

From Ad Hoc Diplomacy to Global South Agency: Gulf Monarchies and the Geopolitics of Mediation

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Abstract

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies have emerged as increasingly influential third-party mediators in conflicts such as those in Yemen, Syria, and Palestine, as well as in the 2017 Gulf rift. Drawing on recent case studies and theoretical frameworks, the article explores three central dimensions: (1) the extent to which Gulf mediation reflects the broader shift from United Nations-led comprehensive accords to more ad hoc, fragmented, and state-driven peace processes; (2) whether the mediation strategies of these small but resource-rich states represent a new form of agency distinct from traditional Western-dominated approaches; and (3) the degree of inclusivity and local ownership in their peace efforts. While Gulf mediators often rely on personalized diplomacy and financial leverage, frequently termed checkbook diplomacy, the paper reveals significant variation in motivations, institutional capacities, and reputational capital among GCC states. The findings underscore the growing relevance of Gulf monarchies in global peacemaking, while also identifying the challenges they face in institutionalizing mediation, ensuring inclusivity, and overcoming intra-Gulf rivalries. This study contributes to both conflict resolution literature and the scholarship on emerging Global South diplomacy by examining how non-traditional actors reshape norms and practices in contemporary international mediation.

Keywords: mediation, Gulf mediation, conflict resolution, Gulf diplomacy, Global South

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Introduction

Existing scholarship on international mediation has traditionally focused on the role of international organizations, major powers, and institutionalized mechanisms such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (Bercovitch and Schneider 2000; Iji 2017; Miller 2024). However, the post-Cold War era has witnessed a gradual diversification of mediating actors. Small and middle powers from the Global South¹ have become increasingly active in shaping

¹ In this article, the Global South is understood primarily as an analytical category that captures the growing diplomatic agency of non-Western states in an increasingly multipolar international order, rather than solely as a geographical or

regional peace processes (Ribeiro and Sanghrajka 2026). Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies, equipped with considerable material resources but limited demographic and military capacity, exemplify this shift. Their interventions exemplify how economic power, along with elite diplomacy, can compensate for limited institutional infrastructure and global political weight (Aras and Al-Khulaifi 2025). Despite a growing body of work on Gulf foreign policy (Coates Ulrichsen 2021; Abdelkhalek 2022; Freer 2022a), the literature continues to treat mediation as a marginal component of their external relations. Most studies examine mediation as a function of small-state survival strategies (Kamrava 2015; Fraihat 2020; Telci and Rakipoglu 2021) or as an extension of soft power (Zweiri and AlQawasmi 2022), rather than as a distinct and evolving practice in global conflict management.

The Gulf monarchies have emerged as increasingly visible actors in international mediation and conflict resolution (Nuruzzaman 2015; Al-Ansari et al. 2021). A few recent examples of Gulf mediations include Qatar's facilitation of negotiations in Afghanistan in 2020 (Bagheri 2021), Qatar's mediation between Hamas and Israel (Bantekas 2023; Akpınar and Öztürk 2026), Oman's discreet diplomacy between Iran and the West during the Obama presidency (Barthe 2023), and Kuwait's mediation during the 2017 Gulf crisis (Alajmi 2018; Altioğ 2023). These examples mark a significant departure from their earlier roles as aid providers, financial donors, or secondary partners in Western-led peace efforts. Despite this growing engagement, the mediation practices of the Gulf states remain understudied within the broader literature on conflict resolution and International Relations.

This article addresses that gap by offering a comparative and empirical analysis of mediation practices across GCC member states, situating them within the global shift from UN-led, comprehensive peace accords toward more ad hoc, fragmented, and state-driven processes. It examines three interrelated questions: (1) To what extent do Gulf mediation efforts reflect this structural transformation in global conflict resolution? (2) Do these small but resource-rich monarchies embody a new form of diplomatic agency distinct from traditional Western-dominated approaches? (3) How inclusive and locally grounded are their mediation practices in contexts where civil society, non-state actors, and cultural norms play critical roles? The article argues that Gulf mediation represents a model of Global South diplomacy—one that blends material leverage and personalized elite diplomacy with claims to cultural and religious legitimacy.

Methodologically, the study employs a comparative approach, drawing on policy reports, UN documents, official statements, and scholarly works. The analysis is structured around four analytical dimensions (motivations and narratives, institutional mechanisms, mediation strategies, and reputational outcomes) to facilitate cross-country comparison among GCC

developmental label (Liu 2023). Although the GCC monarchies differ from many Global South states in terms of wealth and state capacity, they increasingly exhibit characteristics associated with this emerging diplomacy, including greater strategic autonomy, diversified partnerships, and a more active role in international governance (Coates Ulrichsen 2021; Al-Saidi et al. 2019). Accordingly, the concept is used here to situate Gulf mediation within the broader diffusion of international mediation beyond its traditional Western institutional centers.

states. Empirically, it examines a range of cases in which Gulf monarchies have acted as third-party mediators, including Yemen, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Palestine, and intra-GCC disputes. Theoretically, the paper situates Gulf mediation at the intersection of small state diplomacy, Global South agency, and contemporary mediation typologies. In doing so, the article contributes to two overlapping scholarly conversations. First, it enriches the field of conflict resolution by highlighting the agency of non-traditional mediators in the current international system. Second, it advances the theorization of Gulf diplomacy by conceptualizing mediation as a foreign policy instrument that reinforces legitimacy, soft power, and identity construction.

The first section of the article situates Gulf mediation within the broader transformation of international mediation, tracing the shift from UN-centered, multilateral peace processes toward more decentralized, state-led, and regionally driven mediation. This is followed by an examination of the evolution of mediation in Gulf diplomacy, analyzing how GCC monarchies have become increasingly influential mediators while highlighting the distinct strategies, diplomatic traditions, and institutional approaches adopted by individual member states. The third section explores the institutional foundations of Gulf mediation, examining the diplomatic tools, capacities, and material resources that underpin their mediation efforts. Finally, the last part assesses the extent to which Gulf mediation incorporates principles of inclusivity and local ownership, considering whether these practices reflect the maturation of Gulf mediation or primarily an adaptation to evolving international expectations.

A Global Shift in Mediation Practices

Conflicts impose high political and human costs, prompting states to pursue peaceful settlement through mechanisms such as direct negotiation and third-party mediation (Gartner et al. 2004; Yılmaz 2010; Akçapar 2021). At its core, mediation is a collaborative decision-making process in which an external party influences aspects of negotiations while the disputing parties retain ultimate authority over the outcome (Bercovitch and Gartner 2009: 5). Traditionally, until the end of the Cold War, the UN occupied a central role in international mediation and conflict resolution. Since the early 1990s, however, mediation has become increasingly decentralized, with a growing diversity of state and non-state actors reducing the UN's relative prominence (Iji 2017). Although the UN possesses substantial material and human resources, its mediation efforts are often constrained by institutional and political challenges. Unlike sovereign states, the organization must reconcile the divergent interests of its member states, particularly those of the five permanent members of the Security Council, thereby making unified and decisive mediation more difficult (Iji 2017). These political constraints, combined with broader institutional and leadership challenges, have further limited the effectiveness of UN mediation (Ali 2025).

The decentralization of international mediation has created greater opportunities for states to assume more active roles in conflict resolution. Among these, small and middle powers have emerged as particularly important mediators, demonstrating that diplomatic credibility,

neutrality, and political flexibility can often compensate for limited material capabilities (Tür and Salık 2017; Almezaini and Rickli 2017). The Oslo Accords, a milestone in the Arab–Israeli conflict, were facilitated by Norway, illustrating the capacity of a small state to shape major peace processes (Eriksson 2020). Similarly, Mongolia has demonstrated through its Ulaanbaatar Dialogue initiative that small and medium-sized states can foster regional peace despite limited military and economic power. By positioning itself as a neutral peace broker in the Korean conflict since 2013, Mongolia has shown how mediation can simultaneously advance international influence and small-state security interests (Hong 2022).

One consequence of the diversification of international mediation has been the growing importance of financial leverage as a diplomatic resource. Unlike traditional mediators that rely primarily on institutional legitimacy or military influence, resource-rich states can employ economic assistance, reconstruction funding, and financial guarantees to facilitate negotiations. This practice has become particularly evident among several Gulf monarchies, where it is frequently described as checkbook diplomacy (Freer 2022b). The use of material resources has therefore become an increasingly important mechanism through which regional states complement—or at times substitute for—the institutional capacities traditionally associated with the UN (Aras and Al-Khulaifi 2025). Reflecting this trend, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) has described the strategic deployment of Gulf financial resources as “Gulf bailout diplomacy” (IISS 2023).

Situating Mediation in Gulf Diplomacy

The literature on Gulf mediation remains limited but is gradually expanding. One strand examines the GCC as a regional organization engaged in conflict management. Abdelkhalek (2022), for example, analyzes the GCC’s involvement in disputes ranging from the Iran–Iraq War and the Yemeni crisis to the 1981 Fahd Plan and the Hawar Islands dispute between Bahrain and Qatar. At the same time, scholars have highlighted the institutional limitations of the GCC as a mediator. Al-Ansari, Aras, and Yorulmazlar (2021), for instance, argue that the organization demonstrated limited effectiveness during the 2017 Gulf crisis despite ultimately facilitating reconciliation at the Al-Ula Summit. Alongside studies of the GCC as a regional organization, a growing body of scholarship examines the mediation practices of individual GCC member states, predominantly through the lens of small-state diplomacy. Rather than treating mediation as a distinct phenomenon, most studies interpret it as an extension of broader small-state foreign policy strategies. Fraihat (2020: 79), for example, compares Kuwaiti mediation with that of the United States (US) and argues that Kuwait’s legitimacy and timing proved more effective in de-escalating the 2017 Gulf crisis than the coercive leverage the US employed. Similarly, studies of Oman emphasize mediation and non-intervention as core elements of its foreign policy and sovereignty (Albasoos and Maashani 2020; Worrall 2021). Other works examine Qatari and Kuwaiti mediation primarily through the framework of small-state diplomacy (Kamrava 2015; Coates Ulrichsen 2021; Altiok

2023; Baycar 2025). In practice, Gulf mediation has taken two principal forms: bilateral initiatives undertaken by individual states and multilateral efforts conducted through the GCC as a regional organization. Although both forms remain important, bilateral mediation has become the dominant approach, allowing Gulf monarchies to capitalize on their diplomatic flexibility and material resources to engage in conflicts where multilateral mechanisms have often proved ineffective (Freer 2022a).

Although GCC monarchies share several common objectives and mediation tools, their approaches differ considerably in terms of motivations, institutionalization, and diplomatic style (Freer 2023). Qatar represents the earliest and perhaps the most developed example of mediation as a state policy. Qatar's emergence as a proactive and influential mediator gained particular momentum under the leadership of Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani (1995–2013), whose foreign policy vision transformed the country from a relatively obscure Gulf state into an assertive diplomatic actor (Kamrava 2011; Barakat 2014). Almost no major regional conflict since the mid-1990s has unfolded without some form of Qatari mediation, positioning both the state and its leadership as central actors in resolving such conflicts. Under Sheik Hamad and then Sheik Tamim, Qatar developed one of the most extensive mediation portfolios among emerging non-Western mediators, facilitating negotiations between Eritrea and Sudan (1999), Chad and Sudan (2009), and Djibouti and Eritrea (2010), while also hosting the protracted Darfur peace negotiations between 2009 and 2013. On the regional level, Qatar played a central role in the Lebanon peace process (2008), successive rounds of the Yemen peace process (2008, 2011), and intra-Palestinian reconciliation talks (2006, 2012). Beyond the Middle East, Doha also facilitated peace dialogues concerning Afghanistan (2006, 2011, 2019), Syria (2012, 2015), Libya (2018, 2021), and Sudan (2020) (Barakat 2014; Milton et al. 2025).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), by contrast, has generally pursued a more pragmatic and interest-driven approach that closely aligns mediation with its broader strategic and economic objectives (*Mediation by the Gulf States Will Increase* 2024). In addition to its regional initiatives, Abu Dhabi has increasingly expanded its mediation portfolio beyond the Middle East, most notably by facilitating multiple prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine since 2023 (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025). These efforts illustrate the UAE's growing ambition to position itself as a diplomatic broker with global reach. Unlike Qatar, whose mediation has often been associated with its ability to engage both Western governments and Islamist movements, the UAE has been more selective in choosing mediation initiatives that complement its national interests. This pragmatism was evident during the 2021 India–Pakistan crisis. Although the UAE offered to facilitate dialogue between the two sides (*Reuters* 2021), it deliberately avoided direct involvement in the Kashmir dispute, recognizing that a more interventionist role could jeopardize its extensive strategic and economic relations with India—its largest trading partner and the principal source of its expatriate workforce (Fenton-Harvey 2023).

Saudi Arabia, the GCC's largest and most populous state, has adopted a mediation model that differs significantly from those of both Qatar and the UAE. Whereas Qatar and the UAE have often relied on highly personalized leadership diplomacy, Saudi mediation has traditionally been exercised through institutional and state-led channels, reflecting the Kingdom's position as a leading regional power (Kamrava 2013). Rather than seeking to mediate across a broad range of international conflicts, Saudi Arabia has concentrated on disputes central to the political and security order of the Middle East, including Yemen, Lebanon, Palestine, and the Arab-Israeli conflict (Kamrava 2013; Rieger 2016). This regional focus has been evident in several landmark initiatives. Saudi Arabia brokered the 1989 Taif Accord, which brought the Lebanese civil war to an end; introduced the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, under Crown Prince Abdullah, as a framework for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict; and sponsored the 2007 Mecca Accord, aimed at fostering reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas (Kamrava 2013). More recently, Saudi Arabia has also demonstrated a willingness to expand its mediation portfolio beyond the Middle East, including its role in mediating between India and Pakistan during the 2025 crisis (Karim 2025).

Kuwait and Oman have both concentrated primarily on regional disputes, yet they have developed distinct mediation traditions. While Kuwait has focused largely on its immediate neighborhood—including Iraq, intra-GCC disputes, and the broader Arab world—Oman has adopted a wider regional approach grounded in neutrality and non-alignment. Kuwait's long-standing reputation as a regional mediator is closely associated with the legacy of Sheik Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, who served as foreign minister for four decades (1963–2003), later as prime minister, and ultimately as emir until his death in 2020. Under his stewardship, Kuwait played an active role in resolving numerous intra-Arab disputes, ranging from tensions among the Trucial States² during the formation of the UAE to conflicts involving Iran and Bahrain, North and South Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Qatar. Sheik Sabah also played a leading role in establishing the GCC in 1981 and personally spearheaded mediation efforts during the 2017 Gulf crisis, helping to prevent further regional escalation. Kuwait's mediation tradition has therefore been closely tied to personal diplomacy and political leadership (Feierstein 2020).

Oman, by contrast, has consistently sought to position itself as an impartial interlocutor, earning it the reputation of the “Switzerland of the Middle East” (Worrall 2021; *Mediation by the Gulf States Will Increase* 2024). Its strategy of neutrality has become particularly visible in recent years. The Saudi-Iranian normalization agreement of March 2023, widely hailed as a diplomatic breakthrough, was preceded by years of Omani and Iraqi back-channel diplomacy that laid the groundwork before China's formal sponsorship (Baycar 2023; Cafiero 2024). Building on this role, Muscat has quietly facilitated rapprochement between Bahrain and Iran by hosting preliminary talks at the Iranian Embassy in Oman while also acting as an intermediary between Cairo and Tehran. In 2023, Sultan Haitham personally visited both capitals to encourage the resumption of diplomatic relations. These initiatives illustrate

2 The Trucial States was the historical name for the group of tribal sheikhdoms that formed the UAE in 1971.

how Oman's mediation strategy combines pragmatic national interests with a long-standing commitment to dialogue and regional stability, reflecting its conviction that Gulf security depends on sustained engagement among rival regional actors (Cafiero 2024).

Bahrain, by comparison, has played only a limited role in regional mediation. Freer (2023) argues that Bahrain has largely participated through multilateral GCC initiatives rather than independent mediation efforts, while domestic political constraints have limited its ability to develop mediation as a central instrument of foreign policy (*Mediation by the Gulf States Will Increase* 2024). Looking at these six cases, it can be said that Gulf mediation does not constitute a single diplomatic model. They have developed distinct mediation traditions shaped by differences in state size, foreign policy priorities, institutional capacity, leadership styles, and strategic interests. Qatar has prioritized mediation as a central pillar of foreign policy; the UAE has integrated mediation into pragmatic economic statecraft; Saudi Arabia has emphasized regional leadership through institutional diplomacy; Kuwait has relied heavily on personal diplomatic leadership; and Oman has built its reputation on neutrality and sustained dialogue. Bahrain, by contrast, has remained a comparatively limited actor.

Are the Gulf Countries New Influential Mediators?

This section examines whether the negotiation and mediation initiatives of these states introduce new instruments or forms of agency into global practices, reflecting their unconventional positions in mediation and raising questions about inclusivity in peace processes. Simply, are their mediation systematically different than the conventional methods? Third-party intervention is predominantly a non-violent, voluntary process through which an external actor provides guarantees to disputing parties, typically upon their invitation, and can be approached through various frameworks (Bercovitch and Gartner 2009: 4). As Schmidt (2005) suggests that the form of conflict, whether asymmetrical or symmetrical, is determinant in terms of the position of the third party. Secondly, the third party's strategies are critical, whether monitoring a process, enforcing a plan, or implementing a program. This paper offers a comparative analysis of Gulf states' mediation efforts across two key dimensions: their available assets and the strategies they employ in third-party mediation. Their mediation assets comprise three key components: the underlying motivations that shape their narratives, the institutional mechanisms that support their initiatives, and their international reputations as credible mediators.

Assets

The power of the Arab Gulf states in regional and global diplomacy has been a matter of inquiry (Barakat 2014; Freer 2023; IISS 2023). Although they possess financial assets, primarily oil and gas, they are mostly categorized as small powers in terms of their political influence in the international system (Kamrava 2015; Rickli and Almezaini 2016; Fraihat 2020; Baycar 2025). As mediators, they have three assets: 1) the narrative of mediation referring their high

motivation, 2) the institutional mechanisms they use, and 3) the reputations that imply the outcomes of their efforts. While they all share values and interests in mediation as a state policy, not all GCC states approach conflict mediation in the same way (Freer 2023).

To begin with the first asset, the official foreign policy narratives of GCC states highly emphasize their pursuit for the mediation and the peaceful settlement of disputes. This commitment is reflected in their constitutions, all of which contain provisions that frame foreign policy around promoting peace and international cooperation (Article 7 for Qatar, Article 157 for Kuwait, Article 10 for Oman, Article 25 for Saudi Arabia, and Article 12 for the UAE). The Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar states that

The foreign policy of the State is based on the principle of maintaining international peace and security by encouraging the settlement of international disputes by peaceful means, and supporting the people's right to self-determination and non-interference in internal affairs of the State, and cooperation with peace-loving nations (Article 7).

The Constitution of the State of Kuwait clearly declares its support for promoting world peace. Article 157 has a special reference to peace. Still, the same article states that Kuwait "is part of the integrity of the Greater Arab World," an important detail given Kuwait's role in mediating the Gulf crisis and its peacebuilding efforts in Iraq and Syria.

The Basic Statute of the State of Oman reinforces

ties of cooperation and reaffirming friendly relations with all states and nations on the basis of mutual respect, common interest, non-interference in the internal affairs, and adherence to the international and regional charters and treaties and the generally recognized principles of international law conducive to the advancement of peace and security among states and nations (Article 10).

The Constitution of the United Arab Emirates implies that

The foreign policy of the UAE shall be directed towards supporting the Arab and Islamic causes and interests and towards establishing closer friendship and co-operation with all the nations and peoples on the basis of the principles of the charter of the United Nations Organization and international ideals.

As their constitutions show, they all include references to peace and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Although constitutional provisions do not necessarily determine or constrain foreign policy behavior in practice, they provide valuable insight into how states officially frame their diplomatic identity and foreign policy priorities. In this sense, the constitutional references examined here are not treated as binding commitments but as expressions of the official narratives through which Gulf monarchies legitimize mediation and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Consequently, these constitutional provisions are important not simply as statements of foreign policy, but also as part of broader processes of state identity construction and diplomatic self-representation.

In their national visions, the Arab Gulf states also emphasized their role in a peaceful international order. The Omani vision underlines that the nation is prepared “to play an active regional and global role in achieving peaceful coexistence and contributing to the region’s stability and evolution, without losing the authenticity of their identity or forsaking their long-standing heritage or principles” (Vision Document n.d.: 44).

Qatar National Vision 2030 defines the state as “a responsible member of the international community” and “attaining international security and peace, and will fulfill its international commitments” (*Qatar National Vision 2030* 2008: 20). The Emirati national vision has a specific cluster of objectives in diplomacy. It defines the state as “a significant force in global diplomacy, a trusted bridge for trade and partnerships, and a major contributor to humanitarian relief and peace efforts” (*We the UAE 2031: Towards New Peaks* 2023: 35). The Kuwaiti national vision has an objective called Global Position, which aims to enhance “Kuwait’s regional and global presence in spheres such as diplomacy, trade, culture, and philanthropy” (New Kuwait 2017). Although there is no direct relationship between their foreign policy actions and these statements regarding their motivations for the mediation narrative, the Arab Gulf states clearly display an official tendency to engage in constructive peace efforts. Yet, their narrative or intention does not amount to a material asset that enhances their credibility as mediators or gives them more “moving power” to influence the parties and put a settlement in place (Maoz and Terris 2006: 412).

Institutional mechanisms are the second asset that might impact the mediation efforts by the Gulf monarchies. For the Arab Gulf states, the foreign policy making is conducted by a small circle of people, including the heads of state (Emir for Qatar, Sultan for Oman, King for Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and President for the UAE), the prime ministers (if they have one), and ministers of foreign affairs (Wright 2012; Milton et al. 2025). Despite the diplomatic accomplishments, the Gulf mediation model is not without its shortcomings. One of the most significant challenges lies in the institutional capacity. For example, the Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been criticized for lacking the in-house expertise and professional infrastructure characteristic of more seasoned mediating states (Barakat 2014). Much of Qatar’s mediation has been attributed to the personal initiative and political capital of its leadership, particularly former Emir Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and his Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheik Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani (Abu Razag 2021).

However, despite the lack of strong institutionalization of mediation in Qatar there is an emerging progress in institutionalizing mediation. Recent developments, however, suggest a gradual process of institutionalization. In 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established dedicated ministerial portfolios for mediation, expanded the role of special envoys and senior mediation officials, and concluded cooperation agreements with countries including Sweden, Norway, and Finland to strengthen mediation expertise and knowledge exchange. The Ministry has also emphasized both Track I and Track II mediation while promoting the inclusion of women, refugees, internally displaced persons, and other marginalized groups in peace processes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Qatar n.d.).

Moreover, Qatar has initiated several programs that could benefit its mediation and facilitation efforts. Qatar Mediation Forum has gained significant momentum in bringing together diplomats, world leaders, and practitioners, thereby advancing progress (The Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies n.d.). Moreover, Qatar and Oman aim to institutionalize their mediation through bilateral and multilateral cooperation. For example, Oman and Qatar are members of the “Group of Friends of Mediation” at the UN, founded in 2010 (United Nations Peacemaker n.d.). Furthermore, Oman and Switzerland signed a memorandum of understanding on mediation and peacebuilding in 2019, reinforcing their mediation identity (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs 2023).

Reputation is the third asset monarchies use to define their efforts as third-party mediators, shaping other parties’ expectations of one’s own behavior. Their reputation in mediation can enhance credibility in the bargaining process (Svensson 2009). Each Gulf state has been recognized as a significant mediator for different reasons and at various levels. For example, Kuwait has a reputation as a natural mediator in the sub-region (Coates Ulrichsen 2021). Oman, on the other hand, is depicted as an interlocutor state with a pragmatic approach to the long-term geostrategic realities (Worrall 2021). The Qatari mediation is typically depicted as an aggressive (or active, or self-assertive) small-state mediation. Its use of financial sources, including foreign aid, investments, Sovereign Wealth Funds, and trade relations, is portrayed as checkbook diplomacy (ElEtreby 2014). In a similar vein, Saudi Arabia’s interventions as a third-party mediator in the regional and global affairs are defined as petrodplomacy or Riyalpolitik, referring to the Kingdom’s financial assets (Blumi 2018).

Strategies

This part assesses the GCC states’ strategies regarding their roles and commitments in third-party interventions. There are several key characteristics to analyze the mediating role of the Arab Gulf states. First of all, the political culture and economic assets of the monarchies propose a diverse set of strategies and motivations in mediation than those of the great powers (Freer 2023). Despite similarities in their political and economic systems, not all oil-rich states employ the same strategies for mediation. Secondly, the monarchies’ mediation strategies lack a unified approach across the GCC. Instead, they display an intra-Gulf competitive angle, as argued by Freer (2023). Thirdly, an inclusivity issue is highlighted, as local societies in conflict-affected areas are not fully engaged in the mediation process (Blumi 2018; Barakat and Milton 2019). Thus, there is a problem of local ownership that differentiates the Gulf mediation from the Global South mediation (Bilgin 2019).³ As Bilgin (2019) underlines, the prevalence of actors from the Global North in resolving conflicts in peripheral countries reflects a Eurocentric tendency that undermines local ownership. The role of the Arab Gulf states as regional actors in the regional conflict might enhance the local voices. However, in its current form, the Gulf mediation is less institutional and global. It is rather personalized, less transparent (Liu 2023; Mladenov 2024)

³ The concept of local ownership is borrowed from Bilgin (2019: 77).

As a fourth characteristic, the Gulf mediation plays a bridging role between Western policymakers and the conflicting parties (including non-state actors such as the Taliban, Hamas, and Houthis). The Arab Gulf monarchies can be seen as political intermediaries between the parties, rearticulating Western solutions (Aras and Akpınar 2026). Alternatively, we can define this role as a connection or bridge between the parties, articulating a new narrative that diverges from conventional mediation practices, as seen in Qatar's roles in Palestine and Afghanistan, and in Oman's role in Yemen. For example, by hosting the Taliban Political Office in Doha and facilitating the US–Taliban Agreement in 2020, Qatar provided a platform for dialogue that advanced both US security objectives and its own reputation as a trusted interlocutor (Milton et al. 2025). This role extended to subsequent regional crises, including prisoner exchanges, humanitarian coordination in Afghanistan, and negotiations involving Hamas, during which Doha served as a discreet communication channel linking Western powers, regional actors, and armed movements (Horinuki 2024).

Fifth, the monarchies' mediation approaches can be broadly divided into two phases: before and after the Arab revolts. The post-2011 era has displayed bolder ideological contradictions among the Gulf monarchies in their regional policies and interventions as third-party mediators. Syria serves as a compelling example of the intra-Gulf logic of difference. Qatari intervention in Syria tended to support the opposition voices. Whereas Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE normalized their relations with the regime before the December revolution in 2024 (Pericoli 2024). Lastly, the gap between Gulf mediation practices and conventional expectations warrants closer examination. Mediation is often evaluated in terms of high-level agreements and definitive conflict resolution outcomes. However, as Worrall (2021) suggested, this narrow focus overlooks incremental processes, backchannel efforts, and micro-level dynamics that may not produce immediate results but still contribute to longer-term conflict management and dialogue.

Yet, as the following section discusses, Gulf mediation lacks a clearly defined strategy of inclusivity that addresses micro-level conflict dynamics. The primary mediation approach employed by Arab Gulf states can be characterized as power mediation, which involves the use of material leverage or coercive tools—often referred to as hard power—to induce parties to negotiate and reach a settlement (Druckman and Stern 2000; Altunışık and Çuhadar 2010). In the Gulf context, such hard power typically takes the form of financial resources (investments, financial inducements for post-conflict settlement, and foreign aid) and personalized political ties.

This reliance on material and relational leverage renders Gulf mediation somewhat incompatible with conventional definitions in the mediation literature. Interestingly, although Gulf actors employ hard power, their role often aligns more closely with that of a facilitator—defined as a neutral third party who enables communication between disputing sides, organizes logistics, conveys messages, manages information flows, and structures the negotiation agenda. Facilitators typically do not participate directly in substantive negotiations, but they

play a crucial role in sustaining constructive dialogue (Quinn et al. 2009; Bercovitch and Gartner 2009). Their facilitator role includes two mediating functions of the Arab Gulf states. The first function is backchanneling, which involves providing a secure space for meetings and facilitating communication between parties—for instance, Oman mediates between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, while Qatar engages with Western powers and non-state actors such as Hamas and the Taliban (Barakat 2014; Worrall 2021). The second is sealing accords to ensure the safe passage of hostages during crises and evacuations. The Qatari foreign ministry primarily negotiated the recent hostage crisis between Israel and Hamas. In the case of Afghanistan, Doha was used as a safe passage hub for evacuees fleeing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Thus, according to the conventional mediation literature, these approaches primarily reflect a facilitator role exercised through a power-based strategy.

A Growing Trend Towards Inclusivity in Peace Processes

While inclusivity has become almost a norm in peace processes, its practical implementation remains uneven and often selective. Empirical cases reveal a persistent gap between normative commitments and mediation practices. For instance, in the later phases of the Afghan peace process mediated by Qatar, women were largely marginalized from core negotiations despite international advocacy for their inclusion (Aras and Akpınar 2026). This exclusion reflects a broader structural tension in contemporary mediation; while inclusivity is rhetorically endorsed, it is frequently subordinated to elite-driven, security-oriented bargaining dynamics.

Even though Gulf mediation, in terms of inclusivity, remains selective and mostly elite-driven, there is also growing diversification among actors and greater awareness of local culture. Inclusivity extends not only to the actors but also to local culture. Gulf mediation has shown both positive and negative trends in this matter. Qatar's approach to mediation has demonstrated varying degrees of contextual sensitivity. In Lebanon, for example, Qatar was praised for its nuanced understanding of the country's complex political landscape and for effectively leveraging sources of power during the preparatory stages of negotiations (Barakat and Milton 2019). In contrast, its mediation efforts in Yemen were criticized for misaligning with local customs and traditions—specifically the indigenous mediation practice of *wasata*⁴—resulting in peace agreements that lacked moral legitimacy and binding authority over the conflict parties (Barakat and Milton 2019). These inconsistencies suggest that Qatar needs to develop a more robust institutional framework for mediation that incorporates cultural knowledge, conflict sensitivity, and technical proficiency.

The end of the GCC rift, marked by the signing of the Al-Ula Accords in January 2021, opened new avenues for intra-Gulf cooperation in conflict mediation. With regional stability increasingly tied to collective efforts, there is growing potential for joint action on multilateral crises, such as the humanitarian response to the 2023 earthquake in Syria and Turkey or the

4 Wasata refers to customary mediation practices that give agreements moral weight and encourage compliance among conflict parties (Barakat and Milton 2019).

ongoing situation in Afghanistan. As Qatar continues to expand its diplomatic footprint, the institutionalization of its mediation practices and the enhancement of technical capacities will be critical to sustaining its role as a credible and effective peacemaker in an increasingly multipolar world order.

Conclusion

This study has examined the evolving mediation practices of the GCC states within the broader transformation of international mediation toward more decentralized, state-led, and regionally driven conflict resolution. The analysis demonstrates that the growing mediation role of GCC monarchies reflects a broader shift away from the UN's historical dominance in comprehensive peace processes toward a more fragmented landscape characterized by multiple state mediators. This transformation has been driven in part by the limitations of traditional multilateral mediation and the growing prominence of regional diplomatic actors. In this evolving environment, GCC monarchies have leveraged financial resources, diplomatic flexibility, and increasingly institutionalized mediation capacities to establish themselves as influential actors in regional and international conflict resolution.

While GCC states share several structural characteristics, including monarchical governance, hydrocarbon-based economies, and relatively limited military and demographic capabilities, their mediation strategies diverge significantly in terms of institutional capacity, diplomatic traditions, and geopolitical ambitions. The findings demonstrate that Gulf mediation represents not merely a new diplomatic instrument but a distinct form of state agency within contemporary international mediation. The comparative analysis further reveals that there is no single Gulf mediation model. Rather, GCC states have developed distinct mediation traditions that collectively reflect the broader transformation of international mediation, in which small but resource-rich non-Western states increasingly exercise diplomatic agency alongside international organizations and major powers. Although institutional capacity remains uneven across the GCC, recent efforts to professionalize and institutionalize mediation suggest that Gulf diplomacy is becoming increasingly embedded within state institutions.

The study also highlights several limitations that require further scholarly and policy attention. Chief among these are the challenges of inclusivity, the tension between strategic and normative motivations, and the uneven institutionalization of mediation across GCC states. In many cases, the limited participation of civil society actors, women, and marginalized communities constrains the prospects for achieving long-term, locally legitimate peace settlements. Nevertheless, recent regional developments further reinforce the growing relevance of Gulf mediation. As this article was being finalized, the Iran–Israel–US conflict demonstrated that, although GCC monarchies were not direct belligerents, they remained deeply affected by regional instability while continuing to prioritize diplomacy and de-escalation. Oman sustained its long-standing mediation efforts by advocating a return to negotiations and was publicly acknowledged by both Russia and China for its diplomatic

initiatives. At the same time, efforts to revive US–Iran negotiations highlighted Qatar’s role in facilitating communication alongside Pakistan, illustrating the increasingly collaborative, decentralized, and state-led character of contemporary mediation. These developments suggest that, as international mediation continues to diversify, Gulf monarchies are likely to play an increasingly prominent role in both regional and transregional peacebuilding. By offering a comparative and empirically grounded assessment of Gulf mediation, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of third-party intervention in contemporary international relations. It also invites further research on the institutionalization of Gulf diplomacy, the domestic factors shaping foreign policy behavior, and the broader implications of rising non-Western state mediation for the evolving architecture of international peace processes.

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AI Statement

ChatGPT was used for language and stylistic editing. The authors assume full responsibility for the content of the article.