

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and Societal Security in Egypt and Ethiopia; The Fundamental Driver of Conflict and the Hope for Peace

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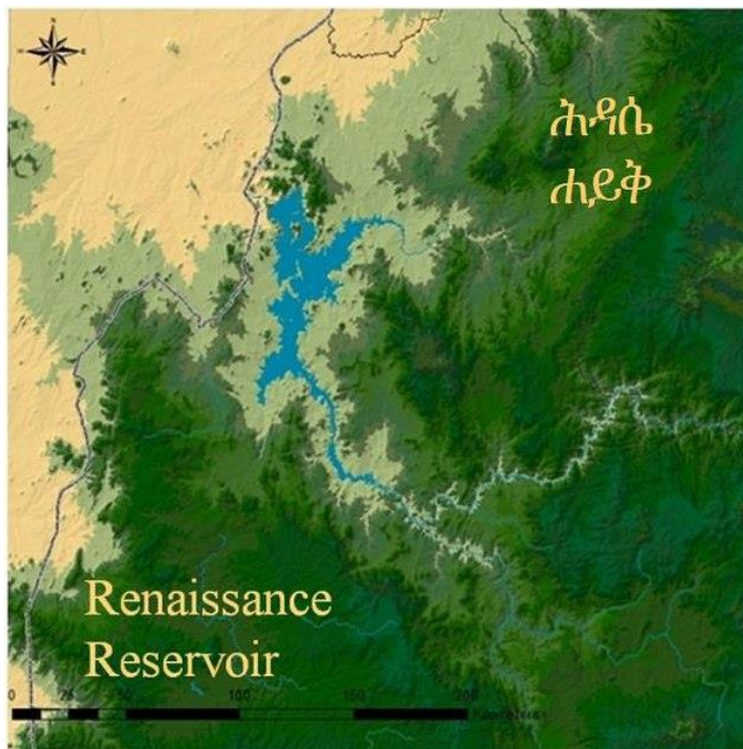


Figure 1. Image Credit: Rasta55, Wikimedia Commons

*“The only thing that will drag Egypt back into war will be water”
(Former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, 1979)*

*“No force could stop Ethiopia from building a dam...if there is
need to go to war, we could get millions readied”
(Ethiopian President Abiy Ahmed, 2020)*

Executive Summary

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is an issue whose fate will impact the lives of hundreds of millions. The GERD will become Africa's largest hydroelectric project, providing power, and securing irrigation in Ethiopia and the surrounding region. Despite this, Egypt still fiercely resists the dam's construction and management. Since Egypt lies downstream, Cairo fears that its national water supply will be threatened by upstream Ethiopia, giving Addis Ababa control of the Nile's water flow. Egypt's arguments lie in legal, water security, and national security-based objections. However, all of these are motivated by something more fundamental.

Societal security analysis, when combined with the work of the Copenhagen School of Security, reveals that the real source of conflict lies at the level of identity.

Control over the Nile is the single most important aspect of Egypt's national identity, and the narrative around the GERD in Ethiopia has been developed as a critical pillar of Ethiopian renaissance. Consequently, arguments from each state actor around the construction and control of the dam lie in the past and future of 'Egyptian-ness' and 'Ethiopian-ness'. The speech of elites in both nations has ensured that the relationship between identity and potential conflict over the Nile's water resources is entrenched in the psyche of each population. As such, one nation threatening the other causes a pushback that is grounded in a fear for the survival of, and an assertion of the future of each culture.

For a workable peace to 'break out', both sides must make significant compromises. Egypt must be willing to compromise on its historical hegemony of the Nile's water, and Ethiopia must be more open and collaborative with its neighbours.

Considering the perceived threat to societal security for each nation over this issue, it is unlikely a peaceful resolution to the Nile's water allocation will occur. It is also the core reason that an agreement has not already been reached, and that there have not been any significant changes to circumstances surrounding this matter that might be enough to overcome this problem. The best that we can hope for is an uneasy peace between countries which is managed carefully into the future. This answer is not neat and so some might not find it satisfactory. However, this can be considered an advantage rather than a drawback. The situation is complex.

Therefore, a well-informed understanding of the situation better allows us to manage this tension constructively and effectively.

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Introduction

Water security is a critical concern for the coming decades. The United Nations World Water Development Report predicts that more than 40% of the world's population will experience 'water-scarcity' by 2050 (UN Water 2019). North Africa is one of the regions of particular concern. As such, proper management of the Nile River will be crucial in managing the impending strain on finite freshwater resources.



Figure 2. A map of Northeast Africa, showing the GERD and Sudan's Roseires Dam, and the Nile River (Image Credit: The Economist 11th February 2021)

In 2011, Ethiopia announced that it would be building the Millennium Dam, later renamed to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The announcement, and subsequent construction sparked controversy throughout the region. Ethiopia insists that the GERD is solely a development project to meet growing needs for water and electricity. Downstream Egypt strongly opposes the project, citing fears about its own water supply and subsequent national security. The path of the Nile River means that the destinies of Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan are intimately linked through their geography. Despite a decade of negotiations, no substantial progress towards peace has been made, with each accusing one another of being unreasonable and unwilling to negotiate.

Why have Egypt and Ethiopia been unable to reconcile their differences over the dam? Further, what implications does the answer to this question have for the hope of a peaceful, constructive resolution? These are the primary questions that this report seeks to answer.

To do this, this report will be structured into four key sections. First the prevailing arguments for and against the dam. The positive case is straightforward, focusing on the development potential that the GERD offers Ethiopia and its regional neighbours. The case against is more complex, and typically grouped into the categories of legal, water, and international security concerns. However, an understanding of these arguments from both sides is not itself enough to describe the conflict between nations. The second section will discuss the complementary frameworks of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies and societal security. These concepts are critical for fully analysing why Egypt and Ethiopia have not been able to agree on the dam. Then, a speech analysis of statements made by elites in each nation will show that the fundamental cause of conflict is not material facts but perceived insecurity to identity caused by the dam. Finally, this conclusion has severe implications for the hope for peace and is the largest barrier to a positive resolution that each nation faces.

Sudan is largely excluded from this report. This is not because it is an unimportant actor in this issue, nor because it does not have high stakes in the outcome of negotiations. Sudan has a highly nuanced and legitimate position, stemming from its geographical position between Ethiopia and Egypt. This gives Sudanese a unique role as a potential middleman and facilitator for the more extreme positions of the larger nations of Egypt and Ethiopia. Sudan is rarely named as a key Nile stakeholder since its arguments tend to fall within the broader camps of Egypt and Ethiopia. When Sudan supports the GERD, it is for the same benefits that Ethiopia hopes to receive in their water, agriculture, and energy sectors. Similarly, they tend to reject the dam for the same reasons as Egypt does, worried as it is about its water supply being managed by a foreign nation. As such, when I refer to Egypt and Ethiopia, Sudan is at different points grouped with each nation, even if not explicitly named.

The Ethiopian government estimates that the dam will be completed in 2023 and has already begun to fill the reservoir. Time is ticking for all nations in the region to come to a consensus or to take bolder action. It is in everyone's interest that this does not result in violent conflict.

The Cases For and Against the GERD

Pro-GERD

The GERD stands to benefit Ethiopia significantly. The dam will produce 6000MW of reliable, and sustainable electricity (The Economist 2021). For reference, the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, and the Hoover Dam in the US produces 2100MW, and 2000MW of energy respectively. 6000MW is two times the total wattage that Ethiopia currently produces and would be a significant step in meeting the electricity needs of Ethiopians, 60% of whom do not currently have access to electricity. The reservoir will also stabilise water supply for both Ethiopia's significant agricultural sector, and for the consumption of the population. Agricultural, water, and electricity stability will catalyse further developments throughout Ethiopia in other areas such as healthcare, education, and politics (Chen & Swain 2014). Finally, the GERD is a large source of national pride and cooperation in a country that faces strong internal division. While no silver bullet to the problems faced in Ethiopia, the successful completion and management of the dam is a crucial step in Ethiopia's development.



Figure 3. Aswan High Dam, Egypt. Image Credit: Ovedc, Wikimedia Commons

The surrounding region would also benefit from the dam. Ethiopia would become a power exporter in the long run to nations who suffer from similar power deficits. They would also be able to support the irrigation of nearby Sudan through stabilizing the Blue Nile's water flow

into the Roseires Dam (Gebreluel 2014). Modelling further suggests that the net usable water in the Nile River will increase due to the GERD. Currently, 16 billion cubic kilometres are lost in evaporation from the surface of Egypt's Lake Nasser, as it is an artificial reservoir in the middle of desert. By distributing the water across the Nile, especially leveraging Ethiopia's less harsh climate, the surface area of the Nile system would decrease. This would decrease the amount of water lost to evaporation especially in Lake Nasser, and result in a higher quantity of water throughout the whole system (International Non-partisan Eastern Nile Working Group 2014). All these benefits only apply if regional stability and cooperation is assured by all parties.

Anti-GERD

The announcement and subsequent construction of the GERD was met with significant pushback from Egypt and Sudan. The Nile River is the major freshwater source of each nation, with Egypt in particular relying on the Nile for 97% of its water. The way of life, and the agricultural, energy, and manufacturing sectors also depend heavily on the waters of the Nile (Negm & Abdel-Fattah 2020 p. 4). Egypt has significant concerns about their water security and the subsequent national security concerns that follow. They also argue that the dam ignores a century of legal precedent. Since the announcement of the dam in 2011, these objections have remained largely consistent.

1. Legal Concerns

Egypt believes that Ethiopia is in violation of legal treaties over management of the Nile's waters. The two most important agreements to this case are the following documents (Wehling 2020):

- 1) The 1929 Exchange of Notes Between his Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom and the Egyptian Government in regard to the Use of the Waters of the River Nile for Irrigation Purposes,¹ and

¹ The full 1929 letters can be accessed here:
https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/Egypt_UK_Nile_Agreement-1929.html

2) 1959 Agreement between the Republic of the Sudan and the United Arab Republic² for the Full Utilization of the Nile Waters.³

The 1929 letters were exchanged between the Egyptian government and the British Government, the colonial power of the time. Their key consequences are the lines, “Except with the prior consent of the Egyptian Government, no irrigation works shall be undertaken, nor electric generators installed along the Nile”, and the recognition of the “natural and historical right of Egypt to the waters of the Nile”. The 1959 agreement echoes these sentiments, further declaring that the United Arab Republic⁴ and Sudan must authorise and manage all upstream developments. It also explicitly divides the usage of the Nile’s water solely between the UAR and Sudan, setting Sudan’s net access at 18.5 milliards of cubic meters per year for the Republic of Sudan, and the UAR at 55.5 milliards of cubic meters per year. The treaty aims to ensure the “natural river shall be equally divided between the two Republics”, though notably do not consider the usage of any other nations which share the Nile.

Despite Egypt’s claims, these treaties do not compel Ethiopia’s actions due to well established treaty principles. In international law, the maxim of *‘Pacta tertiis nec nocent nec prosunt’* is of utmost importance. It can be found under Article 34 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties 1969 and is not a contested principle. It functionally translates to, ‘a treaty binds the parties and only the parties’. To ensure the integrity of treaties as a practice, it is critical that their contents be consented to by the impacted parties otherwise the practice of creating internationally binding treaties becomes a farce. If two nations can sign documents that bind others without their consent, a dangerous precedent is set in which more powerful nations will be able to continually compel the actions of other nations to their own advantages. This occurs readily enough in a competitive world, and international law must continue to be the one theatre that strives to level the playing field and offer dignity to all nations. Ethiopia was not a party in negotiations nor in the final agreement in either the 1929, or 1959 documents. These

² Read ‘Egypt’

³ The full 1959 agreement can be accessed here:

https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/UAR_Sudan1959_and_Protocol1960.pdf

⁴ The United Arab Republic was founded in 1958 and lasted to 1971 and attempted to incorporate Egypt and Syria into one Arab republic. This project failed. Consequently, from a legal position, it is difficult to determine whether agreements made during the UAR period still carry currency today considering the entity no longer exists

agreements violate the principles of international treaty law, and as such do not hold any force over the actions of upstream nations.

In its history, there has never been a treaty signed by all riparian Nile nations. The ones that have been signed are problematic and only between a limited group of nations who are attempting to advance their own interests, and as noted by legal scholar Wehling,

“the current treaty regime stands in stark contrast to the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization of shared water resources, which have in recent decades become the overarching principles of use allocation in international water law” (Wehling 2020).

Treaties on this tended to be a colonial exercise to justify their power through legal documents, or the continuation of this by the UAR, a political entity that ceased to exist in 1971, to gain consent from Sudan for their own infrastructure. The existing regime has not been set up adequately to provide any forceful arguments against countries utilising their resources. New efforts in the 21st century to create modern treaties will be explored shortly.

2. International Security & Water Concerns

Without the waters of the Nile, Egypt is not a viable state. Their needs for both food and water are entirely dependent on this one water source, so any threat to the Nile’s flow represents a substantial security threat.

Egypt is concerned that the pattern of behaviour exhibited by Ethiopia shows bad faith in dealings, and as such they cannot trust that without a binding agreement, Ethiopia will not harm them in the future. According to Egypt, Ethiopia has been consistently covert in planning and announcing the dam. Firstly, the specifications became continually grander throughout the first years of the dam having been announced:

“In terms of the dam storage capacity, it changed from 11.1 BCM, according to the American study, to 62 BCM ... Then it increased to 67 BCM in the statements of the Ethiopian Prime Minister, then to 70 BCM, and finally to 74 BCM in 2012” (Negm & Abdel-Fattah 2019 p.12)⁵

In two years, the proposed capacity of the dam had increased 666%. Further, the timing of their announcement on February 6th 2011 can be reasonably construed to be taking advantage of Egypt's January 25 revolution. Finally, the government's official confirmation of this announcement on the 31st of March preceded the signing of a 4.8-billion-dollar contract with Italian company Salini Impregilo⁶ by just one day, with no official international tender taking place (Negm & Abdel-Fattah 2019 p.13). Clearly, they had been in talks for a long time preceding this announcement without alerting the international community or consulting affected nations.

These actions create a pattern of opacity from Ethiopia. They have been tactical in releasing information about the dam, while showing that they are going to construct the dam whether the international community, and particularly downstream nations consent. As such, Egypt is concerned that this pattern will continue once the dam is built. This is especially a concern in periods of drought or other political conflict where the stakes are far higher (Mbaku 2020). Ethiopia cutting the water supply would be catastrophic to all aspects of Egypt. They have not yet committed to a binding agreement on the GERD's management, and even in the case that they did, they would still control the faucet to Egypt's statehood.

From Ethiopia's perspective, there was no reasonable alternative way to announce the project. They would have faced severe backlash from downstream actors no matter their approach, creating a significant national security risk. All avenues from economic coercion, espionage and military conflict could have been sought to prevent progress. The history of Nile relations only supports this fear, with former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat famously saying in 1979, "The only matter that could take Egypt to war again is water." (Kameri-Mbote 2007). There has also been severe tension, and at times conflict, between the two nations in recent history (Yihun 2014). Egypt has consistently blocked development and diplomatic engagement in Ethiopia, which they have historically had the upper hand in. Had Ethiopia's building of the dam relied on direct consent from Egypt, the dam would never have been built.

It must be remembered that Ethiopia does have a legitimate claim over the utilisation of resources in their territory (Wehling 2020). The historical Egyptian hegemony of the Nile River is outdated, and no longer carries the force that it once did. Egypt certainly has cause to be

⁵ For easy reference, the Hoover Dam's Lake Mead holds 35BCM, and Egypt's Lake Nasser holds 169BCM

⁶ Renamed in mid 2020 to 'Webuild'

worried about their own national security, but Ethiopia also must act in the best interests of its citizens, who desperately need their own electrical and water security. In either case, Ethiopia has certainly been opportunistic in the way it announced and commenced the GERD. Without indication that they will act any differently in the future, Egyptian fears of continued self-interest are founded, and the desire for a binding document is understandable.

Efforts to Establish a Treaty

In the past two decades, renewed efforts have been made by all Nile nations to create a unilateral treaty which is helpful in settling the GERD dispute. The Cooperative Framework Agreement 2007 (CFA) and Agreement on Declaration of Principles (AGP) are the attempts which have come closest to success, though have both failed to establish any lasting and meaningful progress.

In 1999, the Nile Basin Initiative was established by all eleven Nile nations to solve problems about Nile usage. By 2007, they had created the CFA, which was an ambitious project to create a framework for solving problems:

“Rather than quantifying 'equitable rights' or water use allocations, the Treaty intends to establish a framework to 'promote integrated management, sustainable development, and harmonious utilization of the water resources of the Basin, as well as their conservation and protection for the benefit of present and future generations'.” (Nile Basin Initiative 2021)⁷

Today, this has been signed by six nations, and ratified by four. Notably, Egypt and Sudan are not signatories, and throughout the process of negotiations consistently expressed “strong reservations” about the agreement (Berhane 2013). They were unwilling to sign the agreement as it did not acknowledge their exclusive and historic ‘rights’ that colonial treaties recognised. For any treaty to be signed which is meaningful, Egypt and Sudan will have to compromise on their historical position. Otherwise, any unilateral efforts are doomed to fail.

⁷ The full 2007 ‘Cooperative Framework Agreement’ can be accessed here: <https://nilebasin.org/images/docs/CFA%20-%20English%20%20FrenchVersion.pdf>

More constructive progress was made though in 2015, when Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia signed the Agreement on Declaration of Principles (ADP).⁸ Once again, this document did not seek to settle any allocation issues, but rather establish 10 principles which could be referred to in future negotiations. This was a landmark agreement and carried with it an incredible amount of excitement at the time. For the first time since the dam was announced, substantial progress had been made in trilateral diplomatic efforts. However, this document has not and cannot itself settle disputes. The ADP is a document which declares the intention to sign a treaty on the GERD, rather than itself being a binding legal document. It is only helpful in future negotiations, which all failed thus far. As such, the excitement about this document has failed to achieve any lasting results.

No binding legal treaty about water allocation has been signed, and Egypt and Ethiopia still accuse one another of being unreasonable and unwilling to compromise (Al Jazeera 2020a) (Karima 2021) (Messele 2020). There have been other talks between the nations alone, and externally mediated by the EU, AU, USA, and South Africa. Each of these have had varying levels of success, though ultimately the broader effort has failed thus far as no concrete agreement has been reached.

Why Talks Have Failed

If this issue could be reduced to material security concerns, then the path to peace would be clear. Reasonable diplomats would be able to determine the source of disputes and come to a consensus about the best management of the dam. They would sign a document that agreed on the allocation of water, distribution of benefits and burdens of costs of the dam, and each nation's government would ratify the treaty into law. This process would not be easy or straightforward and would take a long amount of time. However, as each group would be working towards the same goal of constructive use of the Nile's water, progress could be made.

This has not happened. Despite immense investment in negotiations from Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan, there has been no agreement beyond the ADP signed in 2015.

⁸ The full 2015 'Agreement on Declaration of Principles' can be accessed here: https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/Final_Nile_Agreement_23_March_2015.pdf

One possible explanation for this is that the material interests of each party are incompatible. It should be considered that there is no way that Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan's needs for water can be met simultaneously. This is especially credible considering the influence of climate change making water access more volatile in the region. In a time of drought or unprecedented rainfall, operation of the dam could potentially harm the water supplies and systems of downstream riparian nations. However, the objective evidence that this dam would increase the quantity of water in the Nile basin shows strongly that negotiations are not motivated solely by material matters, as with proper management, the dam materially benefits all nations (International Non-partisan Eastern Nile Working Group 2014) (Gebreluel 2014).

The reason why talks have failed is not the material reality of the situation. The most fundamental driver of behaviour, and the root cause of objection to and support for the GERD lies in the identity of each nation. The Nile is central to the identity and culture of Egyptians. Thus, the dam, which would place control of the Nile in the hands of Ethiopia, represents a threat to the very heart of 'Egyptian-ness'. Similarly, the GERD represents a critically important project for the modern Ethiopian identity. Their transition to democracy has been hopeful, and the dam is a physical manifestation of a broader push for Ethiopia to regain its place as a respected and powerful society. The best framework for understanding this is the Copenhagen School, and their concept of societal security.

The Copenhagen School and Societal Security

During the 1980s, a concerted effort was made by academics to understand exactly what the field of security ought to cover. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver were two such scholars, with their approach and research is now referred to broadly as the Copenhagen School. They were interested in clarifying and establishing security as a field, rather than as a vague term that grew and was used more organically (Buzan 1991). Since, the Copenhagen School has been described by scholars as "the most thorough and continuous exploration" of security issues and is critical in modern security studies (Huysmans 1988, p. 480). It is a highly useful framework for understanding the causes of conflict in a vast array of circumstances. It clarifies the different areas of security, including the especially helpful area of societal security. It then further describes how something can become 'securitised' through direct acts of speech from elites.

Societal Security

Security refers to the ability for something to continue to survive despite external threats. The concept of survival means that “security is a status quo concept, typically played by those who are privileged under existing conditions and who feel threatened” (Wæver 2011). It is helpful to think of this in the relatively simple case of home security. For a house, the threats could include fire, earthquake, or vandalism, and as such the house’s security is its resistance to such threats. Window shutters or fire-resistant building materials are considered important by most home builders as a reasonable precaution. They are the aspects of a house that mean that a house can continue to be a house. This example is significantly simpler than that of a person or nation, but the same principle applies.

Between states, the ultimate threat from another nation was classically perceived as military invasion. International relations commentators were especially concerned with a nation’s ability to respond to such a threat, and broadly called this area ‘national security’. National security is not solely one’s own military might, though this is certainly an important component of national security. It also considers a state’s geography, ideological strength, water and food supply chains and sovereign capability, amongst other factors. However, these factors were always considered in terms of the “essential issue of war” (Buzan 1991 pg. 2). This approach is now outdated. States and non-government actors influence and threaten one another in other spheres that do not directly concern the essential issue of war. For example, economies have economic security which can be threatened by the paradigm case of trade wars. Applying the house analogy, nations have several houses corresponding to different aspects of that nation, including national, economic, cyber, and societal. These each have their own essence, threats, and security which can overlap, but correspond to each to a different extent.

The concept of societal security is critical in understanding conflict around the GERD. Wæver classifies societal security as “the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions...” (Wæver et al 1993, p. 21). The ‘essential character’ of a society is its culture, and the associated identity that members of that group share. Culture and identity are not subjective, relative concepts, but are themselves a product of a society. Hofstede describes culture as “the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede 2011). We cannot always quantify or predict how a culture is formed, and the results are not always immediately understandable. “It [culture] emerges...from the peculiar interactions of people and institutions in each society, fixed and

incorrigible like the computer output of a complex arithmetic” (McSweeney, 1996 p. 97). The material realities of the geography, climate, history, economy, technology and religion all combine to produce identity. This identity can in turn be threatened by changes in the determinants of identity that every nation has. When a threat to these is perceived, societies respond.

It is true that individuals will all experience a shared identity in their own ways due to a similarly complex arithmetic. This statement does not seek to describe or explain the components or causes of specific identities. It also requires no one individual to be of any identity. Ultimately, different individuals in a society will align with their shared identity to different extents. Yet it is that shared output of group identity that societal security is concerned with. It means something to be Egyptian, as it means something to be Ethiopian, Australian, Peruvian, or Mongolian.

Societal security is the most fundamental type of security, barring perhaps individual security. Identity is inalienable from someone even in the most extreme abusive circumstances. When a group of people have everything stripped away from them; their jobs, political representations, religious freedoms or traditional land, identity often persists. As an example, not even the horrors of the Holocaust or 2000 years of diaspora could erase the Jewish identity. Australian Indigenous people in post-colonial Australia are another clear case where the identity is still strong despite hundreds of years of systemic abuse. Identity has a remarkable ability to persist, and to continue to unite individuals in the darkest of times.

Securitization

Not all issues are security issues. The process of taking an ordinary issue and making it a security is called *securitization*. An elite who speaks in terms of security prescribes an issue with a special status, as it associates it with survival. In their words, “[s]ecurity’ is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics” (Buzan, B, Wæver, O & Wilde, J de. 1998). When an issue is linked with survival, individuals are willing to go to greater lengths to respond and allow for their elites to act in ways that they would otherwise reject. The irony here is that there is nothing inherent about a security issue, as it is formed from the words of elites. The speech act does not describe the security threat, but *creates* it (Wæver, O 1995). A threat does not have

to be a true material threat to become securitized. The reason that an issue may be subject to this is that it is granted that special place at the forefront of attention, and allows for extreme responses, ultimately justified by the existential scale of the threat.

Societal security is interested in actors, perceived or real, that threaten identity. Further, based on the framework of the Copenhagen School societal security is interested in the ways that this can become securitized through speech. Ultimately, if it can be shown that identity has become the subject of security, then it follows that actors will respond with emergency measures. Given the inalienability of identity, this threat cuts deep, and almost anything appears to be a reasonable response. This framework is highly useful for analysing the GERD from both Egypt and Ethiopia's perspective.

Egypt and Ethiopia's Societal Securitization of the GERD

Egypt

Over two millennia ago, it was Herodotus who said both that "Egypt is a gift of the river", and "Egypt is the Nile and the Nile is Egypt" (Cascão 2008, p. 7). Thousands of years of history have not been able to alienate this from the Egyptian identity today. Egypt has been labelled as a "hydraulic state" (Wittfogel 1957), and their political leaders have above all else sought to "secure an uninterrupted and stable Nile water supply" (Flantan & Tamrat 2002, p.297). This attitude has been clearly reflected in their approaches to policy, international relations, and Egyptian Nation building.

The importance of the Nile is declared in Egypt's very constitution. Line three reads, "Egypt is the gift of the Nile and the gift of Egyptians to humanity". It further reads in section 44, "The state commits to protecting the Nile River, maintaining Egypt's historic rights". This attitude is further declared in the Exchange of Letters from 1929, which further asserted Egypt's, "natural and historical right of Egypt to the waters of the Nile". The similarity of the wording of these two documents is critical. The attitude of Egypt's policy makers in 2014 was the same as it was in 1929, when they declared absolute authority over the usage of the Nile. The language in official political documents clearly declares that the Nile is under the purview of the Egyptians.

Ultimately it is not a controversial claim that the Nile River is at the centre of Egyptian identity. As such, anything that threatens the water sovereignty of the Egyptians threatens not just their industry or state viability, but Egyptian-ness itself. Based on the societal security literature of the Copenhagen school, this attack is irreducible and fundamental. The perceived threat to the identity of the Egyptians is an ultimate threat, and its importance cannot be understated. This has also been played upon significantly by the Egyptian elite, who have utilised this perceived threat to consolidate control, and unify defiance against the dam amongst the GERD.

In May 2021, Egypt and Sudan held joint military exercises called Guardians of the Nile. Abdallah al-Bashir, Deputy Chief-of-Staff of the Sudanese Army said, “this military exercise has nothing to do with the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam” (Sabry 2021). Al-Bashir also said that the exercise was for “boosting preparedness... to be ready to defend our rights”, and Maj. Gen. Nasr Salem of Egypt said that “Egypt and Sudan are sending a clear message to Ethiopia and anyone else to think twice before taking any action” (Sabry 2021). Guardians of the Nile, and comments about defending rights, when combined with earlier legal documents, are unambiguous about Egypt’s position. This implies that they believe that the Nile River, the source of their identity, is under direct threat.



Figure 4. President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi. Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Egyptian leaders have not shied away from declaring their willingness to act in defence of this. Sadat’s famous 1979 statement, “the only thing that could drag Egypt back into war is water” was echoed by a leaked 2013 meeting where the Egyptian leadership discussed directly bombing or sending special forces to disable the GERD (Pawl 2013). In 2021, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi said further, “no one will take a drop of Egypt’s water” (Al Jazeera 2021). He was explicit that, even in 2021, Egypt is not willing to concede any more ground than his predecessors, stating, “[a]ny act of hostility is detestable ... but our reaction in the event that we are affected will affect the stability of the entire region” (Al Jazeera 2021). The Guardians of the Nile military operation speaks loud and clear. In conjunction with earlier sentiments from the Egyptian constitution and Nile treaties, Egypt is not willing to concede its historical hegemony of the Nile and sending a clear message that Egypt is willing to fight anyone who might threaten this.

Ethiopia

A similar process has happened in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has not forgotten its past glory as the Abyssinian Empire, and as one of few African nations which successfully resisted colonisation. The key word in the GERD acronym is ‘Renaissance’, meaning rebirth. This word is highly deliberate, suggesting that Ethiopians are going from a dark age to one of growth and development. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has further reinforced this idea through his speech, saying about the dam in 2019, “[the GERD] showcases Ethiopian’s commitment to the renaissance of our country” (Al Jazeera, 2019). The intense level of pride in independence that is part of Ethiopia’s history and national identity is at odds with other nations suggesting that they should co-manage their infrastructure.



Figure 5. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Image Credit: Mark Neyman, Wikimedia Commons

The Ethiopian Minister for Women and Children, Filsan Abdi, said

“Mothers who’ve given birth in the dark, girls who fetch wood for fire instead of going to school — we’ve waited so many years for this — centuries... When we say that Ethiopia will be a beacon of prosperity, well, it starts here.” (Bearak, M & Raghavan, S, 2020)

Once again, this quote ties the future of Ethiopia to the fate of the GERD. It makes the conditions and hopes of Ethiopian mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters subject to the success of this project. It also ties in the idea of Ethiopia as a beacon of prosperity in the region as ultimately depending on the dam. Similarly, the hashtag, “#itsmydam” has become a major rallying point for Ethiopians in several key areas. This phrase was endorsed by Sileshi Bekele, the Ethiopian Minister for Water, Irrigation and Energy. When asked about who would ultimately be managing the GERD upon completion, he replied “It is my dam” (Ayalew, YE & Woldemariam, SB, 2020). There are many such statements which all serve to reinforce that the future of the country in all senses of ‘what we do’, and importantly ‘who we are’, will depend on the completion and filling of the GERD. It ties both the dam and the waters of the Blue Nile in Ethiopia to the Ethiopian people.

Finally, the threat against Ethiopia from Egypt is not being downplayed but emphasised. In a 2020 press conference on the filling of the GERD, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said, “no force

could stop Ethiopia from building a dam...if there is need to go to war, we could get millions readied. If some could fire a missile, others could use bombs.” (Al Jazeera, 2020). These final statements clearly take an issue which has been linked explicitly to identity, and state that the government perceives a threat to the GERD’s physical security. Abiy’s comments have been consistent throughout his term, and echo those of the government before him. Ultimately, any such threat from Egypt against the dam is perceived as a threat against Ethiopian identity. Sustained messaging has made this more than an infrastructure project, but a pillar of renaissance.

It is also no accident internally that the GERD has become an issue of Ethiopian-ness. Conflict in the Tigray region has shown that Ethiopia is far from united. As such, symbols of unity and shared Ethiopian-ness are critical for the Government in maintaining its legitimacy. By securitising the dam and clearly showing the external threats to the unifying items in Ethiopia, they seek to gel divides and project unity. Further, linking it to identity, rather than statehood or economy, plays to something deeper in people, and is more likely to create long term support when physical and economic conditions change.

The Hope for Peace?

The GERD is a complex issue. This report does not serve to claim that concerns about water security or national security are not valid. That approach is unconstructive and ultimately does not get us any closer to a suggestion about how to proceed. All arguments about the causes of conflict at a fundamental level add to the depth of understanding and can support one another in building as close to a full and accurate picture of relations surrounding the dam.

However, the importance of the threat to societal security is often understated or flatly ignored by academics and news agencies reporting on issues. Identity is not something that people are willing to compromise on in even the most abhorrent conditions. It is truly fundamental, and in times of crisis a huge determinate of our behaviour. As such, it must be granted its proper place in security analysis of any kind.

Most academics share similar views about the path to peace (Gebreluel 2014) (Mukum-Mbaku 2020) (Swain 2011) (Chen & Swain 2014). They vary slightly from one another, however in essence,

1. Egypt will have to acknowledge that its historical hegemony over the waters of the Nile no longer applies in a world where legitimate competing claims exist. They will have to be willing to compromise on water usage standards that they have enjoyed for a sustained period for other nations to work with them in allocating a quantity that meets their higher needs.
2. Ethiopia will have to be more inclusive of its regional neighbours. They must be more willing to share information and collaborate in operations with downstream nations to build trust about operations. Without this, other nations will not be willing to enter anything less than a binding legal agreement over dam management.
3. The past decade of bad blood around the dam will have to be acknowledged, and unilaterally everyone will have to make apologies and amends for harm caused. Once this has happened, the GERD will be able to be viewed as a regional asset, and one which will serve all who rely on the water that will pass through it.

This will not happen easily. Each point requires a complete U-turn on the speech that has been permeated through each nation and would defy the very identity of each nation. It is hard to imagine the prevailing attitude changing to the extent that would be required for this constructive peace. This would require Egypt and Ethiopia to place the very continuation of thousands of years of culture in the hands of a hostile neighbour. It is more likely that an uneasy compromise may be reached, with underlying mistrust and disagreement flaring when internal and external pressures rise.

Failures in real diplomatic efforts over the past decades support this imperfect reality. Negotiations continually fail to reach meaningful progress, despite significant investment from each nation and the global community due to the tension in identity. Egypt will not forget their history of hegemony over the Nile. Ethiopia will not forget the importance of the dam to their renaissance. As such, it is not constructive to say what actors in each nation *should* be doing. People are not wrong when they propose these solutions, but there are strong reasons why this has not already happened. Without significant change, it is unlikely that peace will succeed, and that each party will make the necessary compromises.

The GERD could become the greatest development infrastructure project that the region has ever seen, or the trigger that sends the region into a bloody conflict. It could be managed equitably and in the interests of all Nile citizens, or guarded jealousy at the expense of millions. The governments and non-government actors involved certainly have a mountain ahead of them. Any kind of military conflict would completely outweigh any benefits that the Renaissance Dam would bring to Ethiopia and the surrounding nations. I hope for Egyptians, Ethiopians, and everyone who would be affected by the ripple effect of such a conflict, that at least an uncomfortable peace can be maintained.

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Images

Figure 1. Image Credit: Rasta55, Wikimedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/51/Renaissance_Reservoir.jpg/640px-Renaissance_Reservoir.jpg date accessed: 23/07/21

Figure 2. A map of Northeast Africa, showing the GERD and Sudan's Roseires Dam, and the Nile River (Image Credit: The Economist 11th February 2021), <https://www.rocketnews.com/2021/02/why-is-the-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-contentious-the-economist/> date accessed: 23/07/21

Figure 3. Aswan High Dam, Egypt. Image Credit: Ovedc, Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=Aswan+High+Dam&title=Special:MediaSearch&go=Go&type=image> date accessed: 23/07/21

Figure 4. President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi. Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=President+Abdel+Fattah+Al-Sisi&title=Special:MediaSearch&go=Go&type=image> date accessed: 23/07/21

Figure 5. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Image Credit: Mark Neyman, Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=Prime+Minister+Abiy+Ahmed&title=Special:MediaSearch&go=Go&type=image> date accessed: 23/07/21