



THE GERD DISPUTE: HOW ETHIOPIA'S DAM THREATENS SOMALIA'S STABILITY

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Introduction

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is a 6,450 MW hydropower project, finally completed on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, located about 30 km upstream of the border with Sudan. (Conway, 1997). It is the largest hydropower project in Africa. Ethiopian Electric Power (EEP) commissioned a complex infrastructure project on the Blue Nile. This project, which harnesses the river's water, has a generating capacity of 5,150 MW. This is enough power to supply about three medium-sized nuclear power plants. The construction of the GERD was inaugurated in April 2011 by late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. The project was made public first as Millennium Dam and finally Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and sometimes shortly referred as Renaissance Dam. The ¹Dam was announced on March 12, 2011; a contract was signed with Salini and cornerstone placed on April 2, 2011. The primary objectives of this project were to enhance the nation's electrical power generation and stimulate economic growth. Construction of the dam commenced in 2013 on the Blue Nile River, a tributary of the Nile that is a vital water resource for Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt.

The GERD has caused considerable regional tension, primarily because of disputes regarding its effect on the water supply to Egypt and Sudan, which are located downstream. Somalia, a nation in the Horn of Africa, has mostly remained neutral in the dispute. Nevertheless, it faces a diplomatic balancing act as it tries to maintain good relations with both Ethiopia and Egypt, (Cafiero, 2024). Disputes that were once separate have now become linked. Specifically, the conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia over the use of Nile River water has become Interconnected with the disagreement between Ethiopia and Somalia regarding the recognition of Somaliland, (Kurtz, 2024). Drawing from the trilateral disputes among the three nations, this article will explain

how the GERD dispute threatens Somalia's stability.

¹ Embassy of Ethiopia in Brussels. What is GERD. 2011

Geopolitical Tensions

The geopolitical tensions in the Horn of Africa surrounding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) are significant, particularly between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. For Ethiopia, it sees the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) as a crucial project for its energy supply, economic growth, and national identity. The dam is expected to produce a significant amount of hydroelectric power, which would help solve the country's energy shortages and boost its economy. Ethiopia maintains that the dam is vital for its development and its right to control its own natural resources, including the Nile. This stance rejects colonial-era agreements that Egypt and Sudan consider legally binding (Teshome Abera Tessema, 2025).

For Egypt, the Nile River is a matter of survival, as the country relies heavily on its waters for agriculture, drinking water, and national security. Egypt views the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) as a direct threat to its water security, fearing that it will reduce the river's flow and cause disruptions. This fear has prompted Egypt to use its influence to campaign against the dam in international forums, (Saleh, 2021). On the other hand, Sudan's position has fluctuated over time, as it has both supported and opposed aspects of the dam's construction. Sudan stands to gain from the GERD's electricity production, but it also has serious concerns regarding the dam's safety and its potential impacts on water management, especially during droughts.

Geopolitical Rivalry, the conflict over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is more than just a disagreement about water; it's also part of a larger geopolitical rivalry between Ethiopia and Egypt. The GERD could change the balance of power in the region by increasing Ethiopia's influence, which Egypt sees as a direct challenge to its traditional dominance in the Nile Basin. **Although Somalia** is not a direct participant in the GERD dispute, its geopolitical significance has grown because of Egypt's strategic support. Egypt's involvement in peacekeeping missions specially newly transformed mission known as AUSSOM in Somalia is seen, in part, as an effort to counter Ethiopia's increasing influence in the region. This reflects Egypt's broader strategy to maintain its leverage in the Horn of Africa as the GERD dispute continues.

Internationally, The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has drawn the attention of outside parties, such as the United States and international groups like the African Union (AU). While these organizations have tried to mediate the conflict, their efforts have mostly failed because of the countries' conflicting national interests and the complicated nature of the talks.

The GERD conflict has become a major geopolitical issue that impacts water security, changes regional power dynamics, and intensifies rivalries in the Horn of Africa. The increasing tension between Egypt and Ethiopia has put Sudan in a difficult position. Meanwhile, Somalia's strategic importance has grown as countries like Egypt try to influence the evolving situation in the region.

The GERD Dispute risks the regional security

Egypt has historically controlled the Nile's waters, depending on them for its agriculture, energy, and water supply. However, with the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Ethiopia is directly challenging this dominance by claiming its right to use the river for generating hydroelectric power, ((MA), 2021). The possibility of a conflict has arisen from fears of water shortages, particularly during the filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Both Egypt and Sudan are concerned that a reduction in water flow could negatively affect their agriculture, energy production, and overall water security, (Petrov, 2018).

Although Egypt has voiced concerns about the GERD, including the potential for losing water access during droughts, Ethiopia has continued with the project, emphasizing its long-term regional benefits. The dispute also complicates Sudan's position, as it navigates its interests between Ethiopia and Egypt, given the dam's potential to alter water flow downstream.

Egyptian opposition to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has grown over time, with some officials even suggesting military action as an option. In 2020, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi hinted that military intervention could be a possibility if Ethiopia refused to sign a binding agreement regarding the dam. Also, Sudan has voiced concerns over the dam's safety and its own water supply, which could lead to its involvement in the conflict if military actions were to be taken by Egypt, (Rock, 2023). As tensions escalate, there's a possibility of a greater military presence in the area. For example, Egypt might increase its military readiness along the Nile or position troops near the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) if it feels its national security is being threatened.

The conflict over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) could draw other nations into the dispute through diplomatic, military, or financial support. Egypt's alliances with Arab countries, like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, might lead to indirect support for its position. In contrast, Ethiopia has received backing from nations such as China and Russia. These alignments could increase tensions and potentially lead to proxy conflicts, where these external powers provide military support without directly confronting the main countries involved.

If the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute could lead to military escalation or instability that might spill over into neighboring countries like **Somalia**, which is already dealing with internal conflicts, and an influx of foreign military involvement could turn it into battlegrounds for influence. This would worsen the existing security risks throughout the Horn of Africa.

Somali's Internal Stability Concerns from Ethiopia and Egypt

Somalia's domestic stability is significantly affected by the political and security situation in the Horn of Africa, especially the ongoing tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). These tensions have broad consequences for Somalia, forcing it to navigate a complicated relationship with both nations.

Ethiopia has played a significant role in Somalia's security and political stability, mainly through its involvement in peacekeeping missions and counter-terrorism operations against al-Shabaab. However, with its growing regional power, boosted by the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Ethiopia could exert more political pressure on Somalia.

Politically concern, it's worth noting that the Ethiopian government has heavily involved itself in Somali politics and with its politicians, significantly impacting internal governance. As a fragile state, the Somali government has not yet been able to fully control its borders. This has made it easy for regional state leaders to directly engage with neighboring countries, especially Ethiopia, whenever political disputes arise with the federal government. Ethiopia has strong relationships with states like Puntland, South West, Jubbaland, and Somaliland.

Therefore, every while the political tension between Egypt and Ethiopia escalates, it has a negative impact on Somalia's internal politics. This is because if Ethiopia perceives the Somali government's stance on the dam as favoring Egypt, Ethiopia could cause widespread chaos and interference in Somalia's internal affairs, which would threaten Somalia's statehood.

Somalia has numerous clan-based factions and political groups, some of whom may side with Ethiopia while others may align with Egypt. This competition for political influence between the two countries could deepen existing internal divisions within Somalia, hindering efforts to achieve national unity. Political factions might also use the GERD dispute to advance their own interests, leading to greater political instability.

The latest developments in Somalia's Gedo region are the clearest example of how the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile River is playing out. In early July and August 2025, tensions rose amid concerns that Egypt was planning to deploy its military forces, as part of the new African Union Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), to the regions of Somalia bordering Ethiopia. This situation sparked riots and instability, threatening the security of these areas. It resulted in a political uprising against Egypt, reportedly activated by Ethiopia, and led to violent clashes that primarily affected the Gedo region, particularly the areas near the Ethiopian border.

Similarly, the Puntland state of Somalia has a direct relationship with the Ethiopian government. This was demonstrated by the ceremony held in Garowe by the Ethiopian Embassy in Somalia. The event, in which Ethiopians celebrated the inauguration of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), took place in early September 2025. The celebration for the Ethiopian dam was held only in Garowe, the capital of the Puntland administration, which is part of the Republic of Somalia. This was a clear political message from Ethiopia to the Somali government.

To prevent Somalia from falling into the dangerous pitfall that the misunderstanding between Ethiopia and Egypt could cause, it is necessary for the country to strengthen careful strategy to maintain the neutrality of its relationship with both contending states.

For Somalia to enhance the mutual confidence between the two nations, it must bolster its mediating role. Somalia has previously adopted this role, evidenced by the Somali President's several visits to Egypt and his subsequent attendance at the inauguration ceremony of the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on September 9, 2025.

Furthermore, Somalia should actively leverage its non-permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council alongside its existing roles within IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) and the African Union to play a comprehensive arbitration and mediation role in the dispute.

Conclusion

The GERD conflict has escalated from a simple water dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt into a major geopolitical issue that poses a significant threat to Somalia's stability. Somalia's fragile political system makes it particularly vulnerable to this external rivalry.

Ethiopia's growing power, fueled by the GERD, and Egypt's efforts to counteract it are creating a dangerous dynamic. Both nations are actively seeking influence and support from various Somali political groups. This interference could worsen internal divisions, turning Somalia into a battleground for a proxy conflict and threatening its already delicate statehood. Ultimately, the GERD dispute is a catalyst that is exacerbating Somalia's internal vulnerabilities

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