

Tensions at the Sudanese-Ethiopian Border: Conflating New and Pre-Existing Concerns

How spillovers from Ethiopia's military operation in Tigray have affected bilateral relations with its neighbour, and affected other pressing issues including the GERD debate.

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – ANALYSIS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The crisis that has engulfed Ethiopia's Tigray region has become, in the words of the EU's envoy on 23 February 2021¹, "*military and human rights-wise, humanitarian-wise very out of control*". Fighting between Ethiopian government forces and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has left thousands dead², with two million more displaced, including 100,000 Eritrean refugees in Tigrayan

¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-envoy-warns-ethiopia-tigray-crisis-out-of-control/>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56147512>

camps. Against this backdrop, tensions between Ethiopia and its neighbour Sudan, have become increasingly strained.

The Tigray crisis, along with several other interrelated events, have exacerbated pre-existing disputes, including the status of the Sudanese-Ethiopian border itself, the disputed al-Fashaga triangle, which was only marked with a compromise arrangement in 2008. There are reports of troop deployments into each States' territory, with reports of violent clashes between each military. Meanwhile, Sudan has been hosting thousands of Ethiopian refugees that have fled violence in Tigray, putting additional strain on Sudan's precarious economy. This comes as trilateral negotiations under the auspices of the African Union (AU) between the two States and Egypt, regarding the operation of Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) have once again broken down.

2. THE AL-FASHAGA TRIANGLE

2.1 The Temporary "Soft Border" Solution



Figure 1. Map of Sudanese-Ethiopia Border Region³

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55476831>

The al-Fashaga triangle is an area of territorial Sudan that is mainly inhabited by Ethiopian farmers, more specifically ethnically Amharan Ethiopian farmers. Amhara is the ethnic group that are the biggest supporters of the current Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed⁴, and the biggest supporters of the Ethiopian government's military operation in Tigray against the TPLF. In 2008, a compromise arrangement was decided⁵ that essentially established the region as a soft border, whereby while al-Fashaga could remain technically Sudanese territory within Sudan's Gedaref State, Amharan farmers could still use the land unhindered. However, the limits of this deal as a lasting solution were revealed following the violence in Tigray in November 2020, which has led some⁶ to call for a more lasting solution to the issue of this disputed border region.

3. TENSIONS AT THE BORDER

3.1 Military Escalation

As the Ethiopian military began operations in Tigray, two interrelated processes occurred in the border regions. Firstly, thousands of refugees from Tigray began to cross the border into Sudan to escape the fighting⁷. Secondly, there has been calls from Amharan groups⁸ regarding territory in al-Fashaga. In Tigray, Amharan groups have claimed land that was allocated to Tigray while the TPLF was in power in Ethiopia during the 1990s, putting up banners and road signs saying, "*welcome to Amhara*"⁹. Similar trends of this type of sovereignty claims by Amharan groups have followed in al-Fashaga against Sudan.

It is not clear whether Sudan or Ethiopia were the first military to fire the initial shot, however violent clashes within al-Fashaga have occurred since November 2020, perhaps most symbolically despite a face-to-face meeting¹⁰ on 20 December between PM Abiy and his Sudanese counterpart, Abdalla Hamdok, at a regional summit in Djibouti. And until now, there has been an increasing build-up of military assets from both sides, including the deployment of tanks and anti-aircraft batteries by Ethiopia¹¹, whilst Sudan has increased military fortifications

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55476831>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://www.cfr.org/blog/ethiopia-sudan-border-dispute-raises-stakes-security-horn>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/13/world/africa/ethiopia-conflict-sudan-refugees.html>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55476831>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-28/ethiopia-moves-artillery-to-sudanese-border-after-deadly-clashes>

and built roads¹². The rhetoric between the two sides has been fraught and hostile, with repeated condemnations of violations of territorial sovereignty. For instance, on 14 February 2021 Sudan's Foreign Ministry said¹³:

"Sudan condemns and denounces Ethiopia's aggression by deploying its forces in (Sudanese) territory, in direct violation of Sudan's sovereignty and territorial integrity".

Meanwhile, on 23 February 2021, Ethiopia's Foreign Ministry said¹⁴:

"Sudan's exploitation of Ethiopia's preoccupation with the law enforcement process in Tigray, and its violation of our borders, confirms the involvement of a third party pushing the military component in Sudan to enter into conflict with Ethiopia to implement its own agenda".

3.2 The Refugee Dimension

The refugee crisis has complicated relations between the two States further. According to the United Nations refugee agency¹⁵, over 61,000 Ethiopian refugees have crossed into Sudan, with over 43,000 of them crossing the direct border at the Tekeze river between Tigray and Sudan's Kassala State, to a small Sudanese town called Hamdayet. The United Nations has assisted the Sudanese government in moving most of the refugees from Hamdayet further into Sudan, and consequently further from both the violence in Tigray and the increasing tension at the border. However, according to MSF¹⁶, somewhere between 10,000 and 12,000 refugees remain in Hamdayet. There are several concerns here, from the economic toll on an already struggling Sudanese economy to host, feed, and safeguard thousands of refugees, including significant medical requirements and considerations related to the spread of COVID-19. But beyond purely material considerations, the status of so many Ethiopian refugees within Sudan is likely to be a contentious issue in the future, especially if and when the time arrives for those refugees to return to Tigray. Political motivations could easily affect this and interfere with what should otherwise be a humanitarian process.

¹² <https://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article70472>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1814346/middle-east>

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/13/world/africa/ethiopia-conflict-sudan-refugees.html>

¹⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/ethiopian-refugees-hamdayet-sudan-everyone-hungry-everyone-tired>

4. THE GERD PROBLEM

4.1 Breakdown in Negotiations

And whilst this tension persists between Sudan and Ethiopia, the negotiations regarding the GERD have suffered. A recent round of talks between Sudan, Ethiopia and Egypt broke down in January 2021¹⁷. Sudan had argued that the negotiation method needed to change while the role of the AU's experts needed to be expanded to help facilitate the negotiations, but Ethiopia and Egypt had both wanted to preserve their own ability to write the technical texts on filling and operating the GERD. However, with the crisis at the border between Sudan and Ethiopia, there is less incentive from both sides to agree to any new round of negotiations.

For instance, on 5 February the Ethiopian Minister of Water, Irrigation and Energy said¹⁸ that Ethiopia is unconcerned with the lack of agreement, and that the second filling of the dam's reservoir will begin in the coming months. Sudan's Minister of Irrigation and Water Resources responded¹⁹ on 6 February:

"The filling of the Renaissance Dam by one side next July represents a direct threat to Sudan's national security".

This escalation of rhetoric, the increase in tensions between the States, as well as the relative failure of prior negotiations under the AU to reach a substantive agreement, has caused some analysts to consider²⁰ that the GERD issue will likely be escalated to the UN Security Council.

4.2 Untangling the GERD from Other Issues: The US Example

The complexity of these interlinked issues, and the ways to tackle them are substantial. However, we can look to recent actions by the US as to some ways to address these concerns. The Joe Biden administration has reversed ²¹a Trump-era policy that linked a pause in US aid to Ethiopia, amounting to some US \$100 million, to the GERD. Biden's administration has instead said that the resumption

¹⁷ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2021/02/sudan-ethiopia-border-conflict-threats-nile-dam-gerd-talks.html>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL1N2KC0CZ>

²⁰ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2021/02/sudan-ethiopia-border-conflict-threats-nile-dam-gerd-talks.html>

²¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-dam-usa/us-to-de-link-ethiopian-aid-pause-from-dam-policy-idUSKBN2AJ2GZ>

of aid will be contingent upon “*whether each paused program remains appropriate and timely in light of developments in Ethiopia that occurred subsequent to the pause being put in place*”²², in reference to the recent violence in Tigray. This is an important step, as it both prioritises outstanding issues to have humanitarian concerns as the number one focus, whilst still promoting space for dialogue and negotiation on issues like the GERD.

5. CONCLUSION

Moving from the Tigray conflict to the issues that affect bilateral relations between Sudan and Ethiopia, any solution and de-escalation between the two countries will need to have space for each interlinked problem. We have seen the failure of traditional methods, namely direct bilateral talks between Abiy and Hamdok, to solve the issues. Abiy’s dependence upon Amharan support for his political position will also strain this ability to seek compromise. Instead, solutions will need to be practical, that answer questions like the following: to what agreed position should military forces pull back to? What mechanism will be put into place to support eventual refugee returns? Can international monitors and agencies support the accountability and administration of such processes, and at what international level should these be derived from? These are the initial questions, which will then give ways to a more effective and lasting settlement for al-Fashaga, one that codifies the status of territory and residents in a clearer manner. And during these discussions, the GERD issue can be approached as an alternative, but complementary set of dialogue.

²² Ibid.

About the BIC

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