

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Waiting for the Deluge

by Jon B. Alterman

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In a region that already has enough conflicts, another one is brewing, and it comes from a surprising source: the Nile. The river that witnessed history from the pharaohs through the Bible and on to the nationalist revolution of 1952 seems poised to enter a new phase, and there may not be enough water to go around.

Egypt's history is intimately tied to the Nile. A country with very little rainfall, its agriculture was long reliant on the river's annual floods. Through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, public works projects helped regulate the floods, and with the completion of the High Dam at Aswan in 1970, the floods ended altogether.

Throughout much of the same period, Western powers worried that Egypt's growing population was straining against limited resources. Grinding poverty among millions of peasants kept the country on the verge of catastrophe. The floods, like any natural phenomena, were variable, and in weak years, disease and starvation took a devastating toll.

For that reason, when Britain helped draft an agreement to regulate the waters of the Nile in 1929, it gave the lion's share of the resources to Egypt. Britain had played an intimate role in the country's politics since 1882, when it moved in troops to secure debts and ensure the security of the Suez Canal. Much of the British Empire's Middle East operations were run out of Cairo, and it seemed only fair to protect the interests of a cosmopolitan capital under British control than to concede to the interests of the lightly populated, largely rural African colonies to the south.

Under an updated 1959 agreement over the Nile waters, Egypt secured the right to use 55.5 billion cubic meters of water every year, and Sudan gained the right to use 18.5 billion cubic meters. There is little other flow (once accounting for evaporation), and other countries in the Nile Basin, including Ethiopia and Kenya, secured no rights. To the contrary, earlier agreements generally barred

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Jetting About, on a Budget

While the Middle East has a growing reputation for luxury airlines, low-cost carriers are grabbing an increasingly large share of the travel market. Air Arabia, based in the emirate of Sharjah, burst onto the scene in 2003; now, nine low-cost airlines in the Middle East carry more than seven percent of the region's air travel. In countries such as Kuwait, budget-friendly Jazeera Airways has eclipsed the national carrier, Kuwait Airways, in terms of passenger traffic out of Kuwait International Airport.

The new carriers boast a varied clientele, from businessmen to vacationers, and from diplomats to laborers. They not only attract the occasional traveler, but with fares often below \$100 each way, it is now relatively easy to work in one country while maintaining a family in another.

For many, the low cost-carriers are a necessity, not a luxury. More than 2 million Indians work in the UAE alone, and the budget fares mean that family members can see each other more than once a year. Air Arabia flies more than 100 flights to India every week out of Sharja—a third of its global routes—and it has a more comprehensive network of Indian destinations than any other international airline.

And it goes both ways. More than half of the international flights of India's biggest low-cost airline, Air India Express, fly directly to the UAE. The world's largest low-cost carrier, Malaysia-based Air Asia, is building an Abu Dhabi hub. ■ DC

NATO and Gulf Security

Jon Alterman delivered the [keynote address](#) at a NATO Defense College conference on "NATO and Gulf Security," held in Rome on December 2, 2009. He argued that observers have persistently overestimated the fragility of the Gulf and consistently expressed fears that external powers would withdraw and leave the region in chaos. He cited a 1968 CSIS study on Gulf security in anticipation of Britain's withdrawal that made a number of dire predictions that did not come to pass. Alterman suggested that the U.S. security presence is likely to endure for some time, in part because of the enduring importance of the Gulf's oil reserves, and in part because no power or collection of powers could provide the security that the United States military does. ■

their taking any action that would affect the Nile waters. At the time, the consequences were not catastrophic, as much of their agriculture was located in lush highland areas, and irrigation and land reclamation were low priorities.

The world has changed in a half century, and the 1959 agreement is looking tattered. Billions of dollars in foreign direct investment are flowing into Kenya and Ethiopia for agricultural projects, and much of it is coming from the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Rather than continuing to promote agricultural projects in their own deserts, Gulf Arabs are investing in agribusiness overseas, thereby guaranteeing food security and avoiding activities that further strain their limited water resources. The consequences have been dramatic. Foreign investment in Ethiopia's agricultural sector increased more than 25 times from 2000 to 2008, and now totals over \$3.5 billion.

It is in this investment that the seeds of the coming conflict lie. The seven upstream countries where the Nile originates see a huge development opportunity. Harnessing the river could irrigate new crops, feed millions and generate electricity to power homes and industry. Indeed, water projects could do for them what water projects have done for Egypt for a century and a half and be an important spur for economic development. The availability of Arab capital now makes that demand more urgent, and it makes possible plans that might not have been imaginable a decade ago.

Yet, Egypt has refused to relinquish its rights to the Nile waters. Egypt fully uses its allotment, and there is no more to give. There is no mouth of the Nile River in Egypt; instead, it meanders into small lakes and tributaries in the Nile Delta and simply peters out.

For more than a decade, the international community has supported the Nile Basin Initiative to promote agreement on the Nile Waters. Meetings of experts, ministers, and non-governmental officials have been unable to bridge the gaps between growing needs and limited resources.

In point of fact, the common interests are vast. Deforestation and erosion in the African highlands not only threaten their own agriculture, but also the river's flow downstream. Meanwhile, Egypt's network of irrigation ditches has both saturated the soil and raised its salinity. All parties can do a great deal, but it will be expensive, and the benefits will need to be shared.

The international community has done a great deal to highlight the challenge of the Nile waters, and it has established a structure to deal with them. Should the states take steps to improve water management, there seems little question that technical expertise will not be in short supply. But the states themselves are too passive. When outsiders talk of improvements in this region, the response is often to expect those outsiders to pay for them. More than a half-century of donor assistance has bred dependence rather than prosperity. The pattern is not sustainable. The problem belongs principally to the affected countries of the Nile Basin, and if they forestall agreement, it is not hard to imagine that the resultant conflict will be real and sustained.

The most intriguing role to be played here is that of the Arab states that are keen to invest in African agriculture. Their close relations with Egypt, their economic interest in spurring East African agriculture, their deep pockets, and their avowed interest in negotiation combine to present an opportunity for action. A Gulf Arab investment in prospectively treating the looming conflicts over the Nile waters would make tremendous economic and strategic sense, but it would have to represent a departure: the Arab position would have to be more than merely supporting the Arab League members—Egypt and the Sudan—against outsiders, and instead be an active mediation. The role is there to be taken. Whether there is an appetite to take it is another question. ■ 12/14/09

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman was quoted by the *Jerusalem Post* in "[US Urges Saudis to Back Negotiations.](#)"

Jon Alterman was [interviewed by Fox News](#) regarding a draft of an Iranian nuclear deal with the UN.

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