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# The Egypt-Sudan Border: A Story of Unfulfilled Promise

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## Summary

Since Sudan's independence in 1956, its border relations with Egypt have been characterized more by mutual suspicion than by peaceful exchange. This legacy has been exacerbated over the decades by myriad obstacles and conflicts, particularly over the disputed Halayeb triangle, even if both sides did try to improve relations after Egypt's uprising in 2011. Border communities, suffering from this reality, have pushed for improved ties, but mistrust has prevailed to the detriment of both countries.

### Key Themes

- After its July 1952 revolution, Egypt imposed restrictions on citizens wishing to leave Egypt, including those entering Sudan. Border and visa restrictions continue to be the norm today.
- Egypt and Sudan both displaced their Nubian communities from parts of the border for construction of the Aswan High Dam during the 1960s, reducing cross-border interaction and trade that had previously helped strengthen border relations.
- Cairo and Khartoum have been engaged in a dispute over the mineral-rich Halayeb triangle, leading to armed clashes and even an assassination attempt in 1995 against then-Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak.
- Despite poor ties, in 2004 Egypt and Sudan signed an agreement guaranteeing freedom of movement, residency, work, and property ownership for their citizens. The agreement has been implemented selectively, particularly by Egypt.
- More recently, Sudan has sided with Ethiopia over a major Ethiopian dam project that may deprive Egypt of Nile waters. This has again exacerbated relations.

### Findings and Recommendations

- Egypt and Sudan must implement fully the Four Freedoms Agreement of 2004, even if gradually, allowing in part for greater freedom of movement of their citizens across the border.
- Egypt and Sudan are paying an economic price for the restrictions placed on border relations and cross-border population movement, which have enhanced illicit trade and negatively affected border communities. This represents an incentive to improve cross-border relations.

- The Nubian community played an important role in pushing for the opening of two land crossings between Egypt and Sudan in 2014 and 2017. In a similar way, the return of Nubians to the border area could again help to improve cross-border relations.
- In a later stage, Egypt and Sudan could revive their discussion on opening a third land crossing, as well as engage in joint projects connecting the two countries, such as railways, that tension relations had placed on the backburner.
- For as long as the Halayeb triangle dispute remains unresolved, the potential for more serious conflict between Egypt and Sudan will remain.
- Egypt's militarization of the country's borders is problematic, especially when Egypt's military benefits economically from the status quo in such areas, hindering normalization with Sudan.

## Introduction

Since Sudan's independence from British-Egyptian condominium in 1956, the border policies pursued by Egypt and Sudan have ensured that their frontier has become a place of mutual suspicion and tension, not exchange. Despite efforts since the Arab uprisings in 2011 to reverse this trend, the legacy of the past has hindered improved ties. That is why today the flow of people across the border, as well as other exchanges, has been far more limited than it could be.

Since 1956, cross-border contacts have been limited and border tensions have increased for four principal reasons. The first is that after the Egyptian Revolution of July 1952, the authorities in Cairo imposed restrictions on citizens wishing to leave Egypt, including those entering Sudan. The second is the Egyptian and Sudanese governments' displacement of Nubians, a community that sits astride the border, to make way for construction of the Aswan High Dam during the 1960s. This greatly reduced previously higher levels of cross-border interaction and trade that had benefited border communities. A third reason is Egypt's and Sudan's ongoing dispute over a territory called the Halayeb triangle. And a fourth is the antagonism that arose during the Mubarak years (1981–2011) when then Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak survived an assassination attempt in Ethiopia that Cairo blamed on Sudan. In 2016, Egypt's official State Information Service went so far as to label Egyptian-Sudanese relations in the period prior to President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi's election in 2014 as a "cold war."<sup>1</sup>

Still, things changed somewhat after the Egyptian uprising of January 2011. The solidarity of the Sudanese with the Egyptians in their overthrow of the Mubarak regime brought the two societies closer. The Egyptian and Sudanese governments responded to pressure from the Nubian community and opened two land crossings between the countries, as they had been connected only by Nile ferries before then.<sup>2</sup> Egyptian finalization of road construction to the border was repeatedly delayed during the presidency of Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. A Morsi advisor later concluded this was because the military was responsible for putting the finishing touches on construction and had no incentive to do so while Morsi was in office, given its underlying conflict with the Brotherhood.<sup>3</sup> After the first border crossing was opened in 2014, both governments began speaking of plans to open a third crossing as well as to link railways and power stations.<sup>4</sup>

Despite such promise, Sisi and the current Egyptian government pursued policies that have hindered full normalization. They increased militarization of the border region to assert Egyptian sovereignty over the disputed Halayeb triangle and to bolster the regime's image as the purveyor of a strong Egyptian state. This has limited the flow of people across the border, increasing distrust between Egypt and Sudan.<sup>5</sup> Both governments have also made visas for citizens of the other country difficult to obtain, further exacerbating tensions.<sup>6</sup>



More restrictions have been placed on travel between Egypt and Sudan, prompting a rise in smuggling and illicit methods of crossing the border.<sup>7</sup> This has added new challenges. In such an atmosphere, the idea of opening a third border crossing and integrating the two countries' railways has seemed as distant as ever, although in a surprising development in April 2020 it was announced that the first phase of linking their electricity grids had been completed.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the general volatility in bilateral ties has only added to the economic difficulties of marginalized communities on both sides of the border, while also adversely impacting the Egyptian and Sudanese economies.<sup>9</sup> This makes a shift in border policies more necessary than ever.

## Border Policies from Sudan's Independence to the Arab Uprisings

Egypt and Sudan's border is 1,276 kilometers long, making it Egypt's longest land boundary. The border is also the most populated of Egyptian border regions, with some 2.2 million residents in the three southern governorates of Aswan, New Valley, and Red Sea.<sup>10</sup> The border can be divided geo-

MAP 1

### Egypt-Sudan Border



graphically into three sections. Its easternmost section, which begins on the Red Sea, includes the disputed Halayeb triangle, which is rich in minerals and gold. Living conditions in this region are difficult due to high levels of aridity in some areas, enhanced security measures, and a legacy of famines. The region is mainly inhabited by nomadic tribes such as the Ababda and the Basharya.

The second sector encompasses those areas that connect the two states around the Nile River. This central sector is characterized by the presence of urban and agricultural communities, as well as much of the commercial activity in the border region. Aswan Governorate on the Egyptian side includes more than 1.5 million inhabitants. Halfa is the main city on the Sudanese side of the border in this area, and Sudan's Northern Province, where Halfa is located, has about 1 million inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the third sector, further to the west, extends from the Nile to reach the intersection of the borders of Egypt, Sudan, and Libya in the Western Desert. While there is rain in some parts of this border area, notably where the Egyptian army manages large agriculture and land reclamation projects, much of it is very arduous to live in.<sup>12</sup>

The Nubian people are an ethnic minority in Egypt. Their numbers were estimated in 2009 at more than 2.5 million, and many still inhabit the border region.<sup>13</sup> There are no published figures for the number of Nubians in Sudan. Nubians speak two native languages different from Arabic, Fadjeka and Kenouz, and are identifiable by their skin tone, which is darker than that of most Egyptians.<sup>14</sup> Their civilization dates back more than 7,000 years and once ruled over a large empire in northern Africa that included, briefly, all of modern-day Egypt.<sup>15</sup> Both communities, in addition to the Ababda and the Basharya, are the border region's oldest inhabitants and can be described as its native people.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Egyptians and Sudanese not from the region came as migrant laborers over the decades and settled there, particularly during the building of the Aswan Low Dam between 1899 and 1902 and the Aswan High Dam during the 1960s.<sup>17</sup>

A perennial complaint in the border area is that the regimes in Egypt and Sudan have, quite short-sightedly, transformed their political disputes into broader national disputes between the two countries. The belief is especially strong among Nubian leaders, who believe that their community is paying a high price for this situation.<sup>18</sup> That is why Nubians on both sides of the border have encouraged exchanges and pushed their respective regimes to improve border relations. One Nubian community leader expressed such an outlook in this way:

There is absolutely no dispute or conflict within our community toward the Sudanese. We are, and always have been, brothers and sisters. Yet all the disputes in media outlets between the two countries are, and always have been, political disputes between the two regimes over their agendas and interests, not at all those of the people.<sup>19</sup>

This perspective notwithstanding, the four factors that have served to hinder a normal cross-border relationship between Egypt and Sudan have strongly marked border relations and have created a negative tenor in bilateral ties that has been difficult to rise above. The past continues to influence the present, regardless of the more hopeful attitudes of border communities.

After the Egyptian revolution of July 1952, a new era began in Egyptian-Sudanese relations, which was reflected in the movement of people between the two countries. Sudan gained independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule in January 1956 and the Egyptian army was withdrawn from the country. The post-revolution regime in Egypt issued laws and decisions that led to major reversals in the cosmopolitan nature of the society.<sup>20</sup> It imposed restrictions on travel abroad for Egyptians as well as on foreign residents wanting to live in Egypt, which reduced cross-border contacts with Sudan after its independence.<sup>21</sup> This lasted for much of president Gamal Abdel Nasser's time in office until his death in 1970.<sup>22</sup>

Those policies and restrictions, as well as the Nasser regime's focus on security, made some Egyptians feel they were living in a giant prison.<sup>23</sup> It became very difficult for them to cross into Sudan, except under two conditions: if they were officially dispatched by the Egyptian regime or if they were Egyptian Nubians who had relatives on the Sudanese side. In the latter case, the Nubians had to go to their village mayor to have their names registered and obtain a travel permit, after which the Egyptian authorities would be informed. They could then enter Sudan without their passports.<sup>24</sup> This situation hindered cross-border relations, particularly the activities of Egyptian traders and businessmen. The latitude to travel to Sudan was essential for them, as Egypt mainly imported agricultural products and live animals from the country, requiring hands-on inspection.<sup>25</sup> Nor have the products traded changed much today, with 95 percent of Egyptian imports from Sudan in 2017 made up of meat, live animals, cotton, and sesame.<sup>26</sup>

A second factor that has affected cross-border interactions between Egypt and Sudan in recent decades is the displacement of both Egyptian and Sudanese Nubian communities during the 1960s to make room for the Aswan High Dam. More than 100,000 Nubians, roughly half from each country, were displaced from the region between October 18, 1963, and June 27, 1964.<sup>27</sup> The dam affected the life of Nubians in profound ways.<sup>28</sup> Many were relocated to the Kom Ombo Desert north of Aswan, and most of their original lands were permanently flooded by Lake Nasser, which the dam created. Meanwhile, Sudan's Nubians were moved to an area called New Halfa, in the country's southeast on the border with Eritrea.

Promises by the Egyptian government that Nubians would be returned to their lands after the dam was built (or to the closest locations to their submerged lands) were never fulfilled.<sup>29</sup> One weak excuse by Egypt's government was that resettlement of the population of the Sinai had become the

## MAP 2 Old and New Nubia



priority after the territory was returned by Israel in 1982.<sup>30</sup> The regimes of Mubarak and former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat made some efforts to bring back the Nubians, but these fell far short of the community's expectations of being settled close to their areas of origin.<sup>31</sup> In parallel, a lack of economic opportunities pushed Nubians to leave their villages of resettlement north of Aswan and head for Cairo or travel abroad.<sup>32</sup>

The large geographical distance between the Nubians' areas of resettlement in Egypt and Sudan and their areas of origin had another consequence. It weakened the community's ability to build bridges of communication between the two countries, which could have contributed to a better relationship in the border area. Interaction is limited today and cross-border transportation of goods by camel has been curtailed because of the large distances that need to be covered.<sup>33</sup> It is notable that during the period when the border situation was shaped less by security imperatives and when the passage of border communities, particularly Nubians, was easier, the conflict over the Halayeb triangle had never led to military clashes.<sup>34</sup> While there were perhaps many reasons for this, the back and forth of border populations contributed to a less antagonistic atmosphere.

A third factor that has adversely impacted Egyptian-Sudanese border relations is the two countries' dispute over the lucrative Halayeb triangle. Egypt and Sudan have a historical territorial dispute in their border area, one dating back to the British colonial era. Each side has claimed that the triangle should be under its sovereignty. The reason for this situation is that Egypt recognizes a political boundary with Sudan that was drawn up in 1899 between Egypt and Britain. Yet this boundary separated the Ababda and Basharya tribes.<sup>35</sup> This compelled Egypt's then interior minister, Mustapha Fahmy, to issue decrees between 1899 and 1907 to accommodate the tribes. He did so by amending the boundary in such a way that a Sudanese administration would manage the Ababda and Basharya tribal areas north of the 1899 boundary, which is what Sudan recognizes today.<sup>36</sup>

Southwest of the Halayeb triangle, on the Sudanese side of the 1899 boundary, is another territory, Bir al-Tawil, over which neither Egypt nor Sudan has asserted sovereignty. The reason for this is that Egypt's recognition of the 1899 boundary precludes it from recognizing Bir al-Tawil as Egyptian, while Sudan's recognition of the Fahmy boundary precludes it from recognizing Bir al-Tawil as Sudanese.

A main motive for the dispute over the Halayeb triangle is that the territory is rich in natural resources, in particular manganese. Manganese is used in the iron and glass industries and as a fertilizer. An Egyptian governmental study estimated that Halayeb's manganese reserves exceed 700,000 tons, and the state has shown an interest in exploiting them.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Egypt is looking into whether oil and gas reserves are present in waters offshore from the triangle, another of the reasons behind its conflict with Sudan over the territory.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, Bir al-Tawil is very arid and poor in resources, making it difficult for people to reside there. This explains why neither country is keen to assert sovereignty over it.

Today Egypt is in control of the Halayeb triangle and its largest city, Shalatin. Until the Mubarak presidency, the territory was under Sudanese control. However, following repeated clashes, Egyptian forces seized land there, and in 1994 they expelled the remaining Sudanese forces and took complete control of the triangle.<sup>39</sup> Many locals, who number at least 27,000, have avoided engaging publicly with the question of to which country they feel they belong.<sup>40</sup> However, one resident in the triangle remarked on the situation in a way that underlined the ambiguity of the area's inhabitants. He said, "Honestly, and very simply, while our stomachs tend to belong to Egypt, our minds and hearts belong to Sudan, and we have no problem with that."<sup>41</sup> This was a reference to the fact that during the last famine in the early 1990s, Egypt sent food to the locals after Sudan had failed to respond to their requests for assistance. Since then, Cairo has used that example to reassure the inhabitants that Egypt would guarantee their food security, even if culturally the inhabitants are closer to Sudan.

The fourth factor that has affected border relations is the way the territorial dispute between Egypt and Sudan exacerbated bilateral relations during the Mubarak era, reinforcing the legacy of mutual resentment. During that period ties were characterized by heightened tensions and even military clashes, leading to bad blood between the countries. Notable in poisoning the atmosphere early on was the sinking of an Egyptian Nile ferry in May 1983 that led to the death of more than 300 Sudanese. At the time, other than air links, ferries were the only means of transportation between the two countries. The ferry in question, called the *10th of Ramadan*, caught fire and sank in Lake Nasser.<sup>42</sup> Many Sudanese blamed Egyptian negligence and slow intervention for the high death toll. Moreover, the ferry was poorly maintained and inadequate safety precautions had been taken.<sup>43</sup>

A second major incident occurred in 1984 when the Egyptian regime deployed military forces in the Halayeb triangle, then still under Sudanese control. There was no clear reason for such an escalation. However, a community leader in southern Egypt tied it to efforts by Mubarak to consolidate his leadership in the period soon after the assassination of Sadat, his predecessor. “It came as a result of a military mindset, trying to affirm sovereignty over a disputed border region,” he observed. “This represented an easy political victory for the new regime, after the assassination of the late president Sadat.”<sup>44</sup>

The border region had not seen a similar deployment of forces before 1984.<sup>45</sup> The Egyptian move led to fighting between the security forces of the two countries in the triangle. In the aftermath of that episode, the Mubarak regime repeatedly resorted to military means in handling the border dispute.<sup>46</sup> In July 1994, Sudan submitted a complaint to the United Nations, stating that for over a year Egypt conducted 39 raids against Sudanese-controlled areas.<sup>47</sup>

This tension resulted in an assassination attempt against Mubarak while he was visiting Addis Ababa in 1995 for a meeting of the Organization of African Unity. The Egyptian regime accused Sudan of being behind the attack.<sup>48</sup> This had a major impact on Egyptian-Sudanese relations and the flow of people between Egypt and Sudan. Ethiopia’s permanent representative to the United Nations described Sudanese involvement as “clear as noon day,” and Khartoum’s refusal to extradite three of the suspects in the attack lent some credence to this view.<sup>49</sup> In response, Egypt temporarily halted the Nile ferries into Sudan and for the first time the authorities started to treat Sudanese seeking to live in Egypt after 1995 as foreigners.<sup>50</sup> They were required to apply for entry visas and residency permits. This affected Sudanese already residing in Egypt in ways that persist to this day. For instance, Sudanese were no longer able to enroll their children in Egyptian schools and universities. In response, Sudan shut down the Cairo University branch in Khartoum, along with many Egyptian businesses there.<sup>51</sup>

The so-called cold war between the two countries during the Mubarak era did allow rare openings when tensions were eased. In 2004, Egypt and Sudan signed the Four Freedoms Agreement that guaranteed freedom of movement, residency, work, and property ownership for citizens of both countries.<sup>52</sup> Yet, Egypt has never totally implemented the agreement on the ground, even though Sudan began doing so soon after the agreement was signed.<sup>53</sup> In fact, the situation of the Sudanese in Egypt, which had deteriorated after the assassination attempt against Mubarak, has become even worse today, despite the agreement.

In 2005, Egyptian security forces stormed a Sudanese sit-in at Cairo's Mustapha Mahmoud Park near the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The Sudanese were protesting their living conditions and demanding to be resettled in third countries.<sup>54</sup> The crackdown ended with at least twenty Sudanese killed, reviving the hostility between the two countries.<sup>55</sup>

The atmosphere of the pre-2011 period was one of perpetual fluctuation in the bilateral relationship. A heritage of poor relations was occasionally broken by both sides' desire to transcend this situation. The uprising in 2011 allowed for the possibility of genuine improvement. What it brought was more modest than that, however, reaffirming that ties were characterized by unfulfilled ambitions.

## **The Egyptian-Sudanese Border After the 2011 Uprising**

The improvement in relations along the Egyptian-Sudanese border would likely never have happened had the Egyptian uprising not occurred in 2011. The uprising led to Mubarak's downfall, removing the individual identified with a fraught period in Egyptian-Sudanese relations. It also allowed greater space for efforts from within Egyptian society to push for a change in behavior on the border. After a transitional period under military rule, Mubarak was replaced by the first democratically elected civilian president in Egypt's history, Morsi. While Morsi was able to do relatively little during his brief time in office, he was reportedly willing to take steps to meet two of the main demands of the border communities: opening land crossings to Sudan and bringing Nubians back to the border area.<sup>56</sup> The crowning moment of such efforts, which came after Morsi's ouster, was the opening of two land crossings between Egypt and Sudan—the Qustul crossing in 2014 and the Arqin crossing in 2017. This was the most significant boost to Egyptian-Sudanese cross-border relations since the two countries had cooperated over the Aswan High Dam and agreed to share Nile waters in 1959 and since they had signed the Four Freedoms Agreement of 2004.

The opening of the land crossings was unique because the decision was not initially embraced by the political leadership but appeared to be pushed by public pressure, particularly from the Nubian community.<sup>57</sup> Throughout the years following the uprising, there were numerous local and civil

initiatives calling for the Egyptian and Sudanese governments to facilitate the movement of people and goods across borders. Yet these initiatives were not endorsed by officials.<sup>58</sup> In response, Egyptian and Sudanese Nubians were able to harness cross-border social networks and maximize their impact on policy.<sup>59</sup>

The two new land crossings reduced travel time between Egypt and Sudan from seventeen hours via the Nile ferries to under five hours, thereby cutting the cost of transporting goods by some 75 percent.<sup>60</sup> Officials from both countries announced on numerous occasions that the border crossings would revive trade relations by increasing the value of exchanges from \$1 billion to an estimated \$3 billion.<sup>61</sup> Yet more than five years after the opening of the Qustul crossing, total trade between Egypt and Sudan is still estimated at only around \$1 billion.<sup>62</sup> There are no official updated statistics for the number of people who took the land route between the two countries in 2019, but there are only eleven buses crossing the border daily through Qustul and 60 through Arqin.<sup>63</sup> There are also estimates that 2 million Sudanese entered Egypt by air and land during the month of Ramadan in 2019.<sup>64</sup>

Both the Egyptian city of Aswan and the Sudanese city of Halfa have benefited to an extent from the opening of the crossings.<sup>65</sup> They have become way stations for Sudanese or Syrians heading toward Cairo, or for Egyptians and Syrians looking to pass through Sudan before migrating toward Europe after transiting through Libya. Yet the revenues from the new crossings are hardly comparable to those from tourism before 2011 in Aswan, whose major international heritage sites brought Egypt significant amounts of foreign currency.<sup>66</sup>

Despite enthusiastic official statements on the economic benefits of the new crossings, there are fears that these were overestimated.<sup>67</sup> This pessimism is rooted in the fact that the sources of dispute between Egypt and Sudan have usually prevailed.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, under Sisi's presidency, there has been less latitude for communities such as the Nubians to push for effective improvement in Egyptian-Sudanese relations. Although the crossings were opened under Sisi, the groundwork, such as the main road from Aswan to Abu Simbel, was laid under Mubarak, while the stretch of road from Abu Simbel to the border was built but not finalized under Morsi. In fact, despite the opening of the crossings, the current Egyptian president's policies on the border have hewed closely to those adopted during the Mubarak and Nasser years.

Once Sisi became president in June 2014, after a short transitional period following the military's removal of Morsi on July 3, 2013, Egyptian-Sudanese relations went through their ups and downs. While then Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir adopted similar economic and security policies as Sisi and the two countries opened the land crossings, the tensions of the past, as well as new ones, would come back to mar the relationship.



Notable among the new problems was Sudan's shifting position on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a project that Egypt has opposed because it threatens to reduce its share of the Nile waters.<sup>69</sup> Recently, Sudan appeared to side with Ethiopia by refusing to sign onto a February 2020 deal sponsored by the United States to regulate the filling and operation of the dam among Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan. This left Egypt as the only signatory after almost four months of negotiations.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, Sudan rejected a March 2020 Arab League resolution supporting Cairo in the dispute.<sup>71</sup> This attitude, on an issue particularly sensitive to Egypt because of the country's high water dependency, helped push Egyptian-Sudanese relations back to square one.

Also contributing to the setback in relations has been the Egyptian government's continuing limitations on the movement of persons across the border with Sudan. Since the assassination attempt against Mubarak in 1995, Egypt has required that Sudanese nationals obtain a visa to enter Egypt. After 2013, Egypt also imposed other restrictive border and travel policies. For instance, it requires that Egyptians between the ages of sixteen and fifty have a security permit on their person in order to visit specific countries, including Sudan.

Sudan has also adopted stricter border policies. In April 2017, Sudan required for the first time that Egyptian males between the ages of eighteen and fifty obtain visas for entry into the country, a requirement that still exists today.<sup>72</sup> This decision came amid increasing tensions that led both countries to recall their ambassadors in the aftermath of Bashir's May 2017 accusation that Egypt was supporting the rebels in Darfur fighting the government in Khartoum.<sup>73</sup> The Four Freedoms Agreement was intended to end such visa requirements, but to no avail. Until the Sudanese decision, Egyptians entering Sudan did so without a visa, despite that after the failed assassination attempt against Mubarak the Sudanese were required to obtain a visa to enter Egypt.

Because of the mutual border restrictions today, more people have resorted to illicit ways of crossing the borders in much riskier circumstances. This reached a peak after the Sudanese uprising of 2018–2019, when deteriorating economic conditions in Sudan led many Sudanese to try entering Egypt in search of better work opportunities.<sup>74</sup> While official figures from Egyptian border guards, quoted in local newspapers, refer only to people from multiple nationalities detained for illegally crossing the border, they show a fivefold rise from 6,000 illegal migrants detained in 2017 to 30,000 by December 2019.<sup>75</sup> This surge heightened frictions as Egyptians sought to put pressure on Sudanese authorities to cooperate better in controlling the border.<sup>76</sup> Adding to the strains, the Egyptians accused Sudan of welcoming members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood whom they had sought to arrest in the post–July 2013 coup period.<sup>77</sup> This led to tighter Egyptian security measures along the border, further marring the Egyptian-Sudanese relationship after that.

The Halayeb triangle has also remained a leading source of tension between Egypt and Sudan, despite the relative improvement in ties after 2011. This is a result of the continuing competition over the territory's mineral wealth and Egypt's having invited bids in March 2019 for offshore oil and gas exploration. A sign of how the Egyptian military has combined its security role with its economic interests is its November 2012 establishment of the Shalatin Company for Mineral Resources under the National Service Projects Organization, one of the military's departments handling its civilian economic activities.<sup>78</sup> The company's main purpose is to organize under its authority gold extraction activities in the Halayeb triangle, which further highlights one of the military's economic stakes in retaining the territory. However, the stakes have been just as high for Sudan since the independence of South Sudan in 2011. This denied Sudan a valuable source of oil, making competition over Halayeb more acute from Khartoum's perspective.

In February 2014, then Egyptian prime minister Hazem al-Beblawi issued a decree that would develop Halayeb as a city, a bureaucratic step allowing the state to establish government institutions in the triangle, thereby reinforcing Egyptian sovereignty over the territory. In January 2020, the Defense Ministry again reaffirmed that the border corresponded to the 1899 Anglo-Egyptian boundary, thereby stressing Egypt's claim over the Halayeb triangle. It did so in a video on the inauguration of the Berenice base, the largest Egyptian military base in the Red Sea area, located less than 100 kilometers north of the triangle, which underpinned the message. Yet the base is not focused solely on potential threats emanating from Sudan, but also serves to support Egyptian operations with regard to other countries to its south.<sup>79</sup>

The conflict over the Halayeb triangle could have prevented the opening of the Qustul and Arqin land crossings.<sup>80</sup> But for now Egypt and Sudan have found ways of activating cross-border relations in the area of the triangle, even if these remain far too limited to improve the livelihood of the communities living there. The Ras Hadraba border crossing into and out of the triangle remains closed because Sudan does not want to implicitly recognize Egypt's hold over the territory by opening it. Limited exchanges are allowed, however, as Egyptian and Sudanese merchants can deposit their goods there for counterparts on the other side of the border, with Egyptians paying import tariffs in the Red Sea city of Safaga.<sup>81</sup>

More generally, however, border communities have suffered from Ras Hadraba's closure with only menial jobs on offer for them, mainly as porters transporting goods through the crossing.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, the Egyptian approach after 2013 has been focused on countering smuggling activities, an important source of revenue for border inhabitants. Added to this are other forms of antagonism that have led to the occasional suspension of cross-border trade, such as hostile media campaigns in both

countries, often over Halayeb or more recently over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. In September 2016 and March 2017, Sudan banned Egyptian agricultural goods in response to media criticism. In an apparent bid to calm tensions, in May 2017 an Egyptian Foreign Ministry spokesman stated that “media outlets are the cause of the tension between the two countries.”<sup>83</sup>

The Halayeb dispute has also continued to divide the two countries’ societies. At a football match in Omdurman in February 2020, some Sudanese supporters put up a sign during a game with an Egyptian team that read, “Halayeb is Sudanese,” while others chanted “Halayeb is our right.” This twice led to the match being stopped. Such incidents, while perhaps normal in the context of sporting rivalries, only underscore how the border dispute has drifted down into society to affect everyday events and attitudes in Egypt and Sudan.<sup>84</sup>

The militarization of the Egyptian-Sudanese border by the Egyptian authorities has also been a major obstacle to the improvement in relations in the border area. Such measures may be understandable at one level given how terrorism has posed a significant challenge to the Sisi regime, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula. Yet this situation has not justified the transformation of all of Egypt’s border regions into military zones through an executive order of November 29, 2014.<sup>85</sup>

Since 2013, and more than previously, the Egyptian military has been deeply involved in economic activities in the country.<sup>86</sup> This has intensified with the militarization of the border area with Sudan, leading to its greater control over the principal economic pursuits in the Halayeb triangle—including the extraction of gold and other minerals as well as meat trade with Sudan.<sup>87</sup> A result of this has been increased public dissatisfaction as local communities feel they are being denied potential economic gains in the border area.<sup>88</sup> To understand why, one must know that owning land and property has been very complicated in Egypt’s border regions since the July 1952 coup, and even more so after July 2013 coup when the military expanded its economic activities. Border areas, because of their strategic location, are often highly controlled by Arab governments. But in Egypt this has been reinforced by the fact that the military behaves as if it owns national land, according to Law No. 124 of 1958.<sup>89</sup> The law gives the military control over Egypt’s desert, which constitutes a large portion of the country, and even potential oversight over private property in border and desert areas. Therefore, the armed forces have great authority to decide whether land there can be sold to private individuals or can be leased for reclamation projects.

Therefore, border communities today face multiple disadvantages. Their access to land has been highly constrained. They no longer enjoy revenues from tourism as they did before 2011. Tightened border policies have prevented them from crossing the border freely and have limited the economic benefits that land crossings normally provide. Despite Egypt’s and Sudan’s efforts to improve ties, their relations continue to be strained by distrust and an inability to permanently move beyond this situation, which is anchored in decades of disruptive policies.

## MAP 3

### Egypt Military Zones



## Conclusion

Egyptian-Sudanese border relations improved somewhat in the post-2011 period, though lasting mutual suspicion has underlined that an alternative approach is needed more than ever today to ameliorate the current situation. The principal aim would be to build trust and maximize the economic and social advantages that would ensue from an open border that could benefit communities on both sides. One way to do so would be for both Egypt and Sudan to work on reducing the obstacles to the movement of citizens across the border and implement fully the Four Freedoms Agreement of 2004, even if this is done gradually.

At the same time, allowing border communities to interact would also help build trust on both sides. However, for as long as the dispute over the Halayeb triangle remains unresolved, the prospect of more serious conflict will remain. Not only are the potential rewards from the territory high given

the presence of natural resources and the possibility of offshore oil and gas, but Halayeb has become tied to the image that leaderships in both countries are seeking to project, particularly Egypt. This has contributed to the militarization of the border by the Egyptian regime, creating the possibility of clashes in the future if other, more mutually beneficial channels of border interaction are avoided.

Mutual distrust will also continue to undermine projects that are intended to improve bilateral relations and integration, such as connecting railway lines and opening a third land crossing. Yet paradoxically, such a situation may also create openings. That is because both Egypt and Sudan are suffering from serious economic challenges—Egypt due to the decline in tourism and Sudan because of continued political turmoil in the aftermath of Bashir’s removal from office in 2019—that their border relations are only worsening. There can be hope in shared misery. Time will tell if Egyptian and Sudanese leaders agree.

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## Notes

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