

## Kind of Blue (Nile)

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**Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia have a shared economic and cultural heritage built around the Nile River, which stretches from the source at Lake Tana to the floodplains of Alexandria. However, tensions are rising in all three nations as a battle for water supremacy threatens to plunge the region into a simmering conflict – and perhaps set the tone for the first stage in an entirely new ‘resource war’.**



The Nile is most commonly associated with Egypt – think pyramids and Poirot, and the Nile is never far off. And certainly, the river remains absolutely integral to the floodplains and farmlands of Egypt, and by extension the survival of its populace. However, the Blue Nile begins in Ethiopia, and for a decade now a major Ethiopian project has been to construct a dam and reservoir (the Gerd) across its section of the Nile. Clearly, this will bring major economic and (hydroelectric) infrastructural benefits to the people of Ethiopia and, as a naturally occurring resource, it can be strongly argued that the government would be foolish not to take advantage. But whatever is done to the river upstream will have significant consequences downstream, and both Egypt and Sudan have registered major protests at what they see to be damaging and unilateral action taken by the Ethiopian government which puts their own utility of the Nile in sharp relief.

Once the Gerd is fully operational, Ethiopia will theoretically be able to decide how much water it chooses to release downstream, with Sudan and Egypt being powerless to stop this. Furthermore, with extensive droughts predicted in the years to come, Ethiopia may very well hoard more water behind the Gerd than it needs at any one moment (the reservoir is bigger than London) – not only for its own citizens' supply, but to continue to power what will be the largest hydroelectric plant on the planet. Such a situation could very well be an existential issue for both Egypt and Sudan.

It also feeds in to the growing concern that ‘water wars’ in certain parts of the world are not in the too distant future – Las Vegas and much of Australia are frequently mentioned – and Ethiopia is winning absolutely no friends in the region as it continues to dominate conversation about the Nile. Politically, there is deadlock – the UN recognises Ethiopia's right to utilise its own resource but is equally cognisant of the claims of the other states that this is directly affecting their own chances of survival.

The African Union has proven unable to mediate a solution, and the UN is unwilling to, stating only that it backs the AU in this regard. Matters were not helped in mid-July by the natural filling of the reservoir due to Monsoon season (admittedly an irreversible reality for Ethiopia) but one can imagine that newly re-elected Ethiopian president Abiy Ahmed not caring, given that he has staked Ethiopia's economic future – and his own political one – on the Gerd being what will take Ethiopia forwards.

What of a military response? While Egypt and Sudan have been sabre-rattling on the border, conducting joint operations under the banner 'The Guardians of the Nile', a military operation would arguably solve little since the only way to guarantee the activity surrounding the Gerd would be to control it directly – an act of war that none of the parties would arguably be willing to take. But discontent is at fever pitch, and there is every chance that military confrontations between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia – either openly or through covert means – would destabilise not only the shipping routes through the Red Sea and Horn of Africa, but also the wider North African region with far-reaching consequences for all concerned.

For now, businesses need not pull up any more drawbridges in terms of their presence or work. The Nile region is already seeing civil war in Ethiopia, growing militancy in Sudan, discontent against the military dictatorship in Egypt, and social & economic disruption on a grand scale due to Covid-19 and the long legacy of corruption across all three countries. Put bluntly, at present, the Gerd is not going to cause a fundamental change to operations or problems – at present. But it is a prime example of a situation that should be monitored, and with business continuity plans drawn up for a number of eventualities, from subtle cyber-attacks as may be launched by one state to another, to vigilante reprisals against firms seen as involved with or profiting from the dam in an opposing state, to all-out military action. Don't get caught out when the dam finally bursts.

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