renamed Ismailiyah, in current South Sudan to the resources of the Nile in Uganda. Expeditions under Ismail were quite different from those under Muhammad Ali Pasha. Under Ali, expeditions to Sudan, for instance, were aimed at collecting slaves and soldiers. They took place during the initial phase of Ali's state-building efforts. However, under Khedive Ismail, expeditions aimed at controlling the Nile's resources. These were all led by Europeans. Ismail was worried about the rising influence of the French in Africa. He thought that the British generals who led the expeditions would be more committed to expelling the French from the region and winning the British support they needed. In 1876, the Egyptian empire in the Nile basin reached a climax. During Ismail's rule, Egypt controlled the whole Nile. Egypt could also control the Red Sea ports. Ismail then attempted to conquer Ethiopia twice, but his troops were defeated in 1875 and 1876.

Ismail also embarked on several ambitious modernizing schemes, including the development of railways and, most importantly, the development of the Suez Canal. Several European empires were heavily invested in the Suez project, mainly France, and Great Britain, to trade through the Canal. However, through his extravagance and European exploitation Ismail

accumulated a large state debt to European financiers. Hence, less money was available for the irrigation system. Khedive Ismail was then forced to sell his shares in the Suez Company to the British. By 1876, Egypt defaulted on its loan payments, which approach one hundred million pounds, and the country was effectively bankrupt.

### **3. The British and the Nile**

Fearing that Egypt would renege on its debt, the British invaded Egypt in the summer of 1882 and seized control of the country. Throughout most of the first half of the 20th century, Great Britain emerged as the quasi-hegemonic authority in most of the Nile basin. The Nile remained the source of Egypt's wealth and the heart of its political and economic stability. The British favored mainly Egyptian uses of the Nile as they had significant agricultural interests in the Nile Delta. Moreover, the Egyptian Suez Canal was vital to the British maritime power and trade from Europe to Asia (Kimenyi and Mbaku 2015, 25). Basically, Egypt became increasingly important in Britain's global economy. Its productivity depended on having secured access to the Nile through British control of the Nile headwaters. Through water treaties, Britain consolidated their control of the Nile, assured Egyptians "historical rights" to the Nile, and increased the latter's agricultural intensification through the spread of a more intensive crop rotation within perennial systems. Crucially, Britain increased Egypt's dependence on the Nile as they had vested interests in extracting wealth from its long-staple cotton. They built extensively on the agricultural systems developed by Ali and his successors, extending the perennial system throughout the Delta upon the completion of Delta Barrage in 1890 and into Middle Egypt by the Aswan Dam in 1902 and larger irrigation schemes.

To ensure continuous water supply to Egypt, Britain and Ethiopia signed a treaty in 1902 wherein Ethiopian emperor Menelek II agreed not to construct any infrastructural projects on the Blue Nile, Lake Tana, or the Sobat River that would limit the flow of the waters without consent from Great Britain and Sudan. In 1906, Britain signed another agreement in London with France and Italy. The agreement emphasized the requirement of consultations on any project that could threaten Egyptian and British interests (Okoth 2021, 39). British hydrologist Harold Edwin Hurst was one of the major names that thought about how the Nile might work as a coordinated system. He thought of building small dams near the inflow to Egypt and controlling flows from Lake Tana and those coming out of Victoria Lake and cutting a large canal through the wetlands to increase

the water (Hurst et al, 1947). All of this was about extending irrigation in Egypt. While the British controlled Egypt, they introduced extensive scientific measurements, the construction of the first major dam (the low Aswan Dam and others), and larger irrigation schemes. British interests in extending summer cultivation culminated in the construction of the first Aswan Dam in 1902. The dam's height was raised twice in 1912 and 1933. The Sennar and Jebel Aulia dams were constructed in 1925 and 1937, respectively (Glennie 1957). These dams could be used to control and regulate the flow of the Nile for the irrigation season in Egypt and open irrigation into the Gezira Scheme located between the Blue and White Nile rivers in Sudan.

Between 1923 and 1929, Ethiopia attempted to build a dam on the Blue Nile with US help, but they stopped the plan owing to pressure from Britain and Egypt. In 1935, Britain offered to help Ethiopia build a dam at Lake Tana to generate hydroelectric power, but Italy's invasion derailed that plan. Basically, Britain was aware of Ethiopia's desire to use the Nile when the 1929 Water Agreement regarding the utilization of the Nile between Egypt and Great Britain (on behalf of Sudan) was formulated (Tesfaye 2013, 60-63). This purely promoted British interests in Egypt by providing the lion's share of the Nile to the latter. About 4 and 48 billion cubic meters of river water per annum were allocated for Sudan and Egypt, respectively. Ethiopia, the source of the Blue Nile, was not even mentioned in the agreement. That water agreement, however, was only possible if Britain remained the colonial power and enforcer in the region. Crucially, the 1929 agreement gave Cairo the right to veto projects higher up the Nile beyond its national borders to secure the flow of the Nile. Moreover, this led to the construction of the Jebel Aulia Dam in 1937, which is in the south of Khartoum in Sudan to store water for later use in Egypt<sup>2</sup> (Yihdego, Rieu-Clarke, and Cascão 2017).

Like Ali, the British realized that their economic interests lay in controlling the Nile. In this way, they could turn Egypt into a cotton farm for their textile mills and reduce their dependence on American cotton (Earle 1926). Hence, Egypt's continued agricultural and economic development and its control of the Nile were essential for British interests. Through irrigation projects, the British managed to make more water available during the summer and succeeded in doubling Egypt's cotton exports from 1888 to 1892. Subsequently, the Egyptian economy became increasingly dependent on the Nile for its cash crops and growing population.

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<sup>2</sup> Jebel Aulia Dam was later returned to Sudan in 1977 after it became obsolete owing to the completion of Aswan High Dam in 1971.

This strengthened the British position within Egypt because the former was in control of the Nile headwaters. Interestingly, British, and Egyptian rulers' interests aligned in making increased water control a top priority, which extended well beyond Egyptian borders. For instance, the Century Storage Scheme, developed by British hydrologists, aimed to store water from the Blue and White Niles for use during drought years by building dams in upstream countries. This included storing water in Lake Tana and dams along the Blue Nile and Atbara and digging channels in the Sudds to improve water flow. By constructing dams on the Blue Nile in places like Sennar, the British aimed to develop cotton cultivation in Gezira. Moreover, the British also wanted to store water in Lake Victoria by constructing dams to regulate water flows. However, WWI interrupted these plans (Ertsen 2006).

Control of the entire Nile was essential for Egypt's cotton cultivation, and political stability could be achieved through the provision of enough water for crop production. Moreover, the British also had vested interests in enabling the Egyptian economy to thrive, as this would enable the latter to repay its external debt to lending British banks, which had mounted to 100 million pounds with annual debt servicing of 5 million pounds. Egypt's ability to repay its debt depended on its cotton exports and agricultural lands. By the Second World War, Egypt fully repaid its debt in 1943. The country ended up with more developed agriculture and manufacturing compared to when the British came in 1882 (Amīn 1995, 64).

During the reign of Ali's dynasty and under British occupation, control of the Nile basin and continued extraction of its resources strengthened and consolidated the position of the ruling elite. Toward the end of the 19th century, the quest to secure Nile resources beyond Egyptian borders and control the Nile Valley was a direct outcome of this reality. The place of the Nile in the political economy of the postcolonial populist republic of Egypt, however, would witness a change. The security of the ruling elite and power consolidation would be tied to peasants, workers, industrialists, and the quest for hegemony in the Arab world.

#### **4. The Nile in Republican Egypt**

On 23 July 1952, Lieutenant Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser (President 1954–1970) led an army group calling itself the Free Officers and deposed King Farouk. By 1953, the military proclaimed a republic, formally ending almost 150 years of the rule of the Muhammad Ali dynasty. For consolidating his rule and “reforming political life,” Nasser then established a corporatist,

military-dominated political system that organized society into groups to secure their obedience and channel their demands. Nasser's populist regime forged a "social contract" wherein the state was to effect development and "social justice." Externally, Arab nationalism found its voice in Nasser's foreign policy within the struggle against Western colonialism, the old regime, and Israel. Hinnebusch notes that "centuries of subordination to foreign rule and the long independence struggle against Britain generated a powerful nationalism that made defense of independence crucial to the legitimacy of the ruling elite." Nasser "harnessed this sentiment to consolidate his regime, challenge Western dominance, and make Egypt a regional power" (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2002, 91).

Pan-Arab nationalism, a movement that gathered momentum against colonial powers after World War I, reached its apogee under Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s when Egypt united with Syria to form the United Arab Republic in 1958. While advocating pan-Arab nationalism to counterbalance Western presence in the Arab world, Nasser strongly supported African independence movements, including the Nile basin states. To undermine the British position in Sudan, under Nasser, Egypt abandoned any sovereign claims to Sudan and supported its complete independence from Great Britain. By supporting nationalist movements in Africa and the basin, Egypt needed to remove its influence or presence in the upper Nile and ignore the all-consuming importance of the Nile River to Egypt's survival. Faraj Fuda, a former member of the Wafd Party, once argued that "the adverse aspects of Nasserism, such as repressive rule, and the undermining of Nile Valley unity by recognizing Sudan's right to independence, must not obscure its positive aspects, which included social justice and the separation of religion and state" (Winckler 2004, 113).<sup>3</sup>

Crucially, Nasser's Arab nationalism "represented the aspiration to break out of the Nile Valley into the sphere of Arab identity and supra-Egyptian expectations" (Erlich 1989, 170). Erlich and Gershoni note that "President Nasser broke away from the modern concept of Nile Valley unity, which had motivated Egyptian nationalism from the late nineteenth century, and reoriented his politics on Arab nationalism and the regional politics of the Fertile Crescent and the Arab-Israeli conflict (Hagai 2000, 3). Along the same lines, Stephen Walt observes that Nasser's attempts at "preserving his own leadership of the Arab revolution, whether through formal unity,

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<sup>3</sup> *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*. 2004. Edited by Elie Podeh and Onn Winckler, Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

or through some other mechanism, became the cardinal principle of [his] foreign policy” (Walt 1990, 53).

At home, to solidify his populist base, Nasser ensured that his new regime backed its legitimacy and nationalist credentials by confronting the local British clients (i.e., the landowning class) and mobilizing the peasants, workers, and industrialists. He did this by enacting several populist social and political policies and programs. Chief among them was Agrarian Reform Law No. 178, issued in September 1952 almost 40 days after the Free Officers came to power and implemented between 1952 and 1961. The law liquidated the power of the big landowners under the slogan of social justice through the expropriation and equitable redistribution of landed property to obtain the support of the overwhelmingly rural population. The law aimed to empower peasants by reducing rural poverty and inequality and providing the landless with land rights. The law limited the amount of land an individual could own to 200 feddans (approximately 80 hectares). Nasser made the law more comprehensive by reducing the amount of land to 100 and later to 50 feddans in 1961 and 1969, respectively.

Crucially, though, the law aimed to liberate capital from agriculture and direct it toward industrial investment to weaken the landed class (Farah 2009, 32). State-implemented agrarian reform focused mainly on addressing inequality, improving rural income, and reducing the power of the previous regime’s notables. Nasser did not want Egypt to remain an agrarian society. Instead, he wanted the middle class to divert investment from purchasing land to investment in productive industrial enterprises (Ikram 2018, 190). Kienle highlights that the Free Officers wanted to transform an economically dominant class, which was largely agrarian, into an industrial bourgeoisie. Abolishing feudalism was the primary aim of the reform. Nasser’s land reform was purely political and enacted with no long-term vision for enhancing agricultural productivity (Bush 2002, 23-24).

Unlike Ali, Nasser’s strategy of centralizing his government did not aim to augment the water supply from the Nile River to boost agricultural production. Ali’s development plans hinged on the state’s acquisition of command and control of agricultural production, with land, and water allocation concentrated in his hands. On the other hand, Nasser highly prioritized rapid industrialization and mass development projects, including the construction of the Aswan Dam and huge land reclamation programs, to power Egypt’s industrial zenith and raise living standards. His development plans did *not* hinge on gaining a monopoly over the country’s agricultural

resources. Nasser's agrarian reforms aimed to restructure the economy in favor of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie (Aoude 1994, 2). The nationalist rhetoric of the Free Officers received huge support from the labor movement, which played an important role in the struggle against the British and destabilized monarchical rule. Labor laws no. 317, 218, and 319 were enacted to provide job security and other welfare provisions. Up to the 1960s, Nasser constructed a populist authoritarian social contract or bargain which provided Egyptians employment, free education, medical care, cheap food, and housing. In return, the regime asked for political loyalty.

Nasser did not seek to finance his development projects by generating more taxes through higher agricultural productivity. and not agriculture (while still being important) Manufacturing and industrial growth were principal motivations for land reform. Waterbury notes that Nasser believed that "the country's industrial momentum would lead to the occupational relocation of the work force out of agriculture" (Waterbury 2014, 66). Nasser raised the banner of economic development, and development was considered synonymous with industrialization. The main source of the high growth rate after the revolution was the rapid growth in industry and services and not agriculture (Amin 2011, 83). However, Kandil and Ansari (Kandil 2012, 63, Ansari 1986) estimate that most of the capital redirected out of agriculture was invested into real estate, construction, and bank deposits, and not industry. Farah attributes this to the fact that industrial entrepreneurs were landowners. Their removal from the political system made them fear that the government would take over their industries. The reluctance of the private sector to invest in industries led to a nationalization drive that began in 1956 and began forming a huge public sector in the 1960s (Farah 2009), serving as the major employer in the country.

As Nasser could not obtain enough capital from land reform and domestic constituencies, his distributive commitments would lead him to mobilize capital through the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company in 1956 and other foreign assets including foreign banks, insurance companies, and foreign trade agencies. This generated significant revenues for the government. Nationalization and industrialization of the 1960s facilitated the income distribution process, and this was achieved through job creation in the public sector. Simon Commander notes that "[W]hile in 1947 government employment accounted for around 13% of total-non-agricultural employment, by 1960 this share has risen to nearly 27%" (Commander 1987, 8). This helped Nasser consolidate an emerging class in the military and the state bureaucracy, providing a critical new source of political loyalty.

Nasser's grand national development projects (e.g., construction of the Aswan High Dam), and populist welfare commitments (e.g., subsidies and government employment)—which will become a major source of political instability for his successors—also required foreign assistance. He did so through aid and economic support from superpowers (the US and USSR) during the Cold War period. After the US withdrew its offer to assist in financing the Aswan High Dam to punish Egypt for its ties with the Soviet bloc, the USSR intervened to finance the project. Between 1959 and 1966, Egypt received \$1.124 billion, \$842 million, and \$273 million from the US, the Soviet Union, and Eastern bloc countries, respectively (Aidi 2009, 65-66). The Aswan High Dam also provided Nasser with a tool to mobilize the masses and overcome internal complexities.

Through the Aswan Dam, Nasser sought to symbolically compensate for Egypt's loss of influence over the upper Nile. This is because the conclusion of the British upstream fragmented the Nile basin between new sovereign states—Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda—who had competing claims over the River Nile. By constructing the Aswan Dam, Egypt aimed to secure the Nile within its borders. However, this also meant that Egypt no longer aimed to chart a water policy beyond its borders to secure the constant flow of the Nile from upstream states.<sup>4</sup> The ruling regime's dilemma was that it aimed to control the Nile within Egypt's border while having no presence or legal agreements with the upstream states. Nasser stated that “once the Aswan High Dam is built, Egypt will no longer be a historical hostage of the upstream riparian states of the Nile basin” (Yohannes 2009, 37). Moreover, it served as an assertion of Egyptian independence and the ability of the national leadership to design and effectively implement national development.

Furthermore, through the Aswan Dam, and land reclamation schemes, Nasser sought to construct and maintain patronage networks that linked the military to public sector companies and allocated lands to the rural, capitalist middle class. Land reclamation actually composed most of the agricultural budget in 1960s (Verhoeven 2016, 67). Commander writes that “between 1952/53 and 1959/60, agriculture attracted between 12–13 percent of total investment in the economy. This rose sharply between 1960 and 1965 to over 23 percent, falling to 20.4 percent for the rest of the decade. Part of this increase was attributable to the Aswan High Dam project. After 1970 the share of agriculture fell sharply so that by 1975/76 it attracted around 8 percent of total investment” (Commander 1987, 35).

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<sup>4</sup> Previously, Egypt had to rely on a network of small projects inside and outside its borders to secure and regulate the flow of the Nile.



With the construction of the Aswan Dam, Nasser sought to turn Egypt into a regional hegemon in the Arab World—and not in Africa, the source of the Nile—by strengthening unity in the Middle East. During the 1950s and 1960s, Nasser’s policies mainly focused on the Arab world, the Cold War rivalry, and consistent and failed efforts to destabilize Arab monarchies. Nasser’s commitment to pan-Arabism forced him to prioritize intra-Arab conflict mainly between monarchies and revolutionary republics. His adventures culminated in his forays in the Yemen civil war in 1962, which contributed to the Egyptian and Arab army’s defeat in the June 1967 war with Israel. However, through these policies, Nasser successfully obtained military aid and food supplies from the USSR and the US, respectively. Even after being defeated by Israel in 1967, Egypt under Nasser succeeded in trading its withdrawal from Yemen for massive financial support from Saudi Arabia and other major Arab oil producers (Daoudi and Dajani 1984, 79).

Conversely, Nasser had little to no active foreign policy in the Nile basin. Most of his involvement with international affairs focused on the Arab world. Unlike Ali, Khedive Ismail, and the British, Nasser did not have to increase the competitiveness of the economy and agricultural productivity to finance his populist projects. Instead, he financed his projects through sequestration and foreign aid. Agricultural reform was an important populist policy, but agriculture was not an important source of revenue for the regime. Instead, Nasser prioritized the heavy industries. Baker notes that “Nasser had reached the fundamental decision that ‘there is no alternative for us but to become an industrial power in the shortest possible time’” (Baker 1978, 49). Nasser turned to the Soviet Union for economic and technical assistance for Egypt’s industrialization projects, welfare, and military power. This exacerbated the imbalance of resources and created dependencies on external resources. Between 1957 and 1965, foreign loans, and credits totaled \$3.43 billion. His militant pan-Arab foreign policy served to assure Egypt’s independence, project power in the region, and secure large-scale aid from both camps during the Cold War. While Egypt became a formidable power under Nasser, its foreign policy priorities were focused on ending colonialism, helping national liberation movements, and undermining Arab monarchies. Nasser wanted Egypt to become the primary state in the Arab world and leader of pan-Arab nationalism. But these foreign and domestic commitments brought Egypt to the brink of disaster. At home, Egypt was under huge bureaucracy and military rule. Abroad, the country’s revolutionary foreign policy depleted Egypt’s resources in frequent wars with Israel, the West, and Gulf monarchies (Baker 1978, 236).

In the 1970s, Egypt's new ruler, Anwar Sadat, aimed to transition Egypt from authoritarian socialism to a rentier economy heavily reliant on foreign aid, tourism, worker remittances, and oil revenues. Sadat abandoned Nasser's policies of balancing between superpowers and adopted a pro-Western posture (Dessouki 2008, 168). His main objectives were restoring the Egypt-occupied lands in the Sinai peninsula since 1967, ending the war with Israel, improving Egypt's relations with Washington, and modernizing Egypt's economy by attracting foreign investment and Western technology (Shama 2013, 34). Sadat eventually secured peace with Israel separately and broke ranks with the Arab and African worlds. In 1980, Sadat even proposed to divert Nile water to irrigate Israel's Negev desert in return for progress on the West Bank and Jerusalem (Baker 1990, 73). To compensate Egypt for the temporary loss of Arab aid, the US granted Egypt economic aid and access to international financial institutions (e.g., the International Monetary Fund). Basically, the US, and other wealthy pro-Western Arab oil states held the key to Sadat's economic and security objectives. To explain the difference between Sadat and Nasser, one Egyptian diplomat noted that "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). Egypt's Foreign Minister, Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel, who resigned on the eve of signing peace accords with Israel, noted that Sadat "aspir[ed] to become not only America's ally, but also America's policeman in the area. He believed that the way to gain United States support and assistance was to adopt a firm and hostile attitude toward the Soviet Union and to assume on its behalf the role of confronting the Soviet infiltration in the Middle East and Africa" (Kamel 1986, 342).

In the 1970s, Egypt's access to oil-led growth also meant years of underdeveloped agriculture. Sadat's economic opening or *Infitah* show its impact when the Egyptian economy shifted to a rentier economy, opening the door for consumption rather than production. The resulting wealth boom occurred in construction, property speculation, tourism, and consumer imports, and rapidly reduced public investment in agriculture. As the government budget focused on the urban-industrial sector, "agriculture lost out in medium and longer-term investment, a reality reflected in declining productivity in the Nile Delta and steep rises in food imports" (Weinbaum 1985, 217). Remittances from Egyptian workers abroad, especially from those in oil states, "replaced cotton as the most important single source of Egyptian foreign exchange" (Richards 1982, 211). Hence, the growth, and diversification of external rent revenues led to a

relative agricultural decline. While agriculture remained the largest sector in employment (35 percent) and contribution to GDP (16 percent), it has declined in relative importance since the mid-1970s, when it accounted for 30 percent of GDP (Ali and Brown 1988, 34).

After Sadat, Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011) was mainly preoccupied with maintaining stability, regime security and his hold on power. This meant that Mubarak’s foreign policy was mostly directed at retaining the status quo within his regime and the region to foster the alliance with the US and meet the badly needed economic development at home (Shama 2013, 41-42). Although Mubarak was aware that Ethiopia developed master plans to dam the Blue Nile for irrigation and electric power following large scale droughts and famine during the mid-1980s, he neglected relations with Ethiopia where the Blue Nile originates. In fact, Egypt under Mubarak lost clout in Africa as the presidency showed little enthusiasm for the African Union (AU) and viewed Africa and the Nile basin through a security prism. After his attempted assassination in 1995, Mubarak stopped attending African summits, except for Abuja in 2005 (Landsberg and Van Wyk 2012, 245). During those summits, Ethiopia rallied upstream Nile basin countries to review the 1929 and 1959 Nile water agreements and obtains recognition of their right to demand equal share and utilization of the Nile. While upstream riparian states were effectively challenging the existing hydrohegemonic setting that has been in place for several decades, Egypt became inward looking. Mubarak became occupied with grooming his son to succeed him. The Egyptian leadership did not attempt to craft a new Nile basin foreign policy, thinking that upstream states were underfinanced and unable to develop the infrastructure needed to increase their utilization of the Nile. It echoed what Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, Nasser’s confidant, once wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that, “fortunately, with the political conditions, and technological limitations in Central and East Africa, this threat (tampering with the Nile) is unlikely to materialize (Heikal 1977, 715). Mubarak showed little interest in economic integration with African countries, particularly the Nile basin countries (Tawfik 2016). Hence, Egypt barely had any role in negotiations that led to the secession of South Sudan in 2011 that it had long opposed, fearing the threat to its water supply from the emergence of a new riparian state on the Nile. The loss of oil revenues resulting from the independence of South Sudan also meant that Sudan should increase agricultural productivity and, consequently, uses more of the Nile water flowing toward Egypt.

Meanwhile, a new order in the Nile basin based on power relations between the upstream and downstream states was in progress. Upstream riparian states increased their hydropolitical

cooperation in both legal and institutional terms, while Egypt refused to join new initiatives regarding the distribution and utilization of the Nile. This increased the collective bargaining power of upstream countries. The Nile basin Cooperative Framework Agreement, signed in 2010 by Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya, and Burundi, granted upstream states autonomy to begin Nile projects without Egypt's consent (Salman 2013). Egypt responded by freezing its membership in the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), which was formed, in 1999 to develop the river cooperatively. The NBI was the first cooperative agreement that included all the other riparian states along with Ethiopia and Egypt. By pulling out of the NBI, Egypt preempted the possibility of cooperation or negotiation with Ethiopia, which annually supplies more than 85 percent of Egypt's Nile.

Mubarak's last decade of rule saw mounting political disruption within Egypt that culminated in a nationwide uprising on January 25, 2011, ending his nearly 30-year rule on February 11, 2011. Mubarak's downfall ended a long period of autocratic stability and introduced a turbulent "transition" presided over by the armed forces. The ensuing chaos and failure of the Egyptian state to transform or reform its institutions provided little opportunity to conduct more active foreign policy in the Nile basin. Severe political and economic volatility and a restive population made Egypt more vulnerable to external intervention and dependence on its Gulf allies for its survival and security.<sup>5</sup> Since 2011, Egypt's priorities remained heavily inward-oriented, and the priority of regime security and leadership survival came at the cost of securing the Nile.

Almost 2 weeks after Mubarak's fall, Burundi joined the Nile Cooperative Framework Agreement, which Egypt opposed (*Ahram Online*, March 10, 2011). The most serious threat to Egypt was in 2011 when Ethiopia announced its plans to build the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the largest hydroelectric power project in Africa, located 20 kilometers from its border with Sudan. With a total storage capacity of 74 billion cubic meters (BCM), the dam will generate 5,000 to 6,000 megawatts, thrice more than the Aswan High Dam's capacity. For many years, Ethiopia had been preparing to construct a major dam. However, the announcement of GERD just 2 months after Mubarak's fall and 3 months before South Sudan's independence<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</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>6</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.

without consulting Egypt marked a radical change in power relations between upstream and downstream riparian states.

Following President Muhammad Morsi's ouster by the armed forces on July 3, 2013, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union suspended Egypt from participating in its activities until the "restoration of the constitutional order."<sup>7</sup> Hence, in negotiating an agreement with Ethiopia over the GERD, Egypt sought to win sympathy and support on the African continent for its position on the Nile issue and avoid being seen as overly against Ethiopia's right to development. On March 23, 2015, Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia met in Khartoum and signed a new legal document titled "The Declaration of Principles,"<sup>8</sup> which accepted the GERD project and gave Ethiopia the legal right and legitimacy to continue building the dam (Yihdego, Rieu-Clarke, and Cascão 2016). However, the agreement did not refer to the Nile Basin Initiative and lacked any mutually accepted mechanisms to ensure that each party will adhere to its terms. Notably, the agreement neither recognized Egypt's past "rights" (e.g., those claimed in the 1902 Treaty and other treaties) nor any defined water allocation or distribution policies with Ethiopia and Sudan after the GERD's completion. Crucially, no clause assured Egypt of the amount of water it presently uses, which is closely linked to its food and agricultural security. 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.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper examined the nexus between the political economy of regime consolidation and Egypt's rise and decline as a hydrohegemon in the Nile basin. By tracing the objectives and policy priorities of Egypt's monarchical and republican regimes, this paper demonstrated that priorities of regime consolidation and leadership survival have informed the direction and character of their hydropolitics.

Egypt's rise as a hegemon in the Nile basin occurred during the reign of Muhammad Ali Pasha. For Ali, consolidating his powerful dynasty and centralized authority depended on his ability to boost agricultural production by securing the flow of the Nile and fully exploiting its resources. His dynasty's economic and financial systems depended on agriculture. Hence, his

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<sup>7</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>8</sup> See "Full text of 'Declaration of Principles' signed by Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia," *Ahram Online*, March 22, 2015.

realm's financial health rested on his ability to firmly control and manage Egypt's water resources and extract revenues from the sale of agricultural commodities to Europe to build a strong army. These enabled him to conquer new colonies and expand his export market and command over productive resources. Agricultural productivity was key to Egypt's economic progression and essential for sustaining and consolidating his rule. Therefore, Ali highly prioritized investing in the Nile to finance his projects. Territorial expansion into the lands of the White and Blue Nile was also crucial to obtain resources, limit the growing influence of European powers, and accelerate the broader industrialization of his economy. British colonial rule also favored Egyptian use of the Nile owing to their significant agricultural interests in the country. Egypt's agricultural productivity was key in maintaining Great Britain's global dominance in the 19th-century world's economy. Therefore, Britain consolidated their control over the Nile by securing water treaties/agreements with upstream states and European powers that assured Egypt "historic rights" to the Nile. By being in control of the Nile headwaters, the British also strengthened their hegemonic position within Egypt to maintain the political stability of their colonial rule.

However, the place of the Nile in the political economy of the postcolonial populist republic of Egypt would witness a radical change. This is because the security of the ruling elite and power consolidation would be tied to peasants, workers, industrialists, and the quest for hegemony in the Arab world. To consolidate his rule, Nasser separated from the modern concept of the Nile Valley unity and reoriented his politics toward Arab nationalism, the regional politics of the Middle East and Arab-Israeli conflict. To weaken the power of the previous regime's notables, his policies aimed at redirecting capital from agriculture to industrial investment. Nasser's consolidation of power did not involve augmenting the water supply from the Nile River to boost agriculture production and finance his grand development projects. Agricultural reform was an important populist policy, but agriculture was *not* an important source of revenue for the republican regime. He generated revenues by nationalizing the Suez Canal in 1956 and foreign assets and securing foreign assistance from the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Furthermore, grand development projects (e.g., Aswan Dam and land reclamation schemes) enabled Nasser to construct and maintain patronage networks that linked the military to public sector companies and allocated lands to the rural, capitalist middle class, the main base of his regime. By constructing the Aswan High Dam, Nasser secured the Nile within Egyptian borders. Conversely, this also meant that Egypt no longer sought to chart a water policy beyond its borders

to secure the constant flow of the Nile from upstream states. The ruling regime's dilemma was that it wanted to control the Nile within Egypt's border without presence or legal agreements with the upstream states.

Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, transitioned Egypt from authoritarian socialism to a rentier economy heavily reliant on foreign aid, tourism, worker remittances, and oil revenues. In the 1970s, Egypt's access to oil-led growth also meant underdevelopment in agriculture and Nile-based irrigation schemes. Remittances from Egyptian workers abroad, especially from those in the oil states, replaced cotton as the single most important source of Egyptian foreign exchange. After Sadat, Hosni Mubarak was mainly preoccupied with maintaining regime security and his hold on power. He showed little enthusiasm for the African Union and viewed Africa through a security prism, particularly after the assassination attempt on his life in 1995 in Addis Ababa. After Mubarak's downfall in 2011, the Egyptian leaders' priorities remained heavily inward-oriented. The priority of regime security came at the cost of securing the Nile. The severe political and economic volatility and a restive population after Mubarak's regime increased the ruling elite's exposure to external intervention and dependence on their Gulf allies for survival and security. Hence, formulating a coherent foreign policy in the Nile basin is yet to receive sufficient priority in Egypt's foreign policy considerations.

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