



Academic Paper

The Israeli Strategy Towards the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam



Prof. Dr. Walid 'Abd Al-Hay

August 2020



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations - Beirut

The Israeli Strategy Towards the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

Prof. Dr. Walid ‘Abd Al-Hay

Introduction

The Zionist political literature, in general, views the Arab world in three dimensions: the Arab political systems, the Arab society and the Arab state. Since the Arab political systems are the shortest-lived among these three, the focus of the Israeli strategic perspective has been on the Arab society and the Arab state. Following the establishment of Israel, the Arab region has experienced a total of 54 coups and attempted coups, in addition to the change of rulers due to death or disease. The strategic political decision in the Arab political systems is based on the will and orientations of one individual or a limited number of elites. Israel’s interest was not to have a strategy based on the orientations and policies of the “individual ruler,” even when they were favorable to it, rather, Israel chose to keep the Arab countries weak, thus making the capabilities of any Arab ruler hostile to Israel negligible due to the weakness of his country.

Therefore, even if Israel considers the existence of a non-hostile ruler important to it, it keeps in mind that the high level of instability in the region may lead to sudden changes. Thus, if the state and society have sufficient strength and capabilities, the risk is high if a ruler hostile to Israel assumes power. However, if the state and the society are both weak, a hostile ruler would not lead to strategic shifts against Israel.

Based on that, Israel has the policy of keeping the state and society of Egypt (and the rest of the Arab countries especially the central ones) weak.



In this paper, we will demonstrate how Israel has implemented this policy when addressing crisis between Egypt and Ethiopia concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

First: The Israeli Contribution to the GERD Project

The Nile River has been part of the strategic Zionist thought since its early beginnings, as the idea of establishing Zionist projects with the aim of delivering the Nile water to

Israel started in 1903 through calls made clearly by Theodor Herzl, and the idea reappeared during the 1964–1974 period and again in the 1990s.¹

It is known that the issue of delivering the Nile water to the Negev in occupied Palestine was among the terms of negotiations in the Camp David Accords in 1978–1979. These discussions began clearly with the study of Elisha Kally in 1974 and the Shaul Arlozorov project in 1977,² where both are experts from the Israel



Elisha Kally

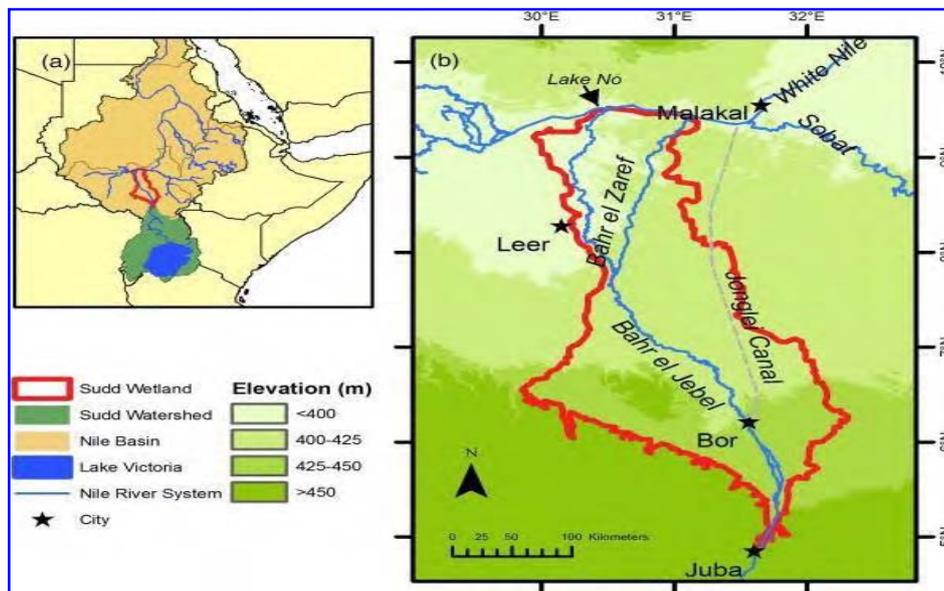
Water Authority. As a result of these ideas, the Jonglei Canal project in southern Sudan was proposed in order to compensate Egypt for the water that would go to the Negev, which resulted in many problems in southern Sudan.³ It ultimately contributed, along with other factors, to fueling the conflict in Sudan, which ended in the secession of the South, which ended up to be one of the closest African countries to Israel.



Shaul Arlozorov

We pointed out in a previous study to the clear interest of Israeli universities in the waters of Africa, especially those related to Arab countries, particularly the Nile basin countries.⁴ Israel considers the Nile a tool to pressure Egypt (by supporting projects of the basin countries that affect Egypt’s share of the river) and normalize relations with it, through joint projects that turn the Arab-Israeli conflict into a “non-zero sum game.”

Geography of the Jonglei Canal



Ethiopia stands at the forefront of the African countries that are of interest to the Israel. This is clear in Israeli propaganda, which has been focusing on mutual historical, modern and contemporary roots. It has pointed at the time of Emperor Haile Selassie (Lion of Judah), Benjamin Netanyahu focused on several dimensions of the bilateral relations in his 2016 speech before the Ethiopian Parliament (referring to King Solomon),⁵ in addition the propaganda has referred to population links (Ethiopian Jews in Israel are around 140–150 thousand).⁶ The Ethiopian-Israeli relationship has developed, when Israel provided military and technical support during the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict, and in the post-Cold War era. Thus, confirming the great Israeli interest in developing the relationship between Tel Aviv and Addis Ababa.⁷



Haile Selassie

Concerning the Israeli role in fueling the GERD issue between Egypt and Ethiopia throughout 2011–2020, we will discuss the following observations, while trying to understand the motives:⁸



PM Netanyahu addressing the Ethiopian parliament

1. Various sources confirm the presence of an entire floor in the Ethiopian Ministry of Water and Electricity where Israeli water experts reside, providing negotiating and technical expertise to the Ethiopian teams. This was confirmed by former Egyptian Irrigation and Water Minister Muhammad Nasr ‘Allam and



Muhammad ‘Ali Bilal



Muhammad Nasr Allam

reiterated by Sudanese officials involved in irrigation and water institutions. It was also asserted by General Muhammad ‘Ali Bilal in May 2013, referring to the presence of large numbers of Israelis working on the GERD, which is financed by Western bodies and the US (the World Bank, Italy, and the European Investment Bank), in addition to the African Development Bank, China and Israel.

2. There are Israeli companies, especially those related to the construction needs of GERD (such as Solel Boneh Construction Company), in Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, along with Agrotop for agriculture, CORE for electronics, Motorola Israel for electricity and water and Carmel Chemicals. Israel’s Gigawatt Global company had increased its investments in the energy sector in 2018 by \$500 million, a company that has relations with 10 Ethiopian universities. Also, there are ten other Israeli institutions operating in Ethiopia. Egyptian MP Ahmed al-Awadi confirmed that the Israeli activity in Africa, especially in Ethiopia, was meant to influence Egyptian interests, especially concerning Egypt’s share of the Nile, where Israel is supporting the GERD Project.⁹



3. The GERD project has actually started in 2011, the year the so-called “Arab Spring” began, where Egypt was at the heart of this development, preoccupied with its internal concerns and the turmoil of the entire Middle East region. In 2013, the Ethiopian Parliament approved a review to the agreements of distribution of the Nile water between the upstream and downstream countries, and in the same year, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Hailemariam Desalegn, announced that nothing would stop his country from completing the project and that Egypt would not go to war unless its leaders went crazy. Notably, the author of these lines has reviewed the announced Ethiopian quinquennial (five-year) plan 2010–2015 (that is, just before the start of the GERD project and just before the eruption of the Arab Spring), but he did not find any reference to this dam which, if implemented, would be the largest project in the quinquennial plan. Under a subheading “Implementation Strategies,” the plan referred to general topics such as irrigation and dam construction, and mentioned facilitating conditions for medium and large scale irrigation development (building dams and related infrastructure), while there are general references to the development of electricity.¹⁰ Notably, a high-cost GERD project (approximately \$5 billion) in a country whose population is roughly equal to the population of Egypt, but whose Gross Domestic



Hailemariam Desalegn



GERD Construction Site

Product (GDP) is 20% less than Egypt's, cannot be absent from a quinquennial plan. This suggests that political instability in Egypt in 2011 (which falls within the years of the Ethiopian five-year plan) has prompted Ethiopia to take advantage of the circumstances, especially since Israeli companies fueled this Ethiopian desire and at the same time they emphasized their role in distributing the electricity the dam will produce.¹¹ This means that the profound change of the Ethiopian quinquennial plan was part of taking advantage of the Egyptian turmoil in 2011.

4. During his visit to Ethiopia in July 2016 as part of a tour of East African countries, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that he was the first Israeli prime minister to visit Ethiopia, and affirmed Israel's readiness to provide technological aid to Ethiopia to complete its projects. Netanyahu focused in his speech before the Ethiopian Parliament on the agricultural sector, saying, "This is my vision for our cooperation: to have Ethiopian farmers enjoy the benefits of Israeli know-how, working together with us; **to have water channeled to every direction that you want.**"



Israeli PM and his Counterpart

5. After the escalation between Ethiopia and Egypt over the effects of the GERD, Israeli, Western and Arab reports in 2019 said that Israel has installed a Spyder-MR air defense system over the GERD to enable it to shoot down warplanes from a 5–50 km distance. Three Israeli companies, namely the Rafael Company that specializes in missiles, the MBT missile branch of the Israeli Air Force, and the Elta Systems Company that specializes in radars, have completed this defense system for Ethiopia.



6. There is a correlation between the Israeli support to GERD and the growing relations between the two sides. On the economic level, the trade volume between Ethiopia and Israel until 2019 reached about \$300 million,¹² while Israeli projects operating in Ethiopia until 2017 reached 187 projects mostly in agriculture.¹³ Security coordination between the two sides increased following the bombing of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, and after the attack on one of the major Jewish stores in Kenya by the Somali “al-Shabab”



The bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi

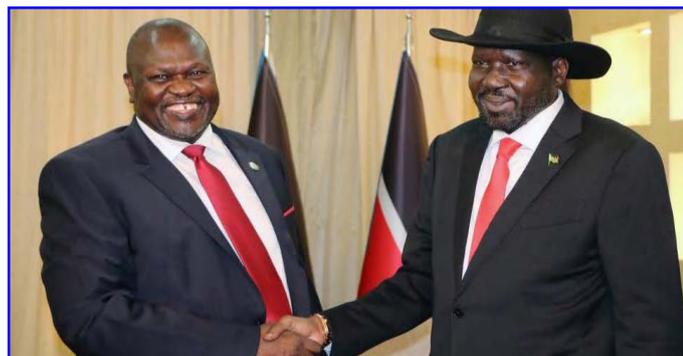
group in 2013. Israel understands the importance of Ethiopia, which overlooks the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea through which 20% of Israel’s foreign trade passes, not to mention the Nile headwaters. All these are strengthened by the bilateral cooperation in military industrialization and training. These relations are part of an accelerated Israeli activity in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. This was clear in 2016, when Netanyahu visited Ethiopia, accompanied by representatives of about 50 Israeli companies, and in which agreements were signed (agriculture, tourism and investment). He also visited Kenya and

signed agreements concerning health, irrigation, agriculture and immigration. Furthermore, it was agreed that Israel would open an office for development cooperation with countries in the region. Since 2007, Israel has irrigation projects in Rwanda with the Israeli Ebony company, while in 2012, Germany, Kenya, and Israel signed a cooperation



Lake Victoria

agreement to purify the waters of Lake Victoria (an area of 69 thousand km²), which is an essential source of the Nile water. Israel has other roles in the region such as its role in the Eritrean-Yemeni conflict regarding the Hanish Island, besides its role in supporting the secession of South Sudan and supporting Silva Kiir in South Sudan against opposition leader Riek Machar, etc. This means that, in addition to the bilateral Israeli-Ethiopian relations, the growing Israeli interests in East Africa are pushing Israel to find a safe base for



Silva Kiir and Riek Machar



its movement there, and it appears that Israel is inclined to embrace Ethiopia as a pillar of this movement.

7. Media and political incitement against Egypt as Israeli newspapers have indicated that Egyptian water policies have harmed Ethiopian interests. The Times of Israel, for example, has stated in one of its articles that the consequences of these Egyptian policies have severely harmed Ethiopia over the decades, and that “Rich in water, Ethiopia has been legally bound not to use its water resources to provide for its population of 90 million — greater than Egypt’s — and has suffered long periods of drought and famine.”

8. Attempts to link the Egyptian positions on the dam to the Palestine issue. Some researchers expected that Israel would make conditions concerning its pressure on Ethiopia to ease the complications GERD has on Egypt, by making the latter increase its pressure on the Palestinians regarding the Arab-Israeli settlement or regarding some problems between the two parties.¹⁴ A study by the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) believes that the pragmatic diplomacy of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and his aspiration for international aid to solve its water problems open an opportunity for Israeli diplomacy to further normalize the Egyptian relationship with Israel, at the official and popular levels. Israel would expand its cooperation with Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority to promote the idea of converting the Arab-Zionist conflict from a zero-conflict to a non-zero-conflict.



Second: The GERD Dangers on Egypt’s National Security

Most studies indicate that Ethiopia’s attempts to play down the dangers of the dam are due to the advice of Israeli experts. The Israeli International Cooperation Agency, MASHAV, noted on its Facebook page, on 3/12/2019, that 20 Israeli experts in the field of water and agriculture were participating in providing expertise to Ethiopia in this field.¹⁵ The majority of Egyptian experts, along with other experts, confirm the major potential risks to Egypt, which are represented in the following:¹⁶

1. Since the dam is built in seismically active region, the possibility of its collapse due to an earthquake greater than 4 degrees on Richter scale may flood large areas of Egypt and Sudan (the dam is only 40 km from its borders), causing immense human losses among the Egyptians and Sudanese. According to the American plans, dating back to 1964 through the US Bureau of Reclamation, the area where the dam will be built is characterized by geological fragility, which makes it less able to withstand the storage of

more than 11 billion m³, given that it is an extension of the Great Rift Valley.¹⁷ This might have prompted Egyptian experts to call on Ethiopia to reduce storage from 74 billion m³ to less than 30 billion m³.¹⁸

2. Egypt relies on the Nile to secure 80–85% of its water, and experts estimate that filling the GERD within 3–5 years would cause a 20% decline in Egypt’s share of 55.5 billion m³ according to the 1929 and 1959 agreements. Thus, it would lead to the deterioration in the Egyptian per capita water share from 2,500 m³ annually to 600 m³.

3. The filling of the GERD might cause the High Dam to remain empty for 12 years, throughout the entire Ethiopian filling period. There is a dispute between Egypt, which requests the dam to be filled within 10 years, and Ethiopia, which seeks to fill it within 3 years, which might lead to a series of major negative consequences, most importantly the following:¹⁹

a. The drying up of irrigation in a large area of agricultural land, which would lead to the reduction of crops that need large quantities of water such as rice. It is estimated that area allocated for this most important crop of the Egyptian food basket would decrease from 1.8 million acres to 724 thousand acres, which is about 40% of the current area in 2020.



- b. Decreasing groundwater level and Egypt’s loss of 11–19 billion m³ of water.
- c. Seawater overlapping with the water in the Egyptian delta leading to high soil salinity and making it less suitable for cultivation.
- d. Pollution and threat to fish wealth.
- e. Electricity decrease in Egypt by 25–40%.

4. Ethiopia’s continuation of its project may tempt the rest of the basin countries to build similar dams, thus exacerbating the aforementioned dangers on Egypt and Sudan, and plunging East Africa and the Nile Basin region into deep and devastating conflicts.

Conclusion

We pointed out at the beginning of this paper that Israel is “more” concerned with weakening any Arab state than weakening Arab regimes, notwithstanding the importance of weakening these regimes. For the change of non-hostile political system to a hostile one in a weak state will not be of strategic impact due to the state’s weakness. The growing strength of an Arab state technically, economically, militarily or socially is an asset to any political regime hostile to Israel. Accordingly, the real guarantee for Israel’s security is for the states to remain weak.

We believe that Israel is aware of the centrality of Egypt in the Arab regional system, and that if the regime in Egypt changes into a hostile one, and that if the state is strong, this will pose great security risks to Israel. Therefore, Egypt must be kept weak politically (by weakening its regional and international centralization), economically (by depriving it or affecting its main resources, including the Nile), and militarily by drowning it in internal confrontations (in Sinai), and on its borders with Libya and Sudan (around Halayeb and others), and with Ethiopia, etc.

Finally, in a dialogue between the former Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir, and former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Meir told Kissinger, “Regimes change in the Arab world. Suppose something happens to Sadat and someone more anti-Israeli and pro-Soviet comes to power? What happens then to all these agreements?”²⁰ This leads us to conclude that weakening the state is the most appropriate strategy despite the importance of weakening the regime.

Endnotes

- ¹ Ronald Bleier, “Will Nile Water Go to Israel? North Sinai Pipelines and the Politics of Scarcity,” Middle East Policy Council, no.3, vol. v, 1997, <https://mepc.org/node/4673>
- ² Elisha Kally, *Al-Miyah wa al-Salam: Wijhat Nazar Israeiliyyah* (Water and Peace: An Israeli Perspective), translated by Randa Haidar (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1991); Bassem Shaaban: The Nile and its Distribution Crisis, *Al-Jaish Magazine*, Lebanon, Issue 397, July 2018, See <https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/ar/content/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%87> and William Claiborne, Sadat Offers Israel Water From the Nile, The Washington Post newspaper, 7/9/1979, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/09/07/sadat-offers-israel-water-from-the-nile/c07ab59e-fde0-489c-88aa-24020196444e/>
- ³ Ronald Bleier, “Will Nile Water Go to Israel? North Sinai Pipelines and the Politics of Scarcity,” pp. 113–124; and Phil Finnegan, Egyptians dispute Sadat bid to give Nile water to Israel, site The Christian Science Monitor, 21/1/1980, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1980/0121/012150.html>
- ⁴ Walid ‘Abd Al-Hay, Trends in Political Science and International Relations Dissertations in Israeli Universities, site of al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, 5/6/2020, <https://eng.alzaytouna.net/2020/06/05/political-analysis-trends-in-political-science-and-international-relations-dissertations-in-israeli-universities/#.XzER51QzZhE>
- ⁵ PM Netanyahu addresses the Ethiopian parliament, site of Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7/7/2016, <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2016/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-addresses-the-Ethiopian-parliament.aspx>
- ⁶ Site of CNN, 4/7/2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/04/middleeast/ethiopia-israel-protests-analysis-oren-intl/index.html>
- ⁷ Michael B. Bishku, “Israel and Ethiopia: From Special to Pragmatic Relationship,” Conflict Quarterly journal, vol. 14, no.2, 1994, pp. 38-56.
- ⁸ Hani Raslan, head of Sudan and Nile Basin studies department at Cairo-based Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, and Haidar Youssef, the Sudanese Irrigation Minister, confirmed the existence of a special floor for Israeli experts. See Walaa Hussein, Is Israel key to solving Renaissance Dam crisis?, site of Al-Monitor, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fa/originals/2016/03/egypt-okasha-israel-ambassador-meeting-renaissance-dam.html>; Fahad Yasii, “Israeli Penetration into East Africa Objectives and Risks,” site of Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 29/9/2016, https://studies.aljazeera.net/sites/default/files/articles/reports/documents/3397a4faf65c48c8923d5ee0b8f06fdf_100.pdf
See also, Netanyahu’s speech before the Ethiopian Parliament on 7/7/2016, site of Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2016/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-addresses-the-Ethiopian-parliament.aspx>
Also: See also Israel denies providing air defense systems to protect Ethiopia’s disputed Nile dam, site of Xinhua, 23/10/2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/23/c_138494425.htm; Israeli finished installing advanced Spyder-MR air defense system for Ethiopia GERD, site of GMN’s Agencies, 10/7/2019, <https://www.gambellamedia.com/news/691-israeli-finished-installing-advanced-spyder-mr-air-defense-system-for-ethiopia-gerd>; Michael Bassin, Egypt’s Water War, site of The Times of Israel, 30/5/2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/egypts-water-war/>
Notably, an Egyptian studies center prepared a comprehensive 80-page report on the GERD, the Western role in it, its risks, the position of international law, the technical alternatives to the dam and its effects on Egypt and Sudan, without any reference in any way to the Israeli role. See Ahmad Amal (Editor), “The Renaissance Dam: Risks, Fallacies, Possible Partnership,” Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies, Cairo, 2020. (in Arabic)
See also Kirubel Tadesse, Vowing to build dam, Ethiopia ratifies new Nile water pact, The Times of Israel, 13/6/2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/vowing-to-build-dam-ethiopia-ratifies-new-nile-water-pact/>; and Ofir Winter and Yogev Ben-Israel, “Water in the Land of the Nile: From Crisis to Opportunity,” INSS Insight No. 1089, 24/8/2018, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/water-land-nile-crisis-opportunity/>
- ⁹ Site of Egypt Today, 5/1/2018, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/39410/Amid-tension-Israel-expend-investments-in-Africa>; and site of Egypt Independent, 23/10/2019, <https://egyptindependent.com/israel-reacts-to-reports-that-its-defense-systems-will-protect-the-gerd/>



-
- ¹⁰ Site of The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, Growth and Transformation Plan 2010-2015, Addis Ababa, September 2020, pp. 42 and 78, <http://et.chineseembassy.org/chn/jsfw/P020150216073959570262.pdf>
- ¹¹ Michael Bassin, Egypt's Water War, *The Times of Israel*, 30/5/2013.
- ¹² Site of International Policy Digest, 4/9/2019, <https://intpolicydigest.org/2019/09/04/ethiopia-and-israel-s-pivot-to-africa/>
- ¹³ "Israeli Penetration into East Africa Objectives and Risks," site of Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 29/9/2016, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/node/1485>
- ¹⁴ Evgeni Klauber, The Ethiopian Dam That's Strengthening Israel, 26/7/2016, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/israel-zionism/2016/07/the-ethiopian-dam-thats-strengthening-israel>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/MASHAVisrael/posts/welcome-to-israel-twenty-water-experts-from-kenya-and-ethiopia-are-participating/2634469419969660/>
- ¹⁶ GERD to collapse within years: int'l dam expert. Website of Egypt Independent, 1/11/2018. <https://egyptindependent.com/gerd-to-collapse-within-years-intl-dam-expert/>
- ¹⁷ Ahmed Amal (editor), "The Renaissance Dam: Risks, Fallacies, Possible Partnership," p. 38 and p. 41. (in Arabic)
- ¹⁸ Michael Bassin, Egypt's Water War, *The Times of Israel*, 30/5/2013.
- ¹⁹ Ahmed Amal (editor), "The Renaissance Dam: Risks, Fallacies, Possible Partnership," pp. 13-14. (in Arabic)
See The Ethiopian Dam That's Strengthening Israel, site of Mosaic, 26/7/2016, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/israel-zionism/2016/07/the-ethiopian-dam-thats-strengthening-israel/>; and Jacques Neriah, Will a New Ethiopian Dam Choke Water-Parched Egypt, site of Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA), 30/6/2019, <https://jcpa.org/will-a-new-ethiopian-dam-choke-water-parched-egypt>
- ²⁰ Edward Sheehan, "Step by Step in the Middle East," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 4, no.2, p. 218.