Egypt and the Nile

26 MARCH 2026

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Title 1: Egypt and the Nile: A History of Imagined Hegemony

Title 2: How Egypt sees the Nile and Why it Matters

The Importance of the Nile

The historic importance of the Nile to Egypt is summarized by late British Prime Minister Winston Churchill writing, “the geography of the river is that of a palm tree [...] if you cut the roots the green upper part will dry out”. Together with its associated tributaries of the White, Blue, and Atbara rivers, the Nile contains a drainage basin that comprises 11 countries and

is one of the longest rivers in the world, with a total length of 6,650km, discharging an estimated 300 million cubic meters of water a day. Aside from its geographic and hydrological features, the Nile has served and continues to serve as a means of transportation, trade, and a source of water for agriculture and human consumption for an estimated 486 million people who live within the Nile basin, a population which is expected to exceed 600 million by 2030.

This statement not only reflects the historic importance of the Nile to the existence of the Egyptian state, but also an aspect of British Imperial policy concerning the management and control of the Nile during its colonial occupation of Egypt (1882-1956), which sought to disenfranchise upper riparian states (located upstream) from the Nile's freshwater reserves in favour of Egypt and its lucrative cotton production. These economic interests gave way to the 1929 and 1959 Nile Waters Agreements, in which Egypt was given a preferential share of the Nile's waters and a normative hegemony over the Nile's management. This is reflected in a written note by the British High Commissioner to Egypt, Lord George Abrose Lloyd (1925-1929) to then Egyptian premier Mohammed Mahmoud Pasha (1928-1929), "safeguarding the natural and historic rights [of Egypt] to the Nile's waters would be a fundamental principle of British policy. The signing of the 1929 and 1959 treaties thus constitutes a continuation of British colonial policy, which began when Britain concluded negotiations with Italy concerning Italian control over Abyssinia (Ethiopia) under the Anglo-Italian Protocol of 1891 in order to ensure the continued flow of Nile waters to Egypt in the face of planned Italian hydrological projects on the Nile.

A Lasting Legacy

This normative favouritism of Egypt and Sudan within hydrological management agreements by Britain has unfortunately left a lasting and corrosive post-colonial governance legacy within the Nile basin that has influenced Egypt's stance in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute with Ethiopia since construction commenced in 2011. Through numerous written and verbal statements, Egypt has continued to insist that it considers the GERD dam to be a threat to its national security, and by extension, its very existence, as it sources 95% of all freshwater consumption and 80% of its drinking water from the river. Irrigation-dependent Egyptian agricultural production in turn, accounts for 14.5% of GDP and nearly 28% of employment. Ethiopia has rebuked Cairo's claims, insisting on its inherent right to economic development, and views the 1929 and 1959 Nile Waters Agreements to be a colonial imposition it has no binding legal obligation to adhere to.

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

The GERD dam is predicted to produce 5.15 gigawatts of electricity daily, constituting the largest hydroelectric project in Africa. Its reservoir is capable of holding 74 billion cubic meters of water, trapping over 100 years of sediment inflow, and once its 13 turbines become fully operational, the dam's electrical production will be sufficient to meet Ethiopia's burgeoning electrical needs (45% of Ethiopia's population currently lives without access to stable electricity) as well as make use of existing infrastructure to export available energy to other African states. Ethiopia has already signed multiple bilateral agreements entailing the sale of over 4,000 MW of electricity to regional partners (Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya) within a decade, totalling estimates of over 1 billion USD in annual revenue. In addition, the GERD dam will create an estimated 12,000 jobs tied to its operation and electrical production, creating a long-term source of employment in an impoverished, rural region of the country.

Due to the GERD, two of Africa's most influential states are seemingly at odds over a project which could well define either country's future. The political importance of the GERD is reflected in the invocation of it as a symbol of the Ethiopian *Hidase* or "renaissance" in Amharic, as a modern, economically dynamic and politically influential state – aspirations which have clashed hard with Ethiopia's ongoing internal conflicts. Egypt, in turn, sees the Nile Waters Agreements as the simple continuation of millennia of Egyptian civilization that has existed alongside, the river as reflected in the writings of Herodotus "The Nile is Egypt-Egypt is the Nile". Similar language was invoked by Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Badr Abdelatty, when writing to the United Nations Security Council on September 9th, 2025, in response to Ethiopia's unilateral decision to fill the GERD dam's reservoir by 5 billion cubic meters of water:

"A grand structure of mammoth proportions has been constructed across the artery that bequeaths life to the people of Egypt ..... A colossal wall of iron and steel has arisen along the banks of a great and ancient river and has cast a long, dark shadow over the future and fate of the people of Egypt ..... With every brick and every layer of mortar ... the GERD grows higher and its reservoir grows larger and it continues to constrict the lifeblood of innocent millions living downstream of this giant dam".

The Future: Between Cooperation and Conflict

Egypt sees itself as both the Nile's closest guardian and its most vulnerable dependent. Having threatened military action through numerous verbal speech acts by Egyptian leaders in the past, it may well be forced to accept that its normative dominance over the Nile is no longer enforceable. Numerous rounds of negotiations with other riparian basin states have culminated in the adoption of the 2024 Comprehensive Framework Agreement (CFA) between all 11 Nile basin states, intended to provide for the

establishment of a governance mechanism for the Nile and the equitable distribution of its hydrological resources. However, the CFA remains a half-baked remedy, as Egypt has refused to sign, citing the supposed favouritism of upstream nations and the lack of a guarantee of "water security", which other states have protested as little more than a smokescreen to ensure continued Egyptian normative dominance over the Nile's waters.

In a 2026 report, the UN has warned that the world may enter a period of prolonged *water bankruptcy,* as climate change and increased consumption have led to a prevalence of water-stressed, and water-scare regions. The spectre of "water-wars" has haunted policymakers, and several recent conflicts such as the 2011 Arab Spring, the continued Israeli occupation of the Golan heights, and the ongoing instability and violence in Nigeria's *Middle Belt*, have purportedly been influenced by the decreasing availability of freshwater. Conflict has so far been largely intra-communal and sporadic, but as states must grapple with the increasing demand for freshwater due to human, agricultural, and industrial consumption, this may change, leading to a heightened risk of inter-state conflict over freshwater resources. The ongoing conflict between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran has glaringly revealed the crippling dependency of the Gulf States on a dozen desalination plants that provide water to thirsty citizens and golf courses. The dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the GERD may therein be a litmus test for states as to how they respond to their neighbours in the face of extreme water scarcity and single source hydrological dependency.