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February 2025 

Egypt–Sudan Land Boundary



July 31, 2019
Marissa Wood

Egypt-Sudan Land Boundary

Mercator Projection, WGS-84 Datum
Scale accurate at 22°N

0 50 100 200 Miles
0 50 100 200 Kilometers

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The land boundary between Egypt and Sudan

At first blush, the land boundary between Egypt and Sudan is fairly simple, it runs from west to east along the 22° North parallel. But looking closer 32% of its length is actually in dispute, with Sudan claiming a boundary based on a different set of colonial documents.

All variations of the modern international boundary between Egypt and Sudan were established under the influence of, or direct administration by, British colonial authorities. The UK gained control over Egypt from the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century. Egypt was never an official colony of the UK, but it wasn't fully independent until after the Egyptian Revolution in 1953. Sudan was co-administered by British and Egyptian officials until its independence in 1956.

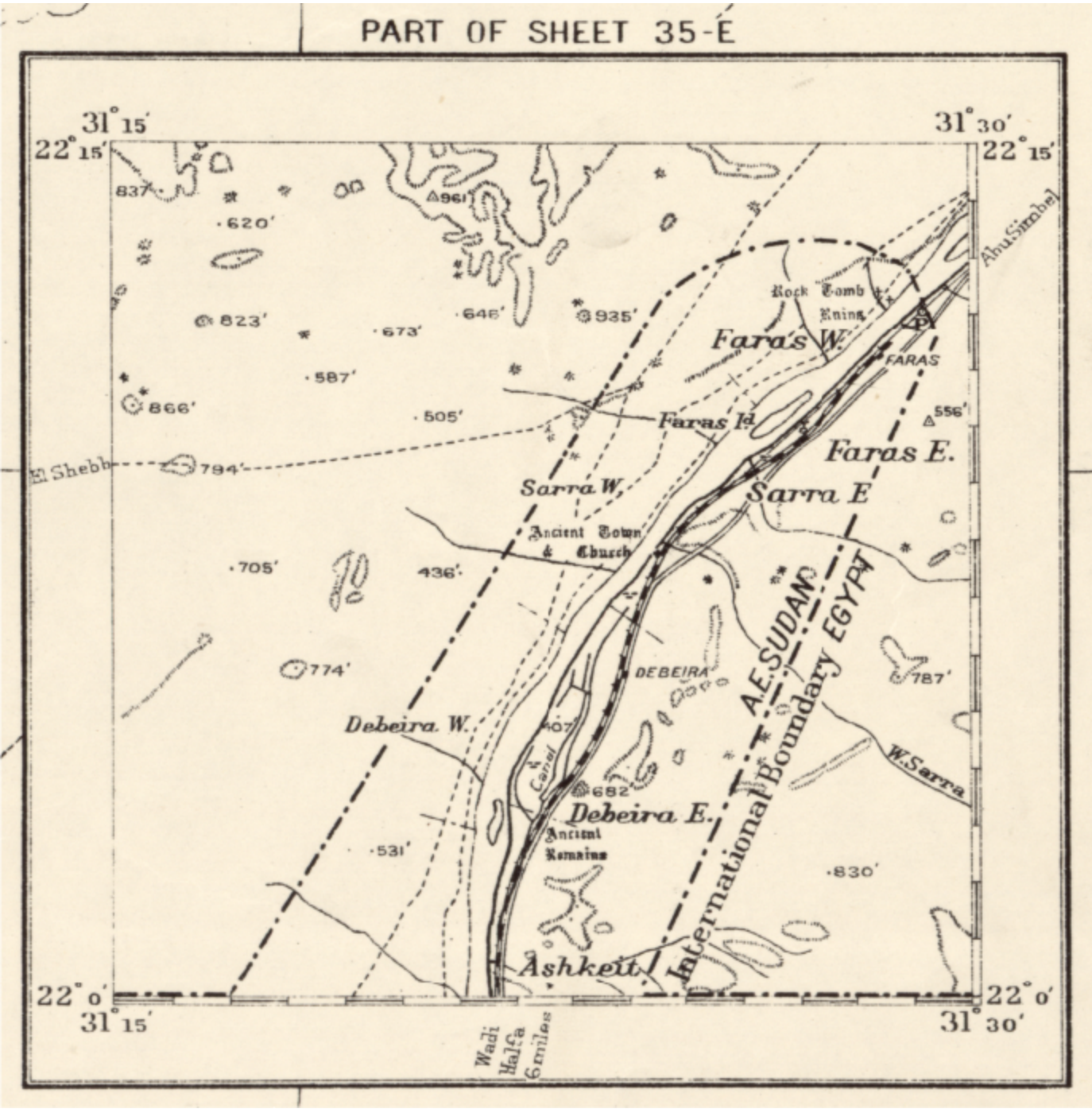
There are three areas in dispute between Egypt and Sudan: Wadi Halfa, Bir Tawil, and the Hala'ib Triangle. Egypt claims and has de facto control of all of the territory north of the 22° parallel as initially established as the international boundary in a 19 January 1899 Agreement as Egypt and the UK sought to reassert their authority and joint administration over Sudan. Over the next eight years, documents would be issued by colonial administrators adjusting or supplementing the initial boundary, and it is from these that Sudan's claims stem.

Wadi Halfa: A Dispute Under Water

The first dispute, geographically and temporally, is 650 km east of the tripoint with Libya and is commonly referred to as Wadi Halfa. The dispute itself actually lies 28 km north of the Sudanese Town of Wadi Halfa and today is almost completely submerged beneath Lake Nasser. On 26 March 1899, an arrêté was made adjusting the 22° North parallel boundary in the vicinity of Wadi Halfa. Instead of crossing the Nile River along the line of latitude, the government officials recommended a deviation to the north, placing several towns within Sudan.

The northward jut of the revised boundary around Wadi Halfa is now almost entirely beneath the shores of Lake Nasser (known as Lake Nubia in Sudan). In 1960, construction of a dam near the town of Aswan, Egypt began, and today the filled reservoir provides water and irrigation to Sudan and Egypt.

The status of the 1899 Arrêté, and subsequent reaffirmation in 1907, is often considered de jure. These documents were intended to adjust an international boundary. Egypt disputes this assessment, however.



The adjustment to the boundary near Wadi Halfa on a 1942 Sudanese map, corresponding with Sudan's modern claim.

The adjustment to the boundary near Wadi Halfa on modern imagery showing the flooding of the Nile River.

Bir Tawil and the Myth of *Terra Nullius*

Technically, neither State currently lays claim to Bir Tawil. But it is also not “*terra nullius*” (an area of land claimed by no state) because Sudan and Egypt assign it to the other country based on their claim lines. Bir Tawil lies south of the 22° North Parallel, so Egypt can’t claim it; they instead “give” it to Sudan. Bir Tawil does not fall within the adjustments to the tribal boundaries, so Sudan can’t claim it, and they “give” it to Egypt. Because it is a remote, unpopulated desert, neither State makes any effort to maintain de facto control over the area.

But many like to argue in favor of *terra nullius* for Bir Tawil. It is sensational and an interesting exercise to think outside the realm of established international boundaries and all of the modern geopolitics and historical context. In 2014, an American laid claim to Bir Tawil so that his daughter could be a princess and dealt with a massive international backlash. If this story interests you, The Guardian produced an excellent and in depth [piece](#) on the dispute, or lack there of, over Bir Tawil.

High Stakes Hala’ib Triangle

The bread and butter of the Egypt–Sudan dispute is over the Hala'ib Triangle. While it is still remote and desert, it is populated, and has natural resources, including gold and oil. Through Bir Tawil and the Hala'ib Triangle, Egypt claims the boundary along the 22° North parallel based on the January 1899 Agreement. Sudan's claim stems from a 4 November 1902 Arrêté that provided for a boundary adjustment or an additional administrative boundary, depending on your perspective, to allow for colonial authorities to more effectively manage the movement of nomadic tribes. Needless to say, the nomadic groups of the early 20th century were less interested in a convenient straight line boundary than they were over access to grazing lands and water that they had historically utilized.

There was almost a full scale conflict between Egypt and Sudan over the Hala'ib Triangle during the 1950s when Sudan set it up as an electoral unit. After Egypt's withdrawal of troops, the dispute then remained dormant until 1992 when Sudan granted drilling rights to a Canadian oil company. In response, Egypt unilaterally annexed the Hala'ib Triangle and has maintained de facto control of it since.

Egypt's claim to the Hala'ib Triangle. Note that they "give" Bir Tawil to Sudan based on their claim line.

Sudan’s claim to the Halai’b Triangle. Note that they “give” Bir Tawil to Egypt based on their claim line. In neither scenario is Bir Tawil *terra nullius*.

The Role of the Red Sea

Stakes over the Hala’ib Triangle grew as oil and natural gas exploration occurred in the Red Sea. The maritime area in dispute off shore of the Hala’ib Triangle is larger than the land territory in conflict and potentially richer in natural resources. In 2016, [Egypt and Saudi Arabia](#) signed a maritime boundary Agreement in the Red Sea that extends into the disputed area. Sudan lodged a protest with the United Nations, noting that points 55 through 61 of the Egypt–Saudi Arabia maritime boundary infringe on Sudanese maritime space.

The maritime area in dispute between Egypt and Sudan offshore of the Hala'ib Triangle.

The territory dispute between Egypt and Sudan has existed since colonial times and resolution seems to be no closer now than it was then. Relations between the two States are complex and often tense, though recently there have been bilateral efforts to work together to resolve water usage issues of the Nile River and the boundary dispute itself.

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