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Renaissance Dam – The Question of War and Negotiation

Dr. Essam Abdelshafy

Amid accelerated developments in the issue of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), against the backdrop of negotiation rounds held under the auspices of the United States during the period from December 2019 to February 2020, there has been controversy about the alternatives available to Egyptian foreign policy to deal with the crisis, and how far the military action may be used or the negotiation process may be maintained.

First: Military Action Scenario

This scenario is based on the possibility of an Egyptian decision to resort to carrying out a military operation targeting the countries that threaten its water interests, or precisely the dams that these countries are building, in light of a number of considerations supporting such a track, including:

- 1) Holding a comparison between the military capabilities of Egypt and other Nile Basin countries and checking the Egyptian superiority in this regard,
- 2) Making sure that the internal tensions afflicting some Nile Basin countries can constitute a cofactor that may enable the Egyptian regime to carry out a military operation, albeit limited, to demonstrate its deterrent capabilities in the face of threats, especially towards Ethiopia,
- 3) Egypt has the right to address any threats to its national security, including its right to Nile waters, according to multiple international legal frameworks that allow countries to use all possible tools they deem appropriate for the legitimate defense of their national security.

However, it can be said that this scenario faces many challenges, in light of the nature of Egyptian foreign policy trends in the current stage, where the current regime is still suffering from a legitimacy crisis, since it came via a military coup in 2013, and that Egypt itself suffers from a state of political instability. Also, the war option is not only related to the balances of military forces, but rather to patterns of regional and international interactions and existing alliances, and the position of the Egyptian regime on these alliances, especially in light of what can be described as a strategic alliance between Ethiopia and the United States and Israel, where the latter two are at the same time strategic

allies of the Egyptian regime and accordingly have many pressure cards to control its external movement, unless they push for such confrontation for destruction of the Egyptian capabilities, taking into account that Egypt will remain from the Israeli strategic perspective its first strategic enemy in the region.

Second: Negotiation Scenario

Egypt has announced keenness to enter into direct negotiations with officials of the Nile Basin countries, confirming its ability to settle the crisis through negotiations.

However, there are several considerations – as it is the case for any negotiations – that should be taken into account, including:

1- Political and economic concessions:

Egypt should realize that there is a set of political and economic concessions that it must make to the States Parties to the Nile Basin – because Cairo's negotiating position seems weaker than those of other parties – where such concessions may include recognition of the right of these countries to build local dams, provided that Egypt should provide technical and even material contributions in their construction, and recognize the rights of these countries to reconsider any upcoming agreements, provided that they ensure requirement of the equitable use of water, without interference from parties outside the basin countries. In this regard it is significant to indicate that the problem with respect to Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam does lie in the abundance of water, where the annual precipitation there amounts to about 800 billion cubic meters, while the share of all downstream countries does not exceed 10%, according to the highest estimates.

2- Multiplicity of negotiation levels:

The current GERD crisis is an international rather than a regional crisis, as it is not confined to the Nile basin countries, but extends to many other international and regional parties that have a role in conflict management, including the donor countries that provide economic aid to the Nile Basin countries and participate in their development plans, including dam projects, as well as a number of international economic institutions such as the World Bank, relevant African organizations, particularly the African Union, and relevant African economic development organizations, whose covenants

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emphasize respect of the signed agreements, even before independence of African countries, to ensure security and stability on the continent, which Egypt is now demanding.

3- External pressures on the Nile Basin countries:

When entering into serious, actual and constructive negotiations, the map of external interactions of the Nile Basin countries, their central political and economic relations, and the nature of pressures exercised on these states by external actors, both regional and international, that pursue achievement of special interests and goals – these elements must all be studied well.

In the context of these two tracks, several basic conclusions emerge, including:

1- The likely risks related to the fate of Egypt's share of water have not and will not end there, even if compromises are made with the Nile Basin countries to preserve Egypt's share or the greater part of it, especially that the problem is not limited to the region, but rather related to a global issue that is likely to cause future wars that could be more fierce than oil wars, power wars, or even military operations launched to test new types of weapons.

2- Egypt should realize the danger posed by existence of the Israeli variable in the equation and its strategic dimensions, especially that it stems from a security doctrine towards Ethiopia, in addition to the significance of water in Israeli thought that comes within the framework of the Israeli national security. Therefore, Israel moves to cordon off the Arab national security by targeting its water resources, with the aim of breaking the cordon imposed on Tel Aviv by the Arab world. In this regard, Israel adopts the cordon alliance theory, by establishing and boosting relations with the States surrounding Arab countries with the aim of creating a strategic depth for Tel Aviv; and therefore, Ethiopia has been a bastion of these Israeli moves.

3- The occurrence of a real problem, even if it comes on a gradual basis in Egypt's water share, means a real catastrophe, as it will certainly lead to destroying and freezing many agricultural and industrial projects, and conversion of thousands of feddans (acres), amid current problems of water shortage suffered by farmers who mostly do not find enough water for irrigation of their crops. Not to mention the additional fees imposed on the water bill, which would deplete the Egyptian society if the water crisis further worsened.

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4- There is an urgent need to address this issue as a top priority, because Egypt may become subject to bargaining from other countries seeking to obtain a share of the Nile water in twisted ways, most prominently Israel, which will seek "commodification of water" so that water becomes a commodity like oil, to be purchased by countries that suffer from a shortage of water resources.

5- There is an urgent need to strategically think of alternatives to water, because the future challenge seems great, not only with respect to water or food security, but also to human and social security, all of which are considered threats to Egyptian national security, if they are used as a pressure card for political bargaining.

6- The Egyptian government should adhere to the outcome of scientific studies and initiatives presented by experts and thinkers both from Egypt and from other world countries on management of the water crisis and the GERD issue, and focus on self-management of the crisis, as betting on regional or international projects in neighboring countries or in some Nile Basin countries makes the Egyptian decision dependent not only on the will of these countries, but also on the will of regional and international actors behind them.