

# The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Project (GERD) and the Quest for African Unity

A massive Ethiopian energy project plays an important role in the current regional situation

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*Since November 4, the focus of the international community in their observations of the internal conflict in Ethiopia has largely been centered on the central government's suppression of a rebellion against its authority in the northern region of Tigray.*

Within a matter of three weeks, the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had declared victory over the authorities and their supporters in Tigray.

Nonetheless, it has been reported that tens of thousands of Ethiopians have fled the northern region to seek refuge in eastern Sudan. These developments are occurring while a decades-long disagreement over boundaries between the Republic of Sudan and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is being played out on the ground in the territory in question.

Image on the right: Rendition of the main dam (Fair use)



These events over the last two months are also overshadowing the ongoing differences surrounding the role of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Project (GERD) which is designed to provide energy resources to Ethiopia and the contiguous states throughout North, East and Central Africa. Ethiopia has invested enormous sums of money in building the dam and is relying on its launching as a key element of its national and regional development schemes.

Surveys for the GERD development date back to the period between 1956-1964 when the United States Bureau of Reclamation issued a 17-volume report on the feasibility of the

project. Since 2011, Ethiopia has been constructing the dam which was initially scheduled to begin operations in 2017. (See [this](#))

An article on the mission of the GERD project says that:

“The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), formerly known as the Millennium Dam, is under construction in the Benishangul-Gumuz region of Ethiopia, on the Blue Nile River, which is located about 40km east of Sudan. The project is owned by Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation (EEPCO).... The people and Government of Ethiopia are funding the project, which will not only serve Ethiopia, but Sudan and Egypt as well. The latter two countries depend on the Nile River for their water although 85% of the river flows in Ethiopia. The dam’s construction is expected to create up to 12,000 jobs. Approximately 20,000 people will be resettled during the course of the project.” (See [this](#))

### Conflict Between Ethiopia and Egypt over GERD

Problems surfaced over the objections of the Egyptian government which opposed GERD saying the full realization of the scheme would redirect waters from the Blue Nile to Ethiopia. However, the existing water arrangements governing utilization of the Blue Nile were instituted during the colonial period when Britain exercised tremendous influence over Cairo.

Egypt was a formal British colony from the 1880s until the early 1920s when the country gained political independence after the uprisings which began in the post-World War I period during 1919. Neighboring Sudan was also colonized by British imperialism and the consequent imposition of border demarcations and ownership of waterways can be traced to these historical events.

Ethiopia had fiercely resisted becoming a colony of Europe. Menelik II fought a successful war against Italy at the conclusion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Ethiopian monarchies become even more surrounded by imperialist states which controlled territories in the countries known today as Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya and Eritrea.

Andrew Carlson, an historian who has studied the origins of the conflicts over the Nile, says of the situation involving Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and other states:

“After achieving its independence in 1922, Egypt negotiated the Nile Waters Agreement of 1929 with the East African British colonies. This accord established Egypt’s right to 48 billion cubic meters of water flow, all dry season waters, and veto-power over any upriver water management projects; newly independent Sudan (1956) was accorded rights to 4 billion cubic meters of water. The Ethiopian monarch was not consulted—at least in part because no one understood how much Nile water actually came from Ethiopia. The 1959 Nile Waters Agreement between Egypt and Sudan was completed before all the upriver states achieved independence: Tanganyika (1961), Uganda (1962), Rwanda (1962), Burundi (1962), and Kenya (1963). The signatories of the 1959 Agreement allocated Egypt 55.5 billion cubic meters of water annually while Sudan was allowed 18.5 billion cubic meters. These 79 billion cubic meters represented 99% of the calculated average annual river flow. The treaty also allowed for the construction of the Aswan High Dam (completed in 1971), the Roseires Dam (completed 1966 on the Blue

Nile in Sudan), and the Khashm al-Girba Dam (completed in 1964 on the Atbara River in Sudan)." (See [this](#))

This Nile Water Agreement served to further the underdevelopment of the Horn of Africa and East African states. Founding Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, an anti-imperialist and socialist, called upon all post-independence nations to disregard the treaties established by Britain in the colonial era.

Former Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I was so outraged by the failure of the-then President Gamal Abdel Nasser to recognize Addis Ababa's rights to the Blue Nile he severed relations with Egyptian Orthodox Church which had been closely linked with its Ethiopian counterpart for 1600 centuries. At this point \$10 million was allocated from the Ethiopian treasury to research the development of dams along the Blue Nile, hence the eight-year long research done by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

### Sudan, Ethiopia and the Tigray Conflict

The disputed control of the region bordering Ethiopia and eastern Sudan has led to clashes between their respective armed forces along with militia groups loyal to Addis Ababa. Prime Minister Abiy has attempted to downplay the seriousness of the military encounters.

Sudan is at present in a transitional stage politically. The Sovereign Council, which is an interim body, is composed of a tense coalition of civil society groupings, popular mass organizations, professional associations, technocrats, and the leading officer corps within the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). The Sovereign Council is chaired by Sudanese military leader Gen. Abdelfattah al-Burhan and since his ascendancy to power through a Transitional Military Council (TMC) in April 2019, the country has moved even further towards the U.S. and its principal allies in the region, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and the State of Israel. Khartoum normalized relations with Tel Aviv without any debate within the Sovereign Council and its components. The act carried out largely at the aegis of the White House of President Donald Trump is a complete violation of the Israel Boycott Act of 1958, adopted just two years after the independence of Sudan from Britain.

A report published by the Sudan Tribune on December 22 claimed that the SAF had ejected pro-Ethiopia militias and the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) from the contested border region. According to the dispatch: "The Ethiopian troops, from the Amhara region, waged severe attacks on the Sudanese army since last April. The outbreak of the Tigray crisis and a recent attack on a Sudanese force patrolling the border triggered Khartoum's decision to control the whole international border in line with the 1902 agreement. In the same context, the Sudanese army deployed its troops in Mahaj area, which is located south of Lugdi town, of the Tigray region. The army reported that an Ethiopian militia, presumably Fano militiamen, attacked Alosra area inside the Sudanese border. They shot a shepherd in the area. Amhara militiamen have played a significant role in the fight against the TPLF fighters of Tigray." (See [this](#))

A joint delegation from Sudan and Ethiopia were scheduled to meet on December 22 to discuss the situation in the border areas, ironically on the same day that the U.S. Congress approved an agreement to delist Sudan from the targeted states accused of state-sponsored terrorism. Sudan will be assessed more than \$300 million for alleged complicity in several attacks on U.S. interests in Tanzania, Kenya and the Gulf of Aden. In Tanzania and Kenya, the U.S. embassies were bombed in early August 1998. Two years later, several

Pentagon soldiers were killed when the USS Cole was struck off the coast of the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. Additional U.S. aid has been promised to Khartoum in reward for the “normalization” of relations with Israel and the deeper penetration of Pentagon forces within the military apparatus of Sudan.

### Implications for African Unity and Development

The Trump White House attempted to force an agreement on GERD in contravention of the interests of Ethiopia. The president later said in a phone call with Sudan Interim Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok that Egypt will have no alternative other than blowing up the GERD project. From these statements along with the role of Sudan in the internal conflict in Ethiopia’s Tigray region, the mission of GERD is thrown into serious jeopardy.

Ethiopia is the headquarters of the 55-member African Union (AU) whose aim is to foster greater cooperation among continental states. Yet the contradictions which have arisen over the role of colonial-era laws, the necessity for respecting the existing and largely inherited territorial boundaries along with the imperatives of regional integration as a prerequisite to genuine independence, sovereignty, and economic development, must be resolved in the coming period.

This required mechanism for the resolutions of such conflicts must be found inside the current AU structures established by the Peace and Security Council. A broader regional conflagration in the Horn of Africa and North Africa will only provide opportunities for even wider deployment of U.S. troops on the continent.

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