

**The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and geopolitical tension between Egypt and Ethiopia with Sudan in the mix**

Michael Asiedu<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi indicated in a televised broadcast on 16 January, 2018 that his country neither wants war with Sudan nor Ethiopia; Egypt was also not looking to meddle in the internal affairs of these two countries. These pronouncements came at the backdrop of what is proving to be a challenge for these three countries, the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the largest hydro-electric dam project in Africa. This policy brief gives a snapshot of the brewing tension surrounding the GERD and some of the regional geopolitical concerns as well as an alternative for a workable solution.

**The Nile River**

The Blue Nile takes its source from Ethiopia, however, it flows extensively through Sudan before it joins the White Nile and flow onwards into Egypt. The White Nile supplies Egypt with 15 percent of its water while the Blue Nile provides 85 percent.

During the period of colonialism little consideration was given to the potential repercussions of access to the Nile waters. Given its major tributaries rose in Lake Victoria which lies in Tanzania and Uganda, and flows through present-day eleven countries before its final discharge



<sup>1</sup> Michael Asiedu is a researcher at the Global Political Trends Center (GPoT) – Istanbul Kultur University, Turkey.

into the Mediterranean, an accord between all countries earlier would have averted much skirmishes. However, considering the priorities at the time, it was least surprising that Britain's 1929 treaty provided Egypt with near monopoly over the Nile waters with outright powers over all upstream projects.

Pursuant to the provisions of the treaty, in 1959 Egypt signed a deal with Sudan which ensured the two countries had access to 90 percent of the Nile Waters. Progressively, the eight other countries (Ethiopia, Rwanda, Kenya, Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan) that shared the Nile basin perceived Egypt's historic dominance of the Nile as unsustainable. For instance, Egypt's upstream neighbors were all experiencing rapid socio-economic development hence, the emergence of these regional powers led to the challenge of Egypt's control of what each viewed as its river.

### **The Nile Agreement**

The concerned countries brought into existence the 1999 Nile Basin Initiative which outlined a proposal to “achieve sustainable socio-economic development through equitable utilization of and benefit from the common Nile Basin resources” (Shay, 2017). Subsequently, a decade of negotiations resulted in six countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Burundi – then newly created South Sudan joined in 2012) along the Nile basin signing the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) in 2010.

The CFA was envisaged to replace the 1929 colonial agreement that apportioned absolute rights over the Nile waters to Egypt and forge a framework for cooperation among all ten member countries with access to the Nile basin water resources. Three countries proved hesitant in committing to the 1959 Nile agreement; while Egypt and Sudan refused their reallocation quotas of the Nile Water, Congo refrained from signing, thus, thrusting a new complexity into the already embattled access to the Nile water resources.

### **The Nile Water Exploration**

The US Bureau of Reclamation undertook a survey of the Blue Nile in the latter parts of the 1950s to earmark where a dam could be constructed to generate hydro-electricity for the region (Teller, 2018). The Ethiopian government under the tutelage of former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi pursued this project further forty years after and concluded that it was time to begin such a project in 2009 (Wuiberq, 2014).

A design for the dam was subsequently drawn by November 2010 and showed to the public on 30 March 2011 with Zenawi laying the first foundation stone of the dam – The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) a couple of days after. It is also argued that Ethiopia strategically took advantage when Egypt was rocked by the Arab Spring – Egypt dedicated much of its concern in addressing domestic issues, Ethiopia on the other hand unilaterally began work on the GERD.

## **The Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD)**

GERD will be the largest hydro-electric power plant in Africa. Upon completion its reservoir is estimated to take from 5 to 15 years to fill with water. In August 2017, the dam's construction reached 60 percent completion thus, reigniting tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile. It is located in the headwaters of the Blue Nile and envisaged to produce 6, 000 megawatts of electricity. The dam is projected to be completed by the end of 2018 with the testing of the first two turbines due in the near future.

### **Egypt's Stance**

Egypt is concerned that upon the dam's completion, specifically, during the elementary stages when the reservoir is being filled, it will receive less than its annual 55.5 billion cubic meters of water, its minimum quantity needed – the Nile supplies almost all of Egypt's freshwater. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has also asserted that the Nile was “a matter of life and death” for his country and that “no one can touch Egypt's share of the water”. He thus, called for the cessation of the dam's construction as a prerequisite for negotiations.

With Egypt's almost 100 million people and a nation dependent significantly on its agricultural sector, a lack of enough access to Nile water could prove catastrophic as the country is already experiencing water shortages. The dam earlier prompted talk of Egyptian military action in 2013 by then-President Mohamed Morsi who indicated “our blood was the alternative.” Current President Al-Sisi has nonetheless, recently announced a \$4 billion plan to build a desalination plant to provide fresh water for Egypt (Johnson, 2018).

### **Ethiopia's Stance**

Conversely, Ethiopia is adamant that the \$5 billion dam will not have any significant effect on Egypt's share of the Nile water even during the initial stages of filling the reservoir. It asserts that the realization of GERD was necessary in terms of Ethiopia's economic surge, it further opines that the dam is also a matter of life and death for it too. Ethiopia rejects Egypt's rights to 55.5 billion cubic meters of Nile water every year since this right originates from the 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan, an agreement Ethiopia is not party to.

### **Sudan's Stance**

With regards to matters pertaining to the construction of the dam, Egypt accuses Sudan of supporting Ethiopia. Egypt therefore proposed the exclusion of Sudan from negotiations surrounding the dam, however, Sudan stands to benefit from the construction of the dam as it would have access to electricity supply should the dam begin operations and also the reduction or prevention of flooding during rainy seasons by the Nile; a view equally buttressed by Issandr El Amrani, North Africa Project Director of the International Crisis group. Effectively on the issue of the Nile, while Egypt sees it as threat to its water interests, Sudan perceives it as an opportunity.

In other developments that add further tension to the issue of the dam, Sudan claims Egypt is behind rebel activities in its country, a claim which Egypt denies as it alleges that several Muslim Brotherhood members live in Sudan. In fact, relations thus far in 2018 have been relatively sour between Egypt and Sudan with ownership of the Hala'ib Triangle<sup>2</sup> another bone of contention.

In fact, disagreements of its ownership led to Sudan recalling its Ambassador Kamal al-Din Hassan Ali from Egypt on 4 January, 2018 for consultations without stating why (Abdelaziz, 2018). The Egyptian Foreign Ministry indicated it would “take appropriate action.” Subsequently, Egypt sent troops to a United Arab Emirates military base in Eritrea. Sudan responded by shutting down its border with Eritrea and sending troops along its border too.

### **Dialogue among the three countries – Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan**

Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan are yet to agree upon a framework to contain the impacts on downstream countries both during the early stages of filling the reservoir and also once the dam is in operation. In renewed efforts to address the differences surrounding the Nile made more pressing with the GERD, discussions were ushered in among the three countries. It was anticipated that the three countries would resolve their differences by 2015. Irrespective of this, the discussions came to a standstill in November 2017. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry however, visited Ethiopia on 26 December 2017 to reiterate his country's concerns (Dahir, 2018).

### **Regional Geopolitics**

Central to the tension among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan is also a wider regional conflict that pits Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other countries against what they allegedly view as Turkey's intrusion in the region. Turkey backed Qatar in its diplomatic stand off with other Gulf States and with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recently visiting Sudan in December 2017, it is alleged that Egypt is nervous especially upon Turkey being granted rights to Sudan's Suakin island, a port city on the Red Sea, raising an unfounded allegation that Turkey could build a military base there as the latter has done in Somalia (Al Jazeera, 2018).

---

<sup>2</sup> The Hala'ib Triangle is an area of land of about 20, 500 square kilometers on the Egyptian-Sudanese border. Both Countries have claimed ownership over it since Sudan gained independence from Britain in 1956. In the 1990s Egypt sent its military to the territory, however the next 20 decades witnessed a *détente*. Tensions surrounding the land reignited in 2016 when Egypt signed a controversial agreement with Saudi Arabia to hand over two strategically significant Red Sea islands, Tiran and Sanafir to the latter. The agreement reworked the maritime border between the two countries and unilaterally acknowledged Egypt's sovereignty over the Hala'ib Triangle. Subsequently, Sudan sent a letter to the United Nations registering its absolute objection of the deal between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to which Egyptian officials swiftly condemned the letter and re-emphasized the triangle as “Egyptian territory” (Adam, 2018).

In fact UAE's Foreign State Minister Anwar Gargash went further to indicate that the Arab world will not be ruled by Tehran and Ankara pursuant to President Erdoğan's visit to Sudan (Kadabashy, 2017). Egypt and Sudan also find themselves on contrary sides of a polarized Sunni-Arab world evidenced by the Qatar crisis. Essentially, Egypt vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates set out to convince African states to back the Saudi/UAE-led bloc against Qatar based on the alleged narrative that Qatar was a rogue actor and sponsor of terrorism.

Irrespective of this, Sudan refused to join this anti-Qatar campaign as it viewed close ties with all six Gulf Cooperation Council States including Qatar as beneficial to it. Emphatically, Egypt's inability to woo Sudan to back the anti-Qatar campaign was demonstrated when Qatari Chief of Staff Major General Ghanim Bin Shaheen al-Ghanim visited Sudan in December and held meetings concerning Red Sea security issues (Cafiero, 2018). Additionally since the beginning of the Libyan civil war, Egypt and Sudan have been opposing actors in that conflict with Sudan in alignment with Turkey and Qatar at the expense of Egypt and UAE.

### **Alternative for a workable resolution**

Given that the GERD is almost 60 percent complete and Ethiopia could begin filling it as early as this summer, there is urgency to reconvene a three-country joint committee with a neutral mediator, perhaps the African Union or the United Nations could step in to encourage a workable framework that will see Ethiopia fill the reservoir gradually over a 15-year period.

Should this option be pursued, it would limit the repercussions of the GERD on downstream countries not only Egypt. This would however, prolong the near and mid-term benefits of the dam, for instance, Ethiopia's anti-government protests beginning from August 2016 led to 10-month state of emergency. It is therefore difficult to envisage how long Ethiopia could be impressed upon to pursue a pathway that would lead to a gradual filling of the reservoir. Concerted efforts among all interested parties could yield a more positive framework, nonetheless.

It is projected according to experts that during the filling of the reservoir, Egypt's fresh water access from the Nile would be cut by 25 percent, this number would reduce significantly depending on if the concerned leading countries Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia are able to outline a pathway for GERD to be filled over a period of time rather than short-term filling. Failure on the part of Egypt to find a clear pathway in mitigating the impact of the GERD will see its water problems compounded in view of its surging population, rapid urbanization, climatic conditions alongside rising sea levels that result in saltwater intrusion into the Nile.

## References

- Adam, H. A. (2018, January 12). What is going on between Egypt and Sudan? Al Jazeera Opinion/Africa. Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/egypt-sudan-crisis-180110134022602.html>
- Abdelaziz, K., Awadalla, N. and Heavens, A. (2018, January 5). Sudan recalls its ambassador from Egypt amid tensions. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKBN1EU0M0-OZATP>
- Al Jazeera News. (2018, January 16). Sisi: Egypt does not want war with Sudan and Ethiopia. Al Jazeera. Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/sisi-egypt-war-sudan-ethiopia-180116074205823.html>
- Al Jazeera. (2017, December 24). Turkey and Sudan agree to boost ties in Erdogan visit. Al Jazeera News/Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/turkey-sudan-agree-boost-ties-erdogan-visit-171224191503361.html>
- Cafiero, G. (2018, January, 8). ‘Water war’ escalates between Egypt, Sudan. Al-Monitor. Retrieved from <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/01/egypt-sudan-tensions-nile-river-turkey-island-red-sea.html>
- Dahir, L. A. (2018, January, 17). A major geopolitical crisis is set to erupt over who controls the world’s largest river. Quartz Africa. Retrieved from <https://qz.com/1181318/ethiopia-egypt-sudan-and-eritrean-tensions-over-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-on-nile-river/>
- Johnson, K. (2018, January 11). Egypt-Sudan Spat Muddies Prospects for Deal on Big Nile Dam. Foreign policy. Retrieved from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/11/egypt-sudan-spat-muddies-prospects-for-deal-on-big-nile-dam-renaissance-gerd-ethiopia-sisi-turkey/>
- Kadabashy, K. (2107, December 27). In first remarks since retweet feud, UAE diplomat says Arabs won’t be led by Turkey. Reuters. retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-emirates/in-first-remarks-since-retweet-feud-uae-diplomat-says-arabs-wont-be-led-by-turkey-idUSKBN1EL139>
- Shay, S. (2017, June 22). Between the “Entebbe agreement” and Entebbe meeting”. Herzliya Conference. Israel’s Strategic Balance: Opportunities and Risks. Retrieved from [http://www.herzliyaconference.org/\\_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/NileBasinShaulShay\\_100617.pdf](http://www.herzliyaconference.org/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/NileBasinShaulShay_100617.pdf)
- Teller, N. (2018, January 1). Damming the Nile – Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia battle out. The Jerusalem Post. Retrieved from <http://www.jpost.com/Blogs/A-Mid-East-Journal/Damming-the-Nile-Egypt-Sudan-and-Ethiopia-battle-it-out-533183>
- Wuibercq, E. (2014, July 14). Ethiopia’s Nile dam project signals its intention to become an African power. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/jul/14/ethiopia-grand-renaissance-dam-egypt>

Global Political Trends Center (GPoT Center) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institution established under the auspices of Istanbul Kültür University in 2009.

GPoT Center was founded with the aim to support reconciliation and non-violent solutions to international as well as domestic issues through dialogue. Our mission is to contribute to stability, democratization and peace through organizing multitrack diplomacy meetings, conducting innovative and independent research, and encouraging informed debates in the media on key issues affecting Turkey and the world.

GPoT Center serves as a platform for the free exchange of views and information on political, social and economic matters concerning a variety of parties and segments of society. We aim to achieve our mission by routinely bringing together opinion leaders, government officials, policy makers, analysts, scholars, experts and members of the media from Turkey and abroad.

Our publications can be downloaded from our website for free. They are also accessible through online libraries worldwide, such as the International Relations and Security Network in Zurich, Europe's World in Brussels, and Columbia University Press in New York. Additionally, you can find our books on Google Books and Amazon Kindle.

## **CONTACT DETAILS**

### **Global Political Trends (GPoT) Center**

Istanbul Kültür University

Atakoy Campus, Bakirkoy

34 156 Istanbul, Turkey

[www.gpotcenter.org](http://www.gpotcenter.org)

[info@gpotcenter.org](mailto:info@gpotcenter.org)

Tel: +90 212 498 44 76/65

Fax: +90 212 498 44 05

