

## EXPLORING THE NILE WATER DISCOURSE IN ETHIOPIA AND EGYPT: SECURITIZATION OR DEVELOPMENTAL?

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**Abstract:** *For centuries, the Nile water has been at the heart of deteriorated relations between Egypt and Ethiopia and, more than ever before, this tension has reached to its climax since the inauguration ceremony of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project. The objective of this article was, therefore, to critically analyze the Nile water discourse, in Egypt and Ethiopia, often leading to irreconcilable interests and, by so doing, to add some insights on its viability to justify the resource curse and resource scarcity literatures in the field of security and conflict studies. Through a qualitative document review and discourse analysis of the key speeches of state officials in Egypt and Ethiopia, it was found out that the successful securitization of the Nile water in Egypt and the ongoing securitizing move of the same water resource in Ethiopia has been further complicating the Nile issue by producing more irreconcilable interests and tensions among the riparian states. Therefore it is recommended that rather than pushing a merely water resource issue to the level of an existential threat it is better for the riparian states to primarily focus on improving the life condition of their people (human security) and such reorientation will ultimately lead to a sustainable win-win solution for the whole Nile basin states.*

**Keywords:** *Existential threat, human security, securitization, securitizing move, water discourse*

### Introduction

Water is one of the most abundant natural resources on earth and almost three-fourths of the planet is covered with water. But about ninety-eight percent of this water reserve is not usable (Wallenstein & Swain, 1997: 1). Only the remaining two percent is freshwater readily available for consumption. Even a large stock of this freshwater reserve is largely found in the permanent ice-covered and snow-covered areas (Tignino, 2010: 647). By extension, most of the fresh water resource readily available for consumption is found in freshwater lakes and rivers, which constitute only 0.26 percent of the freshwater reserve of the Planet. This indicates that, as theoretically supported by resource scarcity literature, river water is a very scarce resource and hence it has the potential to trigger violent conflicts between and among states. The Nile river system is formed by the Blue Nile from Ethiopia and the White Nile from Lake Victoria, which meet at Khartoum and finally empties into the Mediterranean Sea down through Egypt. Various sources show that the water share of the Blue Nile River and White Nile River – two major tributaries of the Nile – is eighty-five percent and fifteen percent respectively. By extension, the greatest volume of the Nile water is constituted by the Blue Nile River originating from the highlands of Ethiopia. The Nile is the longest river in the world that travels a total distance of 6, 825 kilometers from its source to its mouth; and it forms the third largest basin in the world, after the Congo and Amazon rivers (Arsano, 2007). It is shared by eleven riparian Sub-Sahara African countries and the Nile River is a major source of freshwater used for human consumption,

agriculture, and industrial purposes for these countries, particularly in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan.

However, the downstream riparian states – Egypt and Sudan – have yet enjoyed the greatest share (more than the rest nine upper riparian states combined) of the Nile water utilized for irrigation agriculture, generation of hydroelectricity, fishing, domestic consumption and industrial purposes. Beyond this hegemony in terms of actual water utilization, Egypt and Sudan have almost always claimed total control over the Nile water and, among others, this is clearly manifested in their repeated recitation of what they called ‘natural rights’ (mainly by Egyptians) and the 1929 colonial treaties and the later 1959 bilateral agreement between Egypt and Sudan as final and technically binding. As properly described by Cascao (2008), the lower riparian states, particularly Egypt, have historically a hegemonic position on the Nile water and this hegemony has very recently been challenged to some extent by Ethiopia and some other upper riparian states. This has ultimately been deteriorating the already strained diplomatic relations (and creating hostilities) between Ethiopia on one side, and Egypt and Sudan on the other. This tension between Ethiopia and the lower basin states has reached to its zenith with the first day of the inauguration ceremony of the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (hereinafter, GERD) project on the Blue Nile River on the 30th of March 2011. Egypt’s natural and historical rights assertion to monopolize the Nile water on the one hand and the recent Ethiopia’s move to the issue of ‘sovereignty right’ or at least the issue of equitable utilization of the Nile water on the other hand appears to further escalate their historically inimical relations ultimately leading to water wars.

The securitization of water sources has already been studied by some scholars in other contexts; but the securitization of the Nile water and the subsequent challenges this may pose a tough bar against initiating fruitful dialogue and negotiations leading to a sustainable win-win solution for the utilization of the Nile water is not yet well examined. It appears that all initiatives so far made to find political solutions to the Nile water issue have been ultimately failed mainly due to the securitization of the water. The fact is that in the context of securitization, political or any other soft solutions to any issue will be pushed off the table.

The objective of this article is, therefore, to critically analyze the dominant water discourse in Egypt and Ethiopia and the challenges associated with it by bringing the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School as an analytical lens and, in the process, to add some insights on its viability to justify the resource curse and resource scarcity literatures in the field of conflict and security studies. We argue that the resource curse and resource scarcity literatures in conflict and security studies are best explained by the Nile water than any other natural resource, at least in Africa.

To this end, document review and discourse analysis have been used as a principal method to understand the water discourse in Egypt and Ethiopia and then to draw conclusions and the way forward. In order to achieve this end, first, in addition to the natural and historical rights claims, the key speeches of Egyptian state officials across history have been critically analyzed and interpreted. Then, on the Ethiopian side, the key speeches of the Ethiopian state officials have been intentionally made since the inauguration ceremony of the GERD project in March 2011 because in line with the analytical focus of the article the ‘sovereignty right’ and subsequently the ‘securitizing move’ on the Nile water have begun to surface very recently along with the GERD project.

### **Analytical framework**

Informed by the Hobbesian conception of human nature, the traditional neorealist perspective considers conflict or war as an inherent human phenomenon and thus inevitable in human interactions. In this perspective, the international system is generally considered as anarchic, meaning the absence of international government or absence of "...international authority that can enforce agreements and prevent the use of force" (Glaser, 2013, p. 14). By extension, traditionally national security has been exclusively understood as a state's ability to survive in this "anarchic" and "self-help" international system (Kay, 2015; Šulovic, 2010). Accordingly, national security threats have been considered external in origin and militaristic in character (Glaser, 2013; Wing, 2000). Thus in this traditional school of thought the state was not only considered as the primary referent object or the legitimate entity to be secured or protected against any threat but also as the only provider of security. In order to achieve this end, building strong militaries (and economies) capable of averting external aggression was the main preoccupation of states.

However, at the end of the twentieth century, mainly in the 1990s, this traditional state-centric and territorialist understanding of security has been seriously challenged with the emergence of the critical schools of thought in security studies. The shift in the perception of threats and the referent object or unit of analysis has led to the widening (horizontal inclusion of threats) and deepening (redefinition of referent objects) of the concept of security. The critical school of security studies argues that states are not the only referent object and the only providers of security. This broadened and deepened conceptualization of security is mainly attributed to the intellectual contributions of the Copenhagen School. Conceptually, the Copenhagen School treats security issues as inter-subjective and socially constructed (Nyman, 2013). By extension, security issues or threats are not objective and external; rather they are constructed and determined by dominant actors through inter-subjective interactions. Hence, as stated by Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998), the Copenhagen School has deepened the conceptualization of security by including actors beyond the state as the referent object; and it also has broadened the traditional politico-military conception of 'security' by incorporating some sectoral issues such as political security, economic security, social security and environmental security into the security equation. Thus the issue of hydro-securitization seems to emerge from this broader understanding of the concept of 'security' by the Copenhagen School.

Securitization is understood as the process in which an issue moves from a non-political to politicized and finally to a securitized status through "discursive linguistic processes" (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998: 22). In this context, any issue can be politicized and it becomes a subject of public policy debate; but the issue will be securitized when a dominant actor who has the required authority, power and resource frames it as an existential threat to the referent object (Emmers, 2011). This means that a previously non-political issue can be transferred to a political issue and finally promoted to the level of a security concern or an existential threat (perceived or real) to the designated referent object through mere framing (ibid). A certain public issue gets securitized means that it is transferred to the level of above politics and hence it justifies the use of extraordinary measures to achieve it.

Securitization is also considered as a "speech act" (Nyman, 2013) and hence an issue can be linguistically portrayed as existential threat to the referent object through mere act of speaking. But the issue will be successfully securitized when it is acknowledged and

accepted by the respective audience after a series of strong public debates. Therefore, a securitizing move is different from successful securitization. This is particularly true in most of the western liberal democracies where respect for fundamental human and democratic rights and rule of law have been more or less well grounded.

However, mainly due to the nature of the state structure in Egypt and Ethiopia, unlike the western democracies, the difference between a securitizing move and final securitization may be insignificant. By extension, when a state actor in Egypt and Ethiopia frame or spoke of an issue as an existential threat to the designated referent object, it might be automatically securitized without any substantial public debate. It follows that in these two states the speech act as the first stage of securitization is sufficient at least for the designation of an issue as an existential threat to the referent object. In this case, speech act can be understood as a securitization move and an issue can be promoted from producing securitization to becoming a security issue through consent or coercion by the dominant actor. This shows the power of language (even simply mentioning) in the process of securitization of an issue. With this understanding, the following analysis was made to explore whether the Nile water has been framed by the Egyptian and Ethiopian state elites as a security issue or developmental issue by looking at the key speeches of top government officials across time and space in the respective countries. In order to achieve this end, the article was informed by the Copenhagen School securitization and de-securitization theory as an analytical lens to understand the Egyptian and Ethiopian dominant state actors' perception of threat (real or perceived) and subsequent securitization by bringing historical and recent developments on the Nile water into perspective. Accordingly, first the water discourse or the framing of the Nile water in Egypt is presented and this will be followed up by exploring the Ethiopian case.

### **Contesting discourses and practices in Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile**

The historical relations between Egypt and Ethiopia have been influenced to a greater extent by the Nile River. Such relations have often been characterized by suspicion and hostilities. In Ancient Egypt, the source of the Nile River was believed to have divine nature and for many years, most Egyptians believed that the source of the Nile is in the Egyptian soil. However, since the discovery of the source of the Nile, its relation with Ethiopia has become more hostile and suspicious. For instance, Egyptians long believed that Ethiopia could block the flow of the Nile water; and even the Ethiopian kings themselves were warning the sultanates of Egypt to divert the River as a means to stop the persecution of Christian Egyptian Copts (Erlich, 2001). On the other hand, Egypt has made repeated attempts to conquer Ethiopia and control the source of the Nile water. Even the conquest of Sudan by Egypt in the early nineteenth century was motivated by the desire to control the source of the Nile (ibid). Taking this brief historical context into perspective, let us look at the patterns of the Nile water discourse in Egypt and Ethiopia across time and space in the subsequent sections.

#### *The Nile water discourse in Egypt*

The analysis of the water discourse in Egypt has been made by bringing the natural and historical rights claims, the key speeches of dominant state actors, and the resource scarcity literature into perspective. Broadly speaking, in Egypt the water discourse over the Nile

relies on two grounds: viz., 'natural rights' and 'historical rights' claims and 'water scarcity.' The natural rights claims of Egypt on the Nile water have been made by citing its depiction by the renowned Greek historian, Herodotus, 'as the gift of the Nile' while the historical rights claims over the Nile have been made by taking the 1929 and 1959 colonial treaties as legally and technically binding. Egypt was depicted in the writings of Herodotus as 'the gift of the Nile' (Cascao, 2008) and this depiction has been used by successive Egyptian state elites to garner public support and to subsequently securitize the Nile water. Successive Governments of Egypt have used different tactics to ensure their monopoly over the Nile water. One of which was constructing historical and cultural identities (Gebresenbet & Yohannes, 2021) and state identity (Cascao, 2008) over the Nile and the other strategy was securitization. The claim that there is no Egypt without the Nile and vice-versa (Cascao, 2008) has been widely circulated by state officials and different media outlets to construct historico-cultural and state identities and to subsequently ensure monopolization over the Nile water for many years.

Furthermore, the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and the 1959 Bilateral Agreement between Egypt and Sudan have been instrumental to sustaining this ambitious claim over the Nile. The 1929 Treaty gave Egypt a veto over the Nile and thus any riparian country cannot utilize a drop of the Nile water without her consent. The 1959 bilateral agreement also rationed the Nile water between Egypt (75 percent) and Sudan (25 percent) alone. This claim is best described in Gebresenbet's and Yohannes's (2021: 5) words, "...zero water for the upper riparians." In recent negotiations with Ethiopia and other upper riparian states over the utilization of the Nile water, Egyptians have still stuck to this so called 'historical right' as technically and legally binding. Accordingly, the Nile is framed in Egypt's Foreign Policy and National Security Strategy as a matter of survival. This hydro-securitization provides (internal) legitimacy for Egyptian elites to take extraordinary measures - beyond politics - when they feel that their water security is gravely threatened. In line with this, a slight cursor into the key speeches of the officials of Egypt from Anwar Sadat to the incumbent, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, supports this position. For instance, in 1979 President Anwar Sadat stated that: "The only matter that could take Egypt to war again is water" (Kameri-Mbote, 2007: 1). Similarly, in opposition to the initial plan of Ethiopia to construct dams on the Blue Nile, Anwar Sadat also said: "We are not going to wait to die of thirst in Egypt, we will go to Ethiopia and die there" (Cropper, 2020: 1).

Similarly, in 1988, the former Egyptian Foreign Minister, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, also asserted: "The next war in the Middle East would be fought over the waters of the Nile, not politics" (Kameri-Mbote, 2007, p. 1). In a similar vein, President Mohamed Morsi also said: "If Egypt is the Nile's gift, then the Nile is a gift to Egypt...If it diminishes by one drop then our blood is the alternative" (BBC, 10 June 2013). Again, at the UN General Assembly held on 17 September 2019 the incumbent President, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, stated that "...The Nile water is a matter of life and an issue of existence for Egypt..." From a discourse analysis of the above speeches of Egyptian officials across history we can easily infer that Egyptian state elites have attempted to ensure monopoly over the Nile water by resorting to offensive realism. Through avowing the country's dependence on the Nile water for domestic consumption, irrigation agriculture, hydroelectricity, fishing, industrial purposes and by sensitizing their citizens' natural, historical, cultural, emotional and spiritual attachment to the Nile River they have successfully securitized the Nile water. By so doing, Egyptian state elites have mobilized their citizens to get determined to engage in

any action when they felt that their water security is threatened. In the speeches of all Egyptian state elites - from Anwar Sadat to Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, - violence or war is presented as the only available alternative, nothing else, on the Nile issue. Of course, for different reasons until very recently Egyptian monopoly over the Nile water has not been significantly challenged and changed.

*The Nile water discourse in Ethiopia*

The Blue Nile is the most popular river in Ethiopia. The Nile water discourse in Ethiopia has religious backgrounds. It is believed that from the four rivers that flowed from the Garden of Eden was the Ghion, which is considered by the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians as the source of the Blue Nile. They believe that Mary and Jesus had spent a night at one of the Islands of Lake Tana - the source of the Blue Nile - on their journey from the Holy Land to Egypt. It is also believed that the Ark of the Covenant was found in one of the islands of Lake Tana – the source of the Blue Nile River – before it was taken to Axum (Oestigaard & Gedef, 2011; Tafla, 2000; Tadesse, 2008). Historically the Nile water discourse among most Ethiopians was characterized by dissatisfaction over their failure to successfully utilize it. But very recently, this discourse has begun to change and Blue Nile (locally known as Abbay) is presented as "a symbol of the nation." It is portrayed in the songs as a symbol of unity and greatness and "the waterfalls panorama" become a symbol of the Ethiopian currency and assumes a symbol of the nation (Tafla, 2000: 155). Even in some parts of Ethiopia, the Nile water is worshiped as if it has divine power to heal from evil spirits. This suggests that Ethiopians, just like Egyptians, have religious, spiritual and emotional attachment to the Nile water. Beyond this historical and spiritual attachment, Ethiopia had not yet significantly utilized the Nile River water. But very recently it embarked on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project along the Blue Nile in March 2011. As security scholars say this significant event in the country alone may bring and justify a shift from normal politics to high politics. By extension, the beginning of the construction of the GERD on the Blue Nile may bring and justify a significant shift in water discourse in Ethiopia from normal politics to high politics or securitization. Accordingly, as a manifestation of this shifting water securitization discourse across time and space, the key speeches of Ethiopian state officials about the Nile River in general and the GERD in particular have been analyzed.

Accordingly, in the cornerstone laying ceremony of the GERD on the 30th of March 2011, the late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, had said: "No one can stop us from utilizing our rivers...Although we are poor, we are ready to pay any sacrifice...". He also told to the Al Jazeera English on 23 May 2010 that Egypt's attempt to stop Ethiopia from using its own water has become history. He added that it is wrong trying "to stop the unstoppable." In his speech, the late Prime Minister clearly noted that the Ethiopian Government is committed to engage with Egypt in every means possible.

The key speeches of the current PM, Abiy Ahmed, of Ethiopia over the Nile water also seems to share the perspectives of Meles Zenawi. In a recent parliamentary address, Abiy Ahmed affirmed his country's readiness to "mobilize millions" and go to war if the GERD project is threatened. Although the development discourse still persisted and affirmed by the Foreign Relations and National Security Policy and Strategy of Ethiopia, the key speeches made by the two successive prime ministers about the GERD have almost approached a securitizing move. This is simply because as developmental questions have

other alternatives, there may be no need for the Ethiopian state officials to use the terms “every option” and “to go to war” when the GERD (portrayed as a symbol of sovereignty) is threatened.

The previous prime minister of Ethiopia, Hailemariam Desalegn, has also depicted the Blue Nile as a source of national consensus and identity. He said: “There is national consensus among the Ethiopian people from north to south and east to west on the Abbay River and the GERD project about which even those who argue against us exactly knew it” (Ethiopian Television, 29 June 2013). It appears that the PM presented the GERD as instrumental to building a political community or citizens having a common identity. The idea that presenting the GERD as a symbol of unity and constructing state or national identity over it by the Ethiopian state elites is also shared among a number of scholars (Cascao, 2008; Gebresenbet & Yohannes, 2021). Moreover, on the Tenth Anniversary of the GERD, President Sahlework Zewde said that “It is a matter of survival and sovereignty to develop basins of the River Abbay.” She further noted that “GERD is a historic property of Ethiopians which they have been building it by sharing their wealth, time, labor and knowledge.” Again, on the first year filling of the GERD, the President declared that: “19 July 2020 will forever remain an historic day for Ethiopia and Ethiopians.” In line with the Copenhagen School conceptualization of securitization move, the President’s speeches obviously reflect a securitizing move over the GERD in particular. In her speech, the President promoted the GERD from a merely developmental issue to a matter of existential threat to the state; that is, from high politics to a more or less security issue which needs extraordinary measures when endangered. In short, the President portrayed the GERD issue as matter of sovereignty and survival of the state. In the Ethiopian Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy (FDRE, 2002) and also properly described by Gebresenbet (2014: S65) poverty is officially framed as eminent threat to the survival and sovereignty of the state and its citizens. In his addressing to the Parliament about the GERD in July 2020, PM Abiy Ahmed also said that “Unless we alleviate poverty and ensure prosperity, there will not be any difference between living and not living....” Indeed, it is poverty rather than the Nile water officially declared as a national security threat. However, from the speeches of the different government officials of Ethiopia about the GERD project in particular and the Blue Nile in general, it appears that there is a clear securitizing move in recent years.

#### *Challenges of hydro-securitization for utilization of the Nile water*

From the analysis presented in the above sections, we can infer that the utilization of the Nile water by riparian states has several challenges. The first challenge emerges from the historical and natural rights claims over the Nile were mainly by Egypt. Following the portrayal of Egypt by Herodotus as “The gift of the Nile”, Egyptian state elites presented the Nile as Egypt itself and vice versa. They argue that as ‘Egypt is the gift of the Nile’, by default the Nile is given to Egypt. However, this claim has counter claims by Ethiopians as well (Tadesse, 2008). In as much as (even more) Egyptians claim that ‘Egypt is a gift of the Nile’, Ethiopians can assert that ‘the Nile is a gift of Ethiopia’ and this assertion could be justified by the fact that Ethiopia is the source of the (Blue) Nile River. However, such monolithic assertions over the Nile water by both Egyptian and Ethiopian state elites can take them nowhere, except merely complicating and deteriorating their historically strained relations. For instance, regarding Egypt’s natural rights claims over the Nile water, Cascao

argues that: The assertion that ‘Egypt is the Nile and the Nile is Egypt’ entails two fallacies. Firstly, Egypt is not just the Nile, i.e. Egypt is not as dependent on the Nile as it used to be. Secondly, the Nile is not just Egypt; the Nile is an international basin shared by ten riparian states (Cascao, 2008: 19). In the same vein, the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, also once said: “I know that some people in Egypt have old-fashioned ideas. Old-fashioned ideas based on the assumption that the Nile water belongs to Egypt and Egypt has the right to decide as to who gets what on the Nile water” (Al Jazeera, May 23, 2010). Meles Zenawi strongly protested against the "No Nile, No Egypt" assertion by saying: “The Egyptians have yet to make up their minds as to whether they want to live in the twenty-first or the nineteenth century ...” (Al Jazeera, December 9, 2013).

The same holds true for the Ethiopian state elites’ counterpart as well. The ‘natural sovereign right’ thesis very recently brought onboard by the Ethiopian state elites to challenge the Egyptian assertion needs to be critically evaluated in the context of existing international legal regimes and norms supposed to govern international rivers. Being the source of the Nile River many not exactly mean enjoying monopoly or control over the water resource by endangering the water needs of other riparians.

The second challenge emerges from the ‘historical right’ found in the 1929 colonial agreement, which gave Egypt the right to veto any project on the Nile. The colonial agreement generously guaranteed Egypt the right to decide on how to use the Nile water although, in reality, it does not contribute even one drop of water to the River. The 1959 bilateral agreement also gave the entire Nile water for Egypt and Sudan alone. Egypt has still stuck to these colonial treaties to continue as legally and technically binding. It appears that Egyptian state elites denied the fact that treaties can be challenged and changed any time in response to prevailing realities on the ground. In line with this, Erlich (2001) wrote: “In practice, however, the Egyptian interpretation of the “historic rights” concept is becoming less acceptable. There is a growing realization that Egyptian rights cannot exclude others” (p. 6). By recognizing the ‘equitable share’ thesis advanced by the Ethiopian state elites and the 1966 Helsinki Accords, Erlich (2001: 7) further noted: “The principle of equitable shares is indeed the polar opposite of historic rights.”

The third challenge emanates from hydro-securitization or the delineation of the Nile water as a national security issue in Egypt. The natural and historical rights claim and the subsequent securitization of the Nile water have elevated a mere water issue to the level of an existential threat for Egypt. By extension, such Egyptian state elites’ portrayal of the Nile water as an existential threat or as an issue of national security puts the water issue beyond politics, which requires extraordinary measures. This situation, among other things, gives no room for peaceful dialogue and negotiation so as to reach to a sustainable win-win solution with the upper riparian states.

The fourth challenge emerges from very recent developments in Ethiopia. In reaction to the Egyptian historical and natural rights claims over the Nile water, the Ethiopian state elites have brought the issue of ‘absolute territorial sovereignty’ (Arsano, 2007: 30) and securitization into perspective. In Ethiopia, particularly in recent years, the Nile water, particularly the GERD, has been pushed beyond normal politics by state elites. This securitizing move in Ethiopia – over the already securitized Nile water by Egypt – would further complicate the historically strained relations and recent tensions between these two riparian states. The successful securitization of the Nile water by Egypt and the recent securitizing move by Ethiopia means that any action that endangered (perceived or real)



their water security will be considered as an existential threat to national security and consequently, state elites in these two countries may decide to go to water wars at any time. The possibility of water war between these two states should not be undermined. Beyond the securitization thesis, a number of scholars (for instance, Gleick, 1993; Starr, 1991) also affirmed the possibility of major conflicts over water resources. In the words of Gleick: "Water already contributes to conflicts among nations, and future conflicts over water are increasingly likely. Nations fight over access to water resources...and use water-supply systems as instruments of war...." (Gleick, 1993: 111). However, in arguing against the mythical assertion and the subsequent securitization of the Nile water, the Egyptians concern for water scarcity should not be undermined. Beyond the support by resource scarcity literature, there have been real declines in the volume of the Nile water reaching to the lower riparian states (Egypt and Sudan). In line with this, Paisley and Henshaw (2013: 3) reported that repeated measurements conducted over Lake Nasser showed that the general inflow from the Nile River has gradually declined. Similarly, Gleick (1993) also showed that in the Middle East countries and beyond, water consumption is much faster than the natural replenishment level.

### **Conclusion and implications**

The rivalry between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile water is generally grounded on two polar opposite principal claims: namely, the 'historical and natural rights' thesis by Egypt and the 'absolute sovereign rights' and 'equitable water share' thesis by Ethiopia. The political elites of the two countries have constructed own defined narratives and counter narratives instrumental to securitizing the Nile and ultimate control over its water. Egypt has securitized the Nile water in its foreign policy and national security strategy so that the Nile is presented as an issue of life and death. Therefore, any threat (perceived or real) to this water source is considered as a threat to its national security. That is why successive governments of Egypt have demonstrated their commitment, at least in rhetoric, to go to war when their principal water source is threatened. The public speeches of the dominant political figures of Egypt from Anwar Sadat to the incumbent Abdel Fattah el-Sisi are cases in point.

On the other hand, in Ethiopia, until very recently, it has been poverty rather than the Nile water resource officially framed by political elites as a national security threat. However, a discourse analysis of the key speeches of dominant political figures in Ethiopia across time and space showed that there is a securitizing move (not actual securitization) over the GERD Project. The available security studies literature indicates that this securitizing move alone (without successful securitization) can deteriorate international relations between and among states. Beyond this, in Ethiopia the distinction between securitizing move through speech acts and actual securitization may be insignificant. For instance, before its official declaration as a national security threat in the Ethiopian Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy document, 'poverty' was iteratively portrayed by the late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, as a major national security threat to Ethiopia and, by so doing, he moved 'poverty' from a mere developmental issue to a national security agenda in 2002 without any significant public debate.

Accordingly, this article argues that the actual securitization of the Nile water by the Egyptian officials and the recent securitizing move by Ethiopian political elites may

produce even more irreconcilable interests and tensions over the utilization of the water resource. In the end, hydro-securitization may be an eminent threat to the security of the designated referent object (Egypt's and Ethiopia's national security) itself. For instance, the securitization of poverty by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) led Government and the subsequent displacement of people in the suburbs of Addis Ababa on the eve of the 2018 'political reform' has led to mass protests and violence resulting in regime change and the subsequent current state insecurity. Similarly, for Egypt hydro-securitization may put its national security in the hands of other states (mainly Ethiopia) because practically the Nile water and its source are not in its hands. By extension, in Egypt hydro-securitization appears to beg future water wars with riparians that could endanger its own national security. For instance, recent developments show that Ethiopia and other riparian states may follow a different epistemic position over the Nile water parallel to Egypt. The Ethiopian state officials' recent securitizing move on the Blue Nile water in general and the GERD in particular by bringing the 'absolute sovereign rights' claims may be considered as a balancing act against the Egyptian water hegemony. If Ethiopia and other upper basin states, just like Egypt, equally securitize the Nile water, there will be apparent symmetry of interests (of course, inimical) in the urgency of the need for the same water resource, at least in the eyes of an external observer. The Upper riparian states (including Ethiopia) could assume that third party negotiators often take sides with Egypt partly because the Egyptian claim has often been portrayed as a question of survival or as an existential threat whereas the Ethiopian and other upper basin states claims have been presented primarily as a developmental issue which could have alternative pathways. This is to mean that, for a genuine third party negotiator, while the Ethiopian and other upper basin riparian states developmental claim has alternative pathways other than the Nile water (big dams like the GERD and large scale agricultural projects), the Egyptian national security or existential threat claim would not have such options. Apart from the geopolitical interests of the Western European states, the United States and the Arab world and the hard power and soft power supremacy Egypt has claimed over other riparian states, the upper riparian states may begin to think that its hydro-securitization policy has helped her any peaceful resolution efforts to sway in its favor and therefore they opt to follow the same strategy. Therefore, rather than elevating the issue of the Nile water to the level of national security or existential threat it would be better for Egypt and other upper riparian states (particularly Ethiopia) to focus primarily on human security. That is, rather than pushing their claim over the Nile water to the level of beyond politics and/ or national security threat, they should focus on how to improve the life condition of the people in the River basin. It is only through this path that peaceful dialogue and negotiations leading to a sustainable win-win solution not only for Egypt and Ethiopia but also the whole Nile basin states will be envisaged and achieved.

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