
Interview:
Mohammed Bahaa el-Din Saad

Solving Africa's Water Crisis

Bahaa el-Din is the Egyptian Minister for Water Resources and Irrigation. He was interviewed in Stockholm, Sweden, on Aug. 26, by EIR's Arabic language editor Hussein Askary.

EIR: We have the pleasure to meet with His Excellency Mr. Mohammed Bahaa el-Din Saad, the Water and Irrigation Minister of the Republic of Egypt attending the World Water Week in Stockholm, Sweden. First I'd like to welcome you here, in Sweden.

Mohammed Bahaa el-Din Saad: Thank you very much.

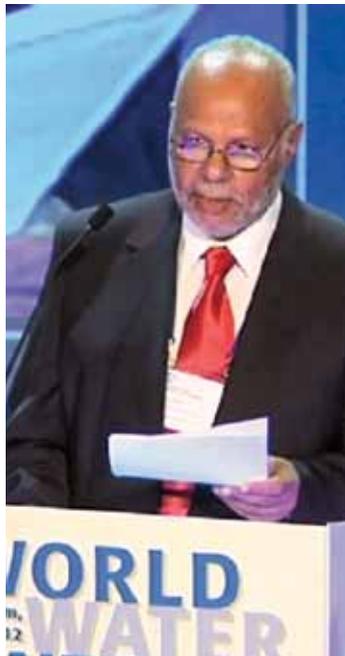
EIR: I have two brief questions. One is, what is your vision for solving the water crisis in North Africa and the Middle East, but specifically in Egypt, where you are most active?

Bahaa el-Din: My vision for solving the problem of water crisis is going in two main approaches. One is an internal approach, and the other one, is the external approach. The internal approach includes desalination of water from the sea, and also rationalizing the use of the water and maintaining it from contamination, and reclaiming the water and reuse program. We have been engaged in a huge program in Egypt, where 22 billion cubic meters [bcm] per year, have already been reused three times. Of course, we have some other problems, such as not cultivating crops which already consume much water, such as rice, sugar cane, and banana, and some other crops. We are trying to get the most economic value from water, by the drip irrigation of crops.

We also have to improve and strengthen our relationships with the neighboring countries, not only to maintain our quota from the Nile water, but also to capture the water and consult with Sudan, help Sudan, and

others in the area in the Nile Basin, in order to increase our quota from the Nile water [from the Nile Basin water-sharing international agreements—ed.]. Because Egypt, unfortunately, is located in the very arid belt of North Africa. So we have no rain; the groundwater we have is fossil groundwater, which means if we withdraw any quantity, there's no recharge.

So, the rational use of water—this is the main project we are progressing in, to save water; we also encourage, of course, using technology which enables us to save more.



Nuclear Power for Desalination

EIR: There have been plans by previous Egyptian governments to have nuclear power as a source for the energy to desalinate water. Is that still the case?

Bahaa el-Din: Well, it's still valid. Although the Cabinet changed about one month ago, the option is still valid. And I think there is no other alternative. We have to do it, because our hydropower has been utilized completely, nothing more can be generated. Of course, what we have is thermal power stations which consume fossil energy. Therefore, we have to increase our capacity from renewable energy,

like wind and hydropower. Hydropower, as I said before, is finished, so we have to consider wind power generation, and also atomic power generation, in order to find a cheap source for power to desalinate seawater.

EIR: In the final session, which you chaired, of the African Focus Day and the African Ministers Committee on Water (AMCOW), you said that national missions should be embodied in the African visions.

Bahaa el-Din: No, they should match with that vision.

EIR: Now, there are certain ideas for the integration of the African continent, both with water projects, like the Transaqua—bringing water from the Congo Basin to Chad, to refill Lake Chad; there are also ideas to bring water from either the Congo Basin or the Great Lakes to Egypt. These look like major projects, but they

are important for the integration of the African continent, economically and politically, in solving political problems. There are also railway projects to connect all of Africa, but also to connect Africa with the Mediterranean.

What is your view of these major transcontinental projects?

Bahaa el-Din: Well, I agree with having a network for unity, to find a proper way to establish a railway transportation between African countries. But to transfer water from the Congo Basin to the Nile Basin, it will be very costly and a very great engineering problem, because of the topographics of the area. So the water always came from the high to the low; so how can we take it from the high, to high? This is the problem.

But we have opportunity. As I said before, the quantity of rainfall which already exists on the River Nile Basin for the catchment area is about 1,000 bcm. If the water is managed adequately, by building water infrastructure for example, the amount of water in the Nile River would increase significantly. A large amount of water in the Nile Basin is lost due to evaporation, especially in the swamp areas in the Sud, in South Sudan.

As for Lake Chad, it is very important to look at the real solutions for this problem of the drying of the lake, and whether these solutions include bringing water from the Congo should be studied carefully. But there are other political issues in that region that have to be resolved, in order to start such projects, because all these projects are transnational and regional issues.

The Jonglei Canal

EIR: Is the building of the Jonglei Canal still on the agenda of the Egyptian government?

Bahaa el-Din: Yes, of course. The Jonglei Canal is a strategic project for Egypt's water security. It will benefit Egypt, but also South and North Sudan. We are still speaking about it with the government in South Sudan, and as you may know, 75% of the canal was actually accomplished, and only 25% of it was remaining when the civil war in Sudan broke out in the 1980s. So this will capture 4-5 billion cubic meters in the first stage, and 8 billion cubic meters in the second stage, and this is of benefit for Egypt and Sudan. So the Jonglei Canal project is still alive and we are waiting for the proper time to start working on action to redig the canal and complete it.

Hussein: Very good. Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions.