

The tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia

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Sudan's military said on September 26, 2021, it had "repelled the incursion of Ethiopian forces" in the disputed border area of Al-Fashaqa.¹ Ethiopia denied the accusations "We deny the movement of our forces on the Sudanese border or their incursion into any area."²

The controversy over sovereignty in the Al-Fashaqa region on the border between Sudan and Ethiopia is just one of a number of issues that are causing growing tensions between the two neighboring countries.

On September 3, 2021, the Ethiopian army claimed, that it killed "50 terrorists" and wounded others as they tried to infiltrate through the Sudanese border to the area where the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is being built.³

Colonel Seif Ingi, the operations coordinator in the Metekel Zone in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, claimed that the attackers carried light and heavy weapons as well as mines during their infiltration and the Ethiopian army seized some of their weapons and destroyed others. A large part of the armed elements fled "back to the north" after their defeat.

Colonel Seif Ingi, claimed that the attackers were elements aligned with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and explained that the TPLF attempted to attack GERD construction because they mistakenly assumed that the majority of the Ethiopian army troops had moved to the north.⁴

Colonel Seif Ingi, said that "attackers have joined our 'historic enemies' in an attempt to stall the construction of the dam but they have failed", but he didn't say who are the 'historic enemies.'

The Sudanese Foreign Ministry on September 4, 2021, condemned the "misleading statements" by the Ethiopian army claiming that armed groups had entered the country through the Sudanese border to target an Ethiopian facility. Such baseless statements have a clear purpose for political consumption, the ministry said in a statement and Sudan is fully committed to the principles of good neighborliness and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.⁵

The border conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan

Sudan and Ethiopia share a 1,600-kilometre-long border. In 1902 a deal to draw up the frontier was struck between Great Britain, the colonial power in Sudan at the time, and Ethiopia but the agreement lacked clear demarcation lines.⁶

Ethiopia is witnessing a border conflict that could flare up into a war with neighboring Sudan. Ethiopia claimed that Sudan had invaded in early November 2020, attacked and displaced Ethiopians and took control of vacated military camps in Al-Fashqa region.

Sudan invaded in Al-Fashaqa in November 2020, around the time Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray to oust the region's ruling party. The bloody conflict in Tigray killed thousands and tens of thousands of Tigrayans have fled into Sudan.⁷

Al-Fashqa region is an area of 260 sq km of fertile land settled by Ethiopian farmers that Sudan says lies on its side of a border demarcated at the start of the 20th century, which Ethiopia rejects. The region is close to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the subject of another dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan and Egypt.

In 2007, President Omar al-Bashir and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi – then the long-time rulers of Sudan and Ethiopia – agreed on a cooperation formula by which Ethiopian and Sudanese citizens could both cultivate the land, with the two sides agreeing to undertake formal demarcation at an unspecified later date. Leadership changes and political turbulence in both countries have sharpened old rivalries between the two neighbors and brought the al-Fashaqa dispute back to the fore.⁸

Clashes erupted between Sudanese and Ethiopian forces in December 2020 over Al-Fashqa region. Sudan's military said in December 17, 2020, a number of its officers had been ambushed by "Ethiopian forces and militias" during a security patrol of the Abu Tyour area of the country's Al-Qadarif province, along the border with Ethiopia. The statement added the cross-border attack caused casualties in lives and equipment without providing more details.⁹

In an effort to prevent further escalation in relations between the two countries Sudan's prime minister met his Ethiopian counterpart in December 2020. Hamdok's office said the meeting with Abiy Ahmed took place in Djibouti, on the sidelines of a summit of a regional bloc. The two leaders' meeting came just days after a cross-border attack by Ethiopian forces and militias in the Abu Tyour area.¹⁰ Sudan's state-run news agency reported that the military had deployed "large reinforcements" into Al-Qadarif province to reclaim territories controlled by Ethiopian farmers and militias in Sudan's Al-Fashqa border area.¹¹

In a statement on February 18, 2021, Ethiopia's foreign ministry said it believes "the conflict being trumpeted by the Sudanese government's military wing could only serve the interests of a third party at the expense of the Sudanese people."¹²

Sudan's foreign ministry responded on February 20, 2021, by saying "slander towards Sudan and accusation of being an agent for other parties is a grave and unforgivable insult. What the Ethiopian foreign ministry cannot deny is the third party whose troops entered with Ethiopian troops trespassing on Sudanese land."¹³

During the recent border escalation between Ethiopia and Sudan, Cairo stressed its support for Khartoum's right to expel Ethiopian forces from Sudan's al-Fashqa region. Egypt also provided Sudan's military with dredging and engineering equipment.¹⁴

The Al-Fashqa region is also close to the border with Eritrea and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki sent a message to Sudanese Prime Minister, affirming that his country is not involved in the ongoing border conflict between Sudan and Ethiopia. He voiced concern over the border dispute, stressing that his country supports Sudan's right to extend its sovereignty

over its lands. Afewerki said that his country calls for a peaceful solution between the two sides in a way that serves peace, stability, and security in the region.¹⁵

Sudan has been stationing troops in Al-Fashqa region since the end of last year, and the UN stated earlier this year that Eritrean troops, Ethiopian troops and ethnic Amhara militia were also operating in the disputed region.¹⁶

The controversy over Ethiopia's Blue Nile dam (GERD)

On July 19, 2021, Ethiopia announced that it had completed the second filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). This unilateral step had been rejected by the downstream countries, Egypt and Sudan, which insisted on a binding agreement with Ethiopia before it completed filling of the dam.¹⁷

In light of the failure of the negotiations, Egypt and Sudan have called on the UN Security Council to take action to prevent Ethiopia from unilaterally filling the dam without a binding agreement with the downstream countries.

On July 8, 2021 the Security Council held an emergency to discuss the issue of GERD. Egypt and Sudan attempted to push members to adopt a Tunisian resolution that would force Ethiopia to stop the second filling of the dam but their attempt failed. The Security Council did not put forth a decision or statement to endorse their demand, rather, it referred the matter to the African Union. A few days later, Ethiopia announced that it completed the second filling of the dam.¹⁸

The controversial dam has strained Ethiopia's relations with Egypt and Sudan and the Ethiopian move added fuel to the stalled negotiations between the three countries.

Sudan's Foreign Minister Mariam Alsadig Almahdi voiced outrage following Ethiopia's announcement of its decision to initiating the second filling of GERD. She considered it "a clear violation of international law and the Declaration of Principles, and an imminent danger and threat to Sudan."¹⁹

In light of the failure of the negotiations, Egypt and Sudan have urged the international community to intervene to try to find a solution to the GERD crisis before it escalates and leads to further regional instability. They also in light of the failure of the negotiations.

The differences between Ethiopia, and Egypt and Sudan regarding GERD revolve around three main issues:

The first is reaching a legally binding agreement among the parties over filling and operating the dam, one that would allow them to work collectively. Egypt and Sudan call for a legally binding agreement on the dam's filling and operation, while Ethiopia insists on guidelines as it considers that any binding accord means interfering in a sovereign matter.²⁰

The second issue is the discord over the legal reference that can be invoked in the event of a dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt and Sudan and how the three countries would settle any future disputes. The Declaration of Principles did not provide a specific mechanism for resolving future disputes. While Ethiopia insists on the African Union as a mediator in negotiations, Egypt and Sudan want to include others such as the European Union, the United Nations and the United States—which Ethiopia rejects.²¹

The third is the dispute over the filling and operation of the dam during drought years and how much water Ethiopia will release downstream if a multi-year drought occurs. It is a critical point for Egypt because it suffers from great water scarcity. Failure to agree on the passage of a certain percentage of water may lead to catastrophic results for Egypt.²²

Background

The construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD) has been a source of tension between Ethiopia and Sudan and Egypt for some years. The dam, begun in 2011, will hold a massive 74 billion cubic meters of water and will be the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa. Addis Ababa wants to rise power generation to 17,346 MW from a current capacity of just over 4,300 MW from hydropower, wind and geothermal sources and

aims to become the continent's biggest power exporter.²³ Ethiopia claims the dam is vital for its development and will reach full power-generating capacity in 2023, helping pull millions of its people out of poverty.²⁴

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is located in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region of Ethiopia, only 40 km east of the country's border with Sudan. About 77% of Sudan water sources come from the Rivers Nile, Gash, Parka, and Azoum, all of which are outside its borders.²⁵

The Blue Nile, the river's main tributary, accounts for 80 percent of the river's volume, and originates in Ethiopia's highlands. The Blue Nile meets with the White Nile in central Sudan from where the Nile winds northward through Egypt and flows into the Mediterranean Sea.

Egypt relies heavily on the Nile River for its main source of water. The River Nile is the backbone of Egypt's industrial and agricultural sector and is the primary source of drinking water for the population. Egypt has been suffering from severe water scarcity in recent years. Egypt is facing an annual water deficit of around 7 billion cubic meters and the United Nations is already warning that Egypt could run out of water by the year 2025.²⁶ Egypt sees the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam as an existential threat and has expressed increasing alarm over Ethiopia's mega – dam project, fearing it could reduce its share of the Nile waters.

Sudan, with much larger water resources than Egypt, also suffers from a scarcity of water resources and this scarcity is increasing year by year. Sudan's total water resources are now estimated at 30 billion cubic meters. 20.5 billion of the resources are estimated to come from the River Nile and its tributaries, 5.5 billion from seasonal rivers valleys and 4 billion from groundwater sources. Sudan's estimated water requirement in the period 2012 - 2027 is approximately 33 billion cubic meters. These 3 billion deficits highlight the growing demand for water in that period.²⁷ Sudan also needs reassurance on the safety of the GERD, since if this were to crack or even collapse the resulting floods could inundate Khartoum.²⁸

Ethiopia argues that its dam would have no negative impact on Egypt or Sudan and there will be no reduction of water downstream, as all the Blue Nile water will be cycled through the dam and eventually reach the

downstream countries on its way to the Mediterranean. It also claims that more water will be available overall because there will be less evaporation.²⁹

The Sudanese position

Sudan and Egypt agreed that Ethiopia's decision to proceed with a second filling for the Renaissance Dam is considered a "unilateral act" that threatens both of their interests. The remarks were announced as part of a joint statement released following a meeting between Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and his Sudanese counterpart Dr. Maryam Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi.³⁰

Sudan has announced earlier this year its proposal calling for the formation of an "international quartet" including the US, the European Union, and the UN, along with the African Union to facilitate reaching a deal on the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam. Egypt backs a Sudanese proposal.

Sudan wants Ethiopia to coordinate and share data on dam's operation to avoid flooding and protect its own power-generating dams on the Blue Nile.³¹

Khartoum has become vocal against Ethiopia's second filling and Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok told the 76th UN General Assembly (UNGA) General Debate that Sudan suffered damages during the filling phases of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). "We suffered some of these damages during the first unilateral filling [of the dam] last year and the second unilateral filling over the past weeks despite the numerous and costly preventive measures that we have taken to avoid these impacts."³²

Hamdok warned that such unilateral acts by the Ethiopian side "threaten the safety of operation of Sudan's dams and negatively affect irrigation of agricultural projects and drinking water plants." The Sudanese PM also warned of the negative social, economic, environmental effects of these unilateral acts along the Nile River.³³

In a meeting with US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman in Khartoum, Sudanese Irrigation Minister Yasser Abbas reiterated on Khartoum's rejection to engage in the GERD negotiations unless they include the regulations of filling and operation of the dam. Abbas said the safety of Sudan's Roseires Dam on the Blue Nile should come on top of the points to be negotiated. Abbas told Feltman that anticipated GERD negotiations should also tackle conducting environmental and social studies, the exchange of information, and all points related to the continuous safe operation of the GERD, Abbas said.³⁴

The military cooperation between Egypt and Sudan

Egypt and Sudan have extended their joint relations on security since Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan became president of the transitional Sovereignty Council of Sudan following the ouster of former President Omar Bashir.

During a visit by Egypt's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Mohammed Farid, to Khartoum in November 2020, Egyptian and Sudanese military leaders agreed to accelerate joint security and military cooperation. They also agreed to carry out more drills and step-up cooperation in training, border security and combating terrorism, as well as technical insurance and military industries.³⁵

Egypt and Sudan also signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Egypt's National Organization for Military Production (NOMP) and Sudan's Military Industry Corporation (MIC) in various manufacturing fields.³⁶ This visit and the MoU also came at the same time Egypt and Sudan held 'Nile Eagles 1' military drills.³⁷

Joint military exercises

Egypt and Sudan jointly conducted three exercises, " Nile Eagles – 1 " in November 2020 and " Nile Eagles - 2" in March 2021 and - 'Nile Guardians' in May 2021.

The joint exercise - 'The Nile Eagles 1'

In November 2020, Egypt and Sudan have conducted joint military exercise, dubbed 'The Nile Eagles 1. Units from the Egyptian Air Force and special forces, 'Thunderbolt' have arrived in Sudan's at the Merowe air base in northern Sudan, to conduct a joint air exercise with the Sudanese Air Force.³⁸

Egypt's Army Chief of Staff Lt. General Mohamed Farid and Sudanese Armed Forces Chief of Staff Colonel General Mohamed Othman Al-Hussein attended the main phase of the military drill.³⁹

The joint exercise - 'The Nile Eagles 2'⁴⁰

Egypt, Sudan Air Forces carried out joint 'Nile Eagles – 2' at Sudan's Merowe airbase, with the participation of elements from the air forces and Thunderbolt forces from both countries.

The early stages of the training included indoctrination procedures to unify concepts and refine skills to efficiently manage joint air operations. It also included implementing many joint sorties the participation of a group of multi-role fighters, to attack targets and protect vital targets.

The Thunderbolt forces on both sides were trained on storming, concealment, and camouflage operations. These would be used to carry out special operations.

The joint exercise - 'Nile Guardians'

In May 2021, Egypt and Sudan conducted in Sudan, a joint military drill dubbed 'Guardians of the Nile', with the participation of land, naval and air forces from the two countries. 'Guardians of the Nile' aims to promote military cooperation between Egypt and Sudan, exchange relevant expertise, and boost joint action between the Armed Forces of both countries.⁴¹

The political crisis of Sudan

Sudan is on a fragile path to democracy after a popular uprising led the military to overthrow President al-Bashir in April 2019, after nearly three decades of rule.⁴²

Sudan's government said it thwarted a September 21, 2021, coup attempt involving military officers and civilians linked to the regime of imprisoned Bashir. At least 11 officers were among those arrested.⁴³

Sudan is led by a civilian-military administration under an August 2019 power-sharing deal signed after President Omar Bashir's ouster by the military in April 2019 that year following mass protests against his iron-fisted rule.

Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, the general who heads the country's ruling transitional authority, has since called for reforms within the army and "After that, the army will leave the political scene and its role will be limited to protecting the country" he said.

Summary

The political and military tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia occurs at a sensitive time for both. The Sudanese government is facing a political crisis that culminates in an attempted military coup that has been thwarted while the Ethiopian government is facing a civil war in the Tigray region that threatens to spread to other areas.

While the border dispute between Sudan and Ethiopia requires a bilateral solution, in the conflict over the GERD, Egypt is a major factor and any solution will require the consent of all the three sides.

Sudan, along with Egypt, has been locked in a bitter dispute over Ethiopia's GERD for more than a decade. Despite different assessments between Cairo and Khartoum on the dangers of GERD, both countries have drawn closer over the past few months in order to collaborate and coordinate their position regarding Ethiopia's steps.⁴⁴

Ethiopia says its dam would have no negative impact on Egypt or Sudan, and argues it is vital for its development. Ethiopia also views the alignment between Sudan and Egypt as directed against its interests, which adds more distrust and complication to an already difficult situation.⁴⁵

Egypt recently conducted with Sudan joint military exercises involving warplanes and special forces. The joint military exercise conducted in May 2021 in Sudan was also intended to send a message to Ethiopia and the

international community that if the crisis is not resolved in political ways, there is also a military option.

Both Sudan and Ethiopia countries seem to prefer to avoid a military confrontation over the GERD and the border dispute between the two countries. But there are reciprocal ties between the two issues at the center of the tensions between the countries. Hostilities could escalate due to accident or miscalculation and deterioration could lead to war between the countries and could draw in regional allies and further destabilize the region.

In the absence of any agreement between Ethiopia and Sudan and Egypt, now is the time for the international community to become more involved in the negotiations in order to prevent a crisis that can destabilize the whole region.

Notes:

¹ Sudan says 'repelled' Ethiopian forces in border area, Arab news, September 27, 2021.

² Sudan: Ethiopian troops 'repelled' after al-Fashaga advance, BBC News, September 27, 2021.

³ Amr Kandil, Ethiopian army claims 'thwarting armed attempt to disrupt construction of GERD', Ahram online, September 3, 2021.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sudan condemns Ethiopian army's 'misleading statements', Ahram online, September 4, 2021.

⁶ Sudan-Ethiopia border demarcation talks set for Tuesday, Ahram online, December 20, 2020.

⁷ Sudan says 'repelled' Ethiopian forces in border area, Arab news, September 27, 2021.

⁸ Containing the Volatile Sudan-Ethiopia Border Dispute, reliefweb, June 24, 2021.

⁹ Egypt expresses its condolences to Sudan over victims of cross-border attack, Ahram online, December 17, 2020.

¹⁰ Sudan's PM meets Ethiopian leader after cross-border attack, Arab news, December 21, 2020.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sudan, Ethiopia Trade Accusations in Escalating Border Conflict, Asharq Al Awsat, February 20, 2021.

¹³ Sudan, Ethiopia Trade Accusations in Escalating Border Conflict, Asharq Al Awsat, February 20, 2021.

¹⁴ Mohammed Soliman, Egypt's Nile strategy, Middle East Institute, June 28, 2021.

¹⁵ Eritrea Denies Involvement in Border Conflict Between Sudan, Ethiopia, Asharq Al Awsat, February 25, 2021.

¹⁶ Sudan: Ethiopian troops 'repelled' after al-Fashaga advance, BBC News, September 27, 2021.

¹⁷ Ibrahim Haithar, Sudan and Egypt begin joint air exercises, BBC Monitoring, November 16, 2020.

¹⁸ Khalil Al-Anani, Will Egypt Live with GERD as a Bitter Reality? Arab center Washington DC, August 19, 2021.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The dispute centers on how much water Ethiopia will release downstream if a multi-year drought occurs and how the three countries would settle any future disputes. Egypt and Sudan also call for a legally binding agreement on the dam's filling and operation, while Ethiopia insists on guidelines.

²¹ Khalil Al-Anani, Will Egypt Live with GERD as a Bitter Reality? Arab center Washington DC, August 19, 2021.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ethiopia leader rejects call for World Bank arbitration in dam dispute with Egypt, Ahram Online, January 21, 2018.

²⁴ Egypt, Sudan launches joint military exercises dubbed 'Nile's Eagles-1', Al Arabiya, November 14, 2020.

²⁵ Saifeldin Yousif Saeed, Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam and its impact on Sudanese water security, Sudan Tribune, January 7, 2018.

²⁶ Amir Dakkak, Egypt's Water Crisis – Recipe for Disaster, EcoMENA, July 22, 2017.

²⁷ Saifeldin Yousif Saeed, Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam and its impact on Sudanese water security, Sudan Tribune, January 7, 2018.

²⁸ Dam negotiations going on: Interview with Ethiopia's ambassador to Cairo, Ahram Online, December 27, 2017.

²⁹ Doaa El-Bey, Bringing in the bank ,Al Ahram Weekly, Issue 1375, 4-10 January 2018.

³⁰ Egypt, Sudan discuss Ethiopian dam during visit by Sudanese FM to Cairo, Arab news, March 2021.

³¹ Egypt Backs Call to Internationalize Ethiopia Dam Dispute, Asharq Al Awsat, February 24, 2021.

³² Sudan suffered damages due to GERD filling, urges binding deal to avoid further harms, Hamdok tells UNGA, Ahram online, September 25, 2021.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Amr Kandil , GERD talks must include filling, operation regulations: Sudan tells US, Ahram online, September 30, 2021.

³⁵ Egypt, Sudan to strengthen military pact, Arab news, March 2, 2021.

³⁶ Egypt, Sudan sign MoU on military production fields, Ahram online, November 20, 2020.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Egypt's Army Chief of Staff attends main phase of Egyptian-Sudanese 'Nile Eagles 1' military drill, Ahram online, November 20, 2020.

⁴⁰ Egypt, Sudan Air Forces carry out joint 'Nile Eagles – 2' training, Egypt Daily News Egypt, March 31, 2021.

⁴¹ Egyptian, Sudanese 'Nile Guardians' joint military exercise kicks off, Egypt today, May 28, 2021.

⁴² Egypt, Sudan launches joint military exercises dubbed 'Nile's Eagles-1', Al Arabiya, November 14, 2020.

⁴³ Sudan says 'repelled' Ethiopian forces in border area, Arab news, September 27, 2021.

⁴⁴ Egypt, Sudan launches joint military exercises dubbed 'Nile's Eagles-1', Al Arabiya, November 14, 2020.

⁴⁵ Ibid.