



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Failure to Resolve the GERD Issue Portends a Global Crisis and Mass Migration

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Despite Qatar's interventionism and use of information warfare to spread conspiracy theories about Israel's alleged role in the Egypt-Sudan-Ethiopia crisis over the GERD, Israel can play an important role jointly with the US in utilizing creative thinking, regional contacts, and economic acumen to provide mutually beneficial solutions for all the parties, avoiding a global crisis and mass migration from Egypt and Sudan.

While Ethiopia has in the past threatened to mobilize much of its 105-million population in the event that Egypt should put up any obstacles to the building and filling of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam ("GERD" or "Renaissance Dam"), the recent hostilities actually [broke out](#) between Ethiopia and Sudan, rather than Ethiopia and Egypt contrary to what many observers of the ongoing crisis would have expected. The concept of building a huge Renaissance Dam that would revolutionize energy and water delivery in Ethiopia goes back decades; despite the involvement of multiple Egyptian administrations, no alternative approach has been proposed. At stake are severe water shortages in Egypt, which is heavily dependent on the Nile for its agriculture-based economy, with potentially as much as 17 of arable land damaged thanks to the implementation of the project. By July 2020, when the construction was completed, and the Ethiopian government announced the process of filling it in, the issue at the crux of the Ethiopian-Egyptian tensions, the outrage and concern in Cairo reached its peak since it became obvious that reversing the situation will require a significantly greater level of investment into the political process and may even lead to military action if the process of fill-in continues.

Upon completed implementation, the percentage of damage from the filled-in dam could over time [rise to 51 percent](#), which would essentially put an end to Egyptian economy and displace as many as 30 million of Egypt's 100+ million population.

Cairo has accepted a compromise solution to slow down the fill-in completion to seven years (up from Ethiopia's envisaged three years), which would give the Egyptian economy some time to adjust but nevertheless result in water shortages and other challenges. The US-brokered talks have failed to resolve any of these thorny issues; in fact, at one point, Ethiopia walked out of the negotiations.

The backstory of this conflict is almost as complicated as the current predicament in which the three key players - Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan - find themselves locked. Ethiopia has invested into the decision to construct the Renaissance Dam since approximately 2000. Despite several attempts to break ground, Hosni Mubarak had interfered with the process, and it went nowhere. Indeed, as revealed by Wikileaks, the Egyptian government had [bombed](#) the dam before the construction began, an action that was also entertained by the short-lived [Muslim Brotherhood government](#) (2012-13), despite president Morsi's reported [readiness](#) for a compromise. Cairo was eventually forced to deal with the issue on both political and military levels. According to some sources, measures were taken to insure that Egypt would not be overwhelmed in the long run.

The capacity of the Renaissance Dam is 74 billion m<sup>3</sup>, but the water storage capacity in Egypt was expanded to 177 billion cubic meters to [encompass](#) The High Dam, Lake Nasser, and the Aswan Reservoir, exceeding the effects of the dam by more than 100 billion cubic meters, which in theory would mean that the initial three years of the construction would not take a catastrophic toll on the country. The military's engineer corps were utilized towards:

- [Toshka](#) expansion (the lakes comprising the excess water about the Aswan Reservoir)
- Lake Nasser [expansion](#)
- Rehabilitation of the Aswan Reservoir
- Establishing Sarabium siphons to deliver water to the Sinai and its reconstruction
- [Compensation](#) for the shortage of electricity caused by the High Dam
- Create the largest [solar cell stations](#) established by NASA
- The establishment of several windmill stations to generate electricity.

Despite these efforts, however, the situation is complicated by several additional political factors.

First, Qatar brought the [Gulf Crisis](#) to Africa, and has essentially been paying off the Ethiopian government to engage in contrarian demands and aggressive rhetoric immune to diplomatic outreach, in retaliation for the boycott imposed by the members of the Anti-Terrorist Quartet, including Egypt, and in part as continuation of its foreign policy agenda to destabilize anti-Islamist states and advance its own

influence in the regional affairs. As a result, Ethiopia has engaged in provocative comments and action steps, seemingly designed to lure Egypt into the trap of a military confrontation, such as another attack on the nascent construction sites of the dam. The populist media attacks by pro-Muslim Brotherhood outlets and Al Jazeera aim to rile up the Egyptian street into a demand for some drastic solutions. Likewise, Qatar has tried in the past to exacerbate tensions between Egypt and Sudan by [playing up](#) the news about the alleged construction of an Egyptian military base in South Sudan, at a time of conflict and consequent sensitivities between Khartoum and Juba.

Second, Qatar has worked to sow tensions between Egypt (and especially ordinary Egyptians) by spreading rumors that Israel has funded the construction of the Renaissance Dam and [had installed its own air defense systems](#) to protect the GERD, implying a veiled threat to Egypt. The Israeli embassy [denied](#) these news reports, but the damage in terms of public relations has been done and conspiracy theories began flying, especially given Israel's growing contacts with Qatar and the agreement that Doha would fund Hamas, in exchange for quiet at the Gaza border. Egypt (and other anti-Islamist Arab states) consider Hamas a bitter enemy and find this arrangement puzzling, especially after the important [diplomatic role](#) Cairo has had in de-escalation in Gaza.

Israel's close trade relations with Turkey, in spite of outward political tensions likewise contribute to a confusion. Many Egyptians and others at odds with Ankara and Doha believe Israel to be allied with both states against the Anti-Terrorism Quartet, which complicates Israel's political maneuvering and diplomatic outreach. Furthermore, in 2016, Al Jazeera [aired](#) clips of Prime Minister Netanyahu allegedly expressing support of the dam. Despite the general distrust of the Qatari state-funded mouthpiece and information warfare/foreign policy media branch of Doha, known to fabricate news and manipulate media, Egyptians nevertheless came to believe these comments, whatever their actual context and meaning, expressed Israel's political position as siding with Ethiopia against Egypt.

Israel seems oblivious to the importance of the Gulf Crisis to most Middle Easterners, and while it has spent an inordinate amount of time dealing with the Palestinian issue, which has grown of increasingly less interest to the average Gulf resident, the looming threat of Qatari-colored propaganda seeking to portray the Jewish state as a partner and a stooge, has not been addressed by Jerusalem. Israel, therefore finds itself, in a complicated situation torn between two growing alliances: its strong links, trade, and energy opportunities with Ethiopia, which Israel has [backed militarily](#) during the various conflicts with Eritrea and which had started as one of its allies during the period of the [periphery policy](#) against hostile Sunni Muslim states, and the growing and increasing warm alliance with Egypt which had recently invited Israel to join its [East Med Gas Forum](#), and upgrading the [gas](#)

[trade](#) between the two countries. For Egypt, the sensitive dam issue is also but one of the many significant challenges it is facing at the moment, including the Gaza border issues, ISIS and other terrorists in the Sinai, Turkey backing the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda-supported and affiliated Government of National Accord ("GNA") with Syrian mercenaries against Egypt's ally Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army on Egypt's crucial border, and Turkey's illegal gas drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean which represents yet another threat.

Third, US has failed in its role as a mediator. From the moment Egypt has asked US to intervene, Washington has taken a lukewarm passive position, ignoring the third party interference in the process and Ethiopia's unreasonable and intransigent demands, threats, and walk-outs. A more creative approach would have had Washington take a big picture view of the situation, which would also affect neighboring countries seeking to benefit from the Dam and offer to attract investors into energy fields and other essential fields for Ethiopia, and later Sudan, which have not been well matched by the Gulf investors who had purchased a great deal of livestock, but have not put much thought towards addressing the issues Ethiopia claims would be solved by the dam. Indeed, with a plethora of potential alternative options that were never considered or even proposed, the political conflict over the Renaissance Dam could have been avoided.

For now, however, as the first year's-worth of the accumulation is [completed and celebrated](#) throughout Ethiopia and [negotiations continue](#), the situation is complicated by the rainfall which is [raising the rate](#) at which the dam is being filled. Egypt has taken on the initiative by engaging in an assertive political rapprochement with Sudan which has had a recent military encounter with Ethiopians over the border issues related to the dam tensions. The threat to Sudan's security, dumping, and water prevention would represent a threat to Egypt's national security. Sudan has no water reserves and no dams. Ethiopian militias, likely with Qatari and Turkish prodding, recently tried to prevent another party of water from reaching Sudan. Sudan, however, is now more closely aligned with the Anti-Terrorism Quartet, and its military is closely connected to President Sisi, which has the potential to turn this portion of the trilateral crisis around.

If the US and Israel play it smart, they could still play an important role in dispelling myths, de-conflicting a partially manufactured political crisis, and utilizing their regional contacts, and economic and trade acumen to provide a broad network of win-win opportunities for all involved, avoiding the looming threat of a global crisis and mass migration from Egypt and Sudan.

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