

The Renaissance Dam Negotiations: An Egyptian View

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Brief Analysis

The U.S.-brokered talks are a good start, but breaking the impasse on the GERD reservoir's fill rate is crucial to avoiding deep socioeconomic damage in Egypt and potential armed conflict.

On November 6, U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and the foreign ministers of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan issued a [joint statement \(https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm827\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm827) affirming their commitment “to reach a comprehensive, cooperative, adaptive, sustainable, and mutually beneficial agreement on the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam” by January 15. Signed by the World Bank president as well, the statement concluded last week’s multilateral meeting in Washington, and the ministers pledged to attend further meetings on December 9 and January 13 to assess their progress.

As discussions continue, the United States has ample cause to keep pushing the parties toward a viable conclusion. Taking a step back from the Egypt-Ethiopia dispute would give geopolitical rivals like Russia an opening to play a greater role in the issue. And while war is unlikely at present, any armed hostilities between these two major African countries down the road would put tens of millions of civilians at risk and threaten the vital international trade route through the Suez Canal and along the Horn of Africa.

POINTS OF CONTENTION

On October 22, less than two weeks after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed claimed there was “no force that could prevent” his country from completing construction of the Renaissance Dam (aka the GERD) along the Nile River. He added that he could get “millions readied” in case of war with Egypt over the plan, which has long been a source of contention due to its projected effects on water access, local agriculture, and related socioeconomic issues.

For his part, President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi appears committed to avoiding conflict, calling Abiy a “man of peace” and asking the U.S. government and European Union to mediate. The White House initially responded by asking the two

countries and their Sudanese neighbor to keep negotiating in good faith, then invited them to Washington for direct talks. The EU has expressed its willingness to mediate as well.

The dispute over Nile waters came to a head in 2011, when the previous government in Ethiopia began building the dam to provide more electricity for its population of approximately 105 million. Although the plan had existed for decades and has faced numerous budgetary and construction delays

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/breaking-the-stalemate-in-the-egypt-ethiopia-dam-dispute>) in recent years, seeing workers in action set off alarm bells in Egypt, whose quickly growing population and poor water management record increased the urgency of maintaining the Nile's northward flow.

Since then, Cairo has been trying to come to an agreement with Ethiopia and Sudan on the project's most impactful issue: the amount of time allotted to fill the dam's massive reservoir. Egypt wants it to be slow enough to avoid major water shortages, while Ethiopia wants to hasten its access to a potentially revolutionizing new source of power. Specifically, Ethiopia hopes to fill the reservoir in three years, while Cairo is asking for seven.

Even that slower rate would seriously threaten Egypt's already-dire water situation. A study published by the Geological Society of America in May 2017 predicted the country would suffer a 25 percent shortage in its annual water quota if the reservoir were filled in five to seven years. The same study found that such shortages would pose "a great danger to the Egyptian Delta," which stands just one meter above sea level. Moreover, according to an April 2018 Reuters report, 17 percent of Egypt's agricultural land would be destroyed if Ethiopia fills the reservoir in six years; the figure rises to 51 percent if the rate increases to three years.

President Sisi asked for outside mediation on this and other issues last month after four years of direct negotiations failed, an option allowed under Article 10 of the Khartoum Declaration of Principles, signed by the two countries and Sudan in 2015. Although Ethiopia eventually agreed to U.S.-brokered talks, its policy since 2015 has been to keep building the dam without serious attention to Egyptian requests regarding fill rate, safety concerns, or water ratios. Cairo has put at least four offers on the table and suggested including the World Bank for technical advice on environmental and economic issues. It also offered to cut 15 billion cubic meters of water from its annual Nile flow of 55 billion cubic meters, the usage rate set by the two countries in a 1929 agreement. When those efforts failed, Egypt recommended mediation by one of several parties, including China and Russia. As recently as the September UN General Assembly meetings, Ethiopia's repeated rejections spurred Sisi to warn that "the dam will not be operated by imposing a fait accompli," making the Washington talks imperative.

POTENTIAL SCENARIOS

If Washington continues its mediation and gives the issue the proper attention, it can help avoid hostilities in a vital corner of Africa while preserving the smooth flow of international trade. If it mishandles the matter or leaves the parties on their own again, however, alternative third parties are waiting in the wings with agendas that run counter to America's. Last month, Abiy and Sisi spoke in Sochi on the sidelines of the inaugural Russia-Africa Summit, an event that highlighted the growing role Moscow would like to play in Africa. A major armed conflict on the continent would only facilitate that goal.

The prospect of such hostilities cannot be ruled out if U.S. mediation falters. Taking military action would be a very difficult option for Cairo, one with severe consequences for the entire country, but the government simply cannot countenance a full-scale water crisis. Egypt is nothing without the Nile—the severe shortages entailed by any quick filling of the Renaissance reservoir would trigger severe social and economic disruption for millions of Egyptian citizens and businesses.

To be sure, no current Egyptian official has mentioned the possibility of using force, and Sisi has repeatedly emphasized that he supports Ethiopia's right to development without doing serious harm to Egypt's water supply.

Yet the tone of Egyptian media—which typically reflects government attitudes on other issues—suggests a growing call for action. Ethiopia and third-party mediators need to keep in mind that previous Egyptian leaders and army commanders have readily stated they would go to war to protect the country’s water share. While the current government hopes to avoid war and may even lack the military capacity to fight one, the desperate importance of water issues could spur the public into the streets despite their restricted channels of protest. In that scenario, Cairo may have no choice but to take action against Ethiopia.

Mahmoud Farouk, a legal and political analyst, is former executive director of the Egyptian Center for Public Policy Studies. ❖

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