

Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam



ISSUE



EGYPT

SUMMARY:

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a 6,500-megawatt hydroelectric power plant being constructed in Ethiopia, has been a major point of contention between Egypt and its southern neighbors, as the completion of the dam poses serious threats to Egypt's dwindling water supply and food security. Built along the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, the megaproject is viewed by Egyptians as a major challenge to Egypt's historical claim to the Nile. Egypt's agriculture sector has declined significantly in recent months, as Egypt reduced the amount of arable land nationwide for water-intensive crops and faced a shortage of crop production. This decline can be attributed to water insecurity and relations between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan remaining in a wavering position as the dam is built.

POLITICAL CONTEXT:



Ethiopia began construction on the dam in 2011 in an endeavor to become the region's primary energy exporter. The uncertainty surrounding the megaproject, specifically **contention** over the timeline in which the dam will be filled, has become a focal point of relations between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan. Former president Muhammad Morsi **asserted** with regard to the dam: "If our share of Nile water decreases, our blood will be the alternative." While relations between the three countries normalized over the past five years, negotiations hit a snag when Sudan **recalled** its ambassador from Cairo in January 2018 after Egypt's rhetoric soured as the dam construction continued, though the ambassador **returned** to Egypt two months later after tensions cooled. Despite normalizing relations, ongoing disputes regarding military alliances and Sudan's growing relationship with Qatar continue to plague relations between Egypt and Sudan. In April 2018, Ethiopia appointed a new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, who has been touted as a reformer. Negotiations reached an important breakthrough in May 2018 with a tripartite agreement regarding the dam. Though other agreements

had been signed previously, political officials in each country **hailed** the May 2018 deal as the most significant to date. Under the deal, each country **agrees** to meet every six months on a rotating basis in their respective capital cities to discuss recent developments with the dam. A tripartite fund for the purpose of development projects was also **established** and a scientific research group was **formed** to study the impact of the dam on water resources.

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Geopolitics aside, construction on the dam has stalled over the **apparent** suicide of the dam’s project manager, **strikes** by workers protesting insufficient wages, and the **replacement** of contracting companies because of delayed progress, which have all occurred as Abiy attempts to implement reforms. Although the date of completion remains unknown, Egypt’s classifi-

cation as water-insecure raises additional political implications hampering the negotiations process. Political officials have **declared** a state of water insecurity, which environmental experts have **attributed** to climate change, outdated irrigation techniques, and overpopulation. Egypt’s water insecurity coupled with the threat of a filled dam has led to additional crop **imports**, especially those that are water-intensive in production. In a two-month stretch (August and September 2018), the General Authority for Supply and Commodities with the Ministry of Trade **announced** multiple **agreements** with Russia and Ukraine to import over one million **tons** of wheat, **maintaining** Egypt’s status as one of the top importers of wheat worldwide. Similarly, private-sector companies in Egypt intend to **import** 38,000 tons of rice from China in response to new domestic growing regulations **reducing** the amount of arable land for rice cultivation by 25 percent.

LEGAL CONTEXT:

The tension over the dam dates to the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement signed by Egypt and Sudan, which is based on the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty regarding the Nile. Under the 1959 agreement, Egypt is **granted** 55.5 billion cubic meters of water in the river as measured in Aswan, while Sudan is **granted** 18.5 billion cubic meters under the same conditions. Ethiopia, being excluded from the original agreement, has dismissed the pact in negotiations regarding the dam calling it outdated, while Sudan asserts that the agreement does not reflect its country’s current needs; meanwhile, Egypt has promoted the pact as its primary legal defense during discussions with the other two countries. Ethiopia, along with other Nile River basin countries, **signed** the Cooperative Framework Agreement in 2010 to establish formal governance over the river’s water distribution, but the agreement was **rejected** by both Egypt and Sudan as an attempt to reduce their respective water supplies. On a domestic level, Egypt safeguards the 1959 agreement through Article 44 of its constitution, which states, “The state commits to protecting the Nile River, maintaining Egypt’s historic rights thereto, rationalizing and maximizing its benefits, not wasting its water or polluting it. The state commits to protecting its mineral water, to adopting methods appropriate to achieve water safety, and to supporting scientific research in this field.”

TREND ANALYSIS:

Sudan has increasingly aligned itself with Ethiopia to reap the economic benefits of the dam and increase its stake to the Nile. Though progress in the negotiations stalled following Sudan’s decision to recall its ambassador in January 2018, tripartite discussions regarding the dam have improved in recent months, primarily because of Ethiopia’s new prime minister. Abiy and Egyptian officials have cooperated beyond extents of his predecessor, and this increased coordination led to the countries agreeing to the May 2018 deal. Abiy’s status as a reformist and the May 2018 tripartite agreement shed a positive light for future negotiations.

IMPLICATIONS:

The most prominent implications of the dam for Egypt pertain to Egypt's agricultural sector and international relations. Though the dam is not yet complete, Egypt's agriculture industry has already felt the effects of the megaproject coupled with its ongoing status as water-insecure: The government has **reduced** the amount of arable land for water-intensive crops by 25 percent and the country's wheat harvest **fell** 350,000 tons short of its expected yield in 2018. These agricultural trends are expected to worsen once the dam becomes operational, as some experts **predict** that up to 60 percent of arable land in Egypt will no longer be suitable for agriculture after the dam is filled. Coupled with Egypt's growing population and outdated irrigation methods that **create** overly salient water unfit for agricultural usage, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam may pose disastrous effects for the country's agriculture sector.

While the dam poses pressing concerns for Egypt on a geopolitical level, these risks are overblown compared to the domestic problems associated with Egypt's water insecurity. Under its current irrigation system, Egypt **loses** three billion cubic meters of water annually. Before attributing its water insecurity to Ethiopia to the dam, Egypt must address its outdated irrigation systems to yield more transparent negotiations between involved parties. However, the dam poses major economic implications for the region, as Ethiopia and Egypt both vie to become prominent regional exporters of energy resources, though Egypt has relied on nonrenewable resources such as natural gas compared to renewable hydroelectric power generated by the dam.

TIMEP COVERAGE:

"Pulling Back the Curtain: Dynamics and Implications of Egypt's Elections Period – Phase III: Voting and Reactions" (TIMEP Brief).

"Ethiopia's Dam and Egypt's Water Woes" (TIMEP Commentary by Lindsay Carroll)

