

South Africa and Qatar in Gaza and Beyond: A New Dawn for Transformative Third-Party Intervention?

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Abstract

As geopolitical realignment intensifies conflict and exposes failures in Western-led intervention, space is opening for alternative actors and approaches. Gaza marks a critical juncture as non-Western third-party actors assume prominent roles, raising questions about their intervention logics and implications for peace processes and outcomes. This paper develops a typology distinguishing transformative third-party intervention from dominant realist and liberal paradigms. Transformative intervention, as conceptualized here, pursues structural redress rather than conflict management, centers historically marginalized voices and agency, and engages global institutions and norms that shape intervention contexts and outcomes. Through interpretive case studies of South Africa and Qatar in Gaza and beyond, the paper examines the transformative, realist, and liberal logics evident in their practices across diverse forms of third-party intervention. Analysis reveals that both cases display strong transformative orientations grounded in distinct normative histories, capabilities, and structural positions. Their selective, hybrid use of realist and liberal instruments reflects the practical need to preserve access, leverage, and room for action within an order they seek to transform. The overall intervention can nonetheless be understood as transformative, in which those approaches are selectively deployed within a broader orientation toward structural redress, inclusion, accountability, and the pluralization of peacemaking authority.

Keywords: Mediation, hybridity, Global South, middle powers, non-Western diplomacy

Research Article | Received: 26 October 2025, Last Revision: 21 September 2026, Accepted: 25 September 2026

Introduction

The post-Second World War international order promised peace, stability, and prosperity through universal norms and multilateral governance. Yet some eighty years later, these promises remain unfulfilled for much of the world. Conflicts and crises have disproportionately affected populations in the Global South, exposing structural failures in political, economic,

and peace and security systems that reproduce inequity and contestation. Amid deepening geopolitical tensions, these intertwined crises both complicate conflict resolution and challenge the foundations of global order (McCandless and Barakat 2023: 8).

Dominant approaches to third-party intervention – particularly those rooted in realism and liberalism – have proven insufficient to address the persistence of conflict and its structural causes. High levels of war recurrence and double standards in enforcing global rules and norms continue to privilege dominant powers. Realist approaches, grounded in strategic control and power maximization, have subordinated intervention to geopolitical competition: the 2003 United States (US)-led invasion of Iraq – driven by hegemonic ambition despite liberal rhetoric of democratization – produced lasting destabilization and exposed the structural violence of power-driven engagement (Halliday 2005). Liberal approaches emphasize multilateral and technocratic solutions but often leave entrenched power asymmetries intact. The Oslo Accords, for example, privileged elite bargains over justice and historical accountability, consolidating Israeli control while sidelining Palestinian self-determination (Tilley 2005). Although Iraq and Oslo arise from distinct traditions, they show how realist and liberal frameworks can converge in practice.

Amid growing disillusionment with dominant paradigms and intensifying demands for global justice and consistency in the rules-based order, transformative approaches to third-party intervention have become increasingly urgent. Rather than stabilizing conflict-affected systems through elite bargains focused on managing conflicts, transformative interventions are defined here through three features: pursuit of structural redress beyond conflict management by addressing root causes and systemic drivers; centering marginalized voices and agency in intervention processes and outcomes; and engagement with the global systems, institutions, actors, and normative frameworks that shape intervention contexts and outcomes. Synthesized from the interdisciplinary literature reviewed below, these criteria anchor an interpretive comparative typology that distinguishes realist, liberal, and transformative approaches by their core logics, modalities, and normative orientations – rather than constituting a formal evaluative framework.

Gaza – following the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks and Israel’s ensuing military assault –profoundly reveals both the limits of dominant intervention paradigms and the urgency of alternatives. At least 70,117 Palestinians have been killed (20,000 children), (through December 2025, Al Jazeera 2026), alongside unprecedented numbers of humanitarian, medical, and United Nations (UN) personnel and journalists. Global condemnation is increasingly pronounced as evidence of genocide mounts. The international community’s failure to respond effectively has further eroded confidence in the legitimacy and impartiality of the rules-based order, exposing its selective application – particularly by Western powers unwilling to restrain their allies. It has catalyzed global mobilization of actors across states, societies and international organizations demanding justice for Palestinians and transformative shifts in the nature and operationalization of our rules-based order (McCandless 2026). We argue that this moment

reflects a critical juncture – a rupture in international norms that opens space for paradigm shifts in global governance (Hall 1993; Mahoney 2000).

Within this shifting landscape, South Africa and Qatar stand out as prominent third-party actors whose engagements with Gaza and beyond reveal convergent transformative tendencies and illuminate changing norms, practices, and authority in global peacemaking. South Africa draws on legal action, mediation, multilateral diplomacy, peacekeeping, and the moral authority of its anti-apartheid transition to pursue accountability and structural redress. Qatar combines strategic, principled diplomacy, convening power, access to diverse actors, financial and humanitarian capacities, and security relationships across rival blocs to facilitate negotiations, ceasefires, humanitarian access, and reconstruction.

Their approaches challenge prevailing intervention norms and Western gatekeeping, asserting the agency of the Global South in shaping peace processes, normative frameworks, and the terms of intervention itself. South Africa and Qatar are conceptualized here as non-Western middle powers whose influence rests on structural position, access and normative standing as much as material or military capacities. South Africa is commonly characterized as an emerging middle power; Qatar, though small in size and population, can be viewed as a middle power by behavior, exercising influence through mediation and niche diplomacy far beyond its size (Kamrava 2011, 2015). Mandıracı (2026) suggests that Qatar can be counted among Global South middle powers that have expanded their mediation roles as global and regional orders fragment. Middle power scholarship has typically portrayed such states as order-stabilizing or reformist (Jordaan 2003); we argue that in Gaza and beyond, South Africa and Qatar pursue structural redress that goes farther.

Situated within critical and constructivist traditions, the typology and case analysis draw on a systematic literature review and both authors' extensive prior research and policy engagement with the cases. South Africa and Qatar are treated as interpretive case studies – selected not for their representativeness but for analytical purchase: together, they test and refine the typology by revealing how transformative logic operates in practice, including through realist and liberal instruments. The central finding is that both cases exhibit strong transformative orientations, grounded in distinct normative foundations, capabilities, and structural positions, while deploying realist and liberal instruments toward transformative ends. What distinguishes this from realist and liberal intervention is not the tools deployed but the purpose animating their use: where realists treat third-party engagement as a calculated transaction and liberal multilateralism deploys institutions to stabilize existing orders, transformative actors mobilize the same leverage and platforms to contest structural hierarchies, challenge selective enforcement, and advance accountability. Gaza has accelerated these tendencies, creating a moment of moral urgency and global visibility that may consolidate longer-term normative change, even as material outcomes remain contested.

The analysis contributes to scholarly and policy debates in three ways. First, it clarifies the conceptual contours of transformative third-party intervention and offers an analytical tool

for assessing intervention logics. Second, it shows how two rising, non-Western middle powers engage in transformative practices in contested geopolitical spaces. Third, it reflects on the broader implications – notably the pluralization of peacemaking authority in an increasingly multipolar world.

Third-Party Intervention: An Evolving Landscape

Competing Paradigmatic Approaches and the Rise of Non-Western Middle Powers

This section briefly reviews the evolving landscape of third-party intervention through the dominant lenses of realist and liberal internationalist approaches and proposes a transformative track gaining traction amid shifting geopolitical dynamics. Realist approaches to third-party intervention rest on the assumption that the international system is anarchic and that states act primarily to preserve their survival, security, and power within a competitive environment (Walt 1987; Mearsheimer 2001). Interventions are understood as strategic instruments – employed to maintain regional balances of power, protect spheres of influence, or pre-empt threats from rivals. Modalities include military force, coercive diplomacy, and economic leverage, often deployed unilaterally or through coalitions aligned with the intervening state's interests (Art and Cronin 2003). Realists adopt distinctly transactional approaches – viewing mediation as a strategic bargaining process in which mediators leverage power to extract concessions and facilitate settlements that advance their national interests and geopolitical objectives (Touval and Zartman 1985). Realists view institutions not as norm-shaping, but as arenas through which powerful states advance their agendas. While offensive realists emphasize the pursuit of regional hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001), defensive realists stress the risks of liberal overextension in pursuit of hegemony, arguing that it can fuel instability and therefore advocate restraint (Posen 2014). Across these variants, third-party engagement remains a calculated transaction response to shifting power configurations.

Liberal approaches to third-party intervention emphasize cooperation through rules-based institutions and multilateral engagement, positioning international organizations as central to managing and legitimizing external involvement (Keohane 1984). Interventions are typically framed around advancing democracy, human rights, and the rule of law – normative goals rooted in Enlightenment thought, prevailing through post-war liberal internationalism (Doyle 1986; Ikenberry 2001). Modalities have included peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, electoral support, and the rebuilding of post-conflict institutions. Mediation, while not always foregrounded, has increasingly featured in liberal peacebuilding frameworks as part of broader efforts to stabilize post-conflict environments, often in tandem with institutional reform (Eriksson and Kostić 2013). The emergence of neoliberal institutionalism shifted analytical focus to how international regimes facilitate cooperation among rational states, emphasizing institutional design over normative justification (Keohane 1984; Koremenos et al. 2001). While in the post-Cold War period liberal norms were increasingly operationalized through statebuilding and democracy promotion (Ikenberry 2001).

Transformative approaches to third-party intervention draw from numerous disciplines and theoretical traditions, which we suggest constitute an emergent paradigm. Rooted in critical and postcolonial perspectives, such approaches challenge the assumptions, values, and interests of dominant power interventions that marginalize the agency of conflict-affected communities and reproduce structural hierarchies rather than addressing them (Spivak 1988). Critical peace scholars have long advanced transformative directions, including Richmond's "emancipatory peace," emphasizing local ownership and resistance to top-down liberal interventions; "conflict transformation," focusing on building ownership through culturally sensitive, inclusive processes and addressing systemic root causes (Curle 1990; Richmond 2005; McCandless 2019; McCandless and Donais 2020); and approaches rooted in a structural paradigm with social movement engagement as "global system reform" (Uvin 2002). Postcolonial theorists have described interventions reinforcing colonialism-derived power imbalances in the international system, undermining the sovereignty and self-determination of weaker states (Jabri 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016). Scholarship on Palestine tends to argue that intervention cannot produce enduring peace if it ignores Israeli occupation and aid dependency, and the UN Security Council veto system as structural drivers of conflict (Qarmout 2024: 292).

Across disciplines, transformative change refers to changes in structures (*of* the system) – rather than reformative measures (*in* the system, preserving the status quo) (Sztompka 1993). The concept aligns with critical, constructivist, and post-colonial International Relations scholarship on Global South norm entrepreneurship (Acharya 2014; Artner and Yin 2023). Transformative change and conflict transformation often require confrontational strategies to shift power asymmetries and raise public awareness about the historical and structural contexts of violence (Curle 1990; McCandless 2025). Together, these traditions prioritize local agency, challenge Eurocentric frameworks, and seek to transform rather than reform existing power structures – through both contestation and at times, engagement with existing institutions.

As one modality within the broader repertoire of third-party intervention, mediation illustrates how these paradigmatic tensions play out in practice – and the pressures toward transformation, as well as the forces working against it. The dominant realist tradition rooted in bargaining theory and rational-actor assumptions has focused on mediator strategy, leverage, and effectiveness (Touval and Zartman 1985; Bercovitch 1992; Wallensteen and Svensson 2014), with "ripeness" determining the context for viable intervention (Zartman 2000). The liberal turn in mediation generated a substantial parallel literature focused on embedding negotiation within institutional frameworks, linking mediation to post-conflict state-building, democratization, and institutional reform (Eriksson and Kostić 2013; Wallensteen and Svensson 2014). A critical strand of this – emphasizing inclusion of civil society and marginalized groups as a condition of durable settlements (Paffenholtz 2014; Çuhadar and Paffenholtz 2017) – has nonetheless remained largely led by and for Western institutional mediators and shaped by their normative assumptions – a structural bias the field has itself begun to acknowledge (Schia and de Carvalho 2023).

Against these dominant tracks, non-Western and small-state mediators – including South Africa and Qatar – have become increasingly prominent, deriving effectiveness from access and normative positioning (Svensson 2007; Kamrava 2011; Barakat 2014; Nathan 2017; Milton, Elkahlout, and Tariq 2024). Emerging middle powers, in particular, deploy a distinctive brokering agency rooted in structural positioning¹ rather than in material leverage alone (Süsler and Alden 2025). At the same time, emerging middle powers are typically characterized as semi-peripheral, regionally influential states that favor reform over radical change of the global order (Jordaan 2003), and as caught between critiquing and remaining within a Western-dominated order (Öniş and Kutlay 2017). We take up these tensions in relation to a transformative lens, below.

Small states can similarly build credibility and influence where great powers lack legitimacy – through perceived neutrality, principled diplomacy, and norm entrepreneurship (Ingebritsen 2002; Stokke 2012; Kamrava 2015; Fraihat 2020; Milton-Edwards 2024). Yet this movement is neither linear nor uncontested: the reassertion of transactional deal-making – exemplified by the Trump administration’s approach to Gaza and Ukraine – signals a realist counter-current in which structural concerns are explicitly subordinated to great-power interests and short-term settlements. Taken together, these cases demand a more expansive conceptualization of third-party intervention – one attentive to the structural conditions, normative commitments, and diverse epistemological traditions that non-Western and small-state mediators bring to intervention.

Drawing on the literature above, with framing adapted from McCandless and Barakat (2023) and Lanz et al. (2008), Table 1 presents a typology of realist, liberal, and transformative approaches to third-party intervention. The columns represent ideal types: real-world interventions often combine elements across categories, and the analytical task is to identify which logics predominate and how they interact.

1 Structural positioning refers to a state’s place within the international system, which determines the opportunities, constraints, and strategies available to it.

Table 1. Realist, Liberal and Transformative Approaches to Third-Party Intervention:
A Framework for Analysis

DIMENSION	REALIST	LIBERAL	TRANSFORMATIVE
NORMATIVE INTERESTS			
Goals	Security and stability; balance of power; strategic interests	Peace and security; democratic governance; human rights; rule of law	Emancipatory, just peace; structural redress and systemic justice; transformation of international norms and frameworks that enable and sustain conflict
Values & Motivations	National interest; stability maintenance	Liberal international norms; institutional legitimacy	Decolonization; anti- hegemonic solidarity; structural accountability; Global South agency
CAPABILITIES			
Power Leverage	Coercive (military, economic sanctions)	Institutional, incentivizing (diplomatic, economic/financial, normative)	Instrumentalized across dimensions (hard, soft, moral, legal); multiple modalities deployed to contest existing hierarchies
Institutional Capacity	Ad hoc, short-term; state- centered resources	Coordinated; use of international mechanisms	Holistic, instrumentalizes existing institutions toward systemic change; locally- empowering focus
STRATEGIC APPROACHES			
Operational Modalities	Military force; economic sanctions; elite mediation; power politics	Multilateralism; use of international organizations; legal and political mechanisms; civil society inclusion and support	South–south cooperation; strategic use of global institutions to challenge selective norm application, confronting power asymmetries; empowerment of marginalized; inclusive dialogue and mediation; support for social movements
Cultural & Context Sensitivity	Low prioritization; maintain status quo	Moderate adaptation; push to adopt liberal values	High-centrality; focus on needs/aspirations of those affected
Stakeholder Inclusion	Limited to powerbrokers	Representative stakeholders	Targeted inclusion of marginalized and non-Western actors; centering grassroots voices and structurally excluded actors alongside elite engagement
Intervention Coherence	Alliance-based alignment	Multilateral coordination	Solidarity-based; principled anti-hegemonic alignment; normative consistency over process neutrality

Source: McCandless and Barakat, 2026. Key References: Ikenberry (2001); Keohane (1984); Lanz et al. (2008); McCandless (2019; 2025); McCandless and Barakat (2023); Mearsheimer (2001); Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016); Nye (2004); Richmond and Mitchell (2012); Spivak (1988); Sztompka (1993); Walt (1987).

The cases of South Africa and Qatar are examined through this framework to identify where transformative logics predominate, where they are constrained, and how they interact with realist and liberal logics. This, in turn, illuminates an emergent transformative paradigm operating within, and in tension with, the existing international order.

South Africa, Qatar, and Transformative Third-Party Intervention

The following begins with a brief history of third-party engagements, then applies the framework above with a focus on normative interests, capabilities, and strategic approaches.

South Africa

Following the dismantling of apartheid in 1994, South Africa's foreign policy shifted from regional coercion toward stability through mediation, multilateral diplomacy, and peacekeeping. During apartheid (1948-1994), military interventions targeted neighboring states to counter perceived threats to white minority rule and maintain regional dominance. Its negotiated transition, supported by multi-stakeholder peace committees under the National Peace Accord, made mediation central to its post-apartheid identity and regional approach (Nupen 2013).

Successive presidents have led South Africa's mediation efforts. Nelson Mandela drew on moral authority, persuasion, and shaming, while his international stature gave him exceptional convening power (Khadiagala 2007). Mandela facilitated the 2000 Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement in Burundi, and Mbeki provided troops to support implementation of the agreement (Bentley and Southall 2005) and mediated the Inter-Congolese Dialogue leading to the Sun City Agreement, alongside participation in the UN Mission (MONUC) (Rogier 2004). Jacob Zuma continued these efforts.

After a period of declining influence due to domestic challenges, South Africa's role as a mediator resurfaced. In 2022, it hosted peace talks between Ethiopia's federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), resulting in a cessation-of-hostilities agreement. President Cyril Ramaphosa led the multi-country African Peace Initiative on Russia and Ukraine - the first African mediation collaboration beyond the continent – which advanced prisoner exchanges and food security issues (Singh and Reva 2023).

South Africa's third-party intervention efforts between Israelis and Palestinians have been informed by its apartheid to democracy transition. This has involved strong support for the Palestinian cause with sharp criticism for Israel's actions in the occupied territories – including equating its treatment of Palestinians with apartheid. This is reflected in African National Congress (ANC) resolutions and official government statements, underpinned by a government-commissioned study finding that Israeli practices reflect the UN's conceptualization of apartheid (Tilley 2009). In 2018, it downgraded its embassy in Tel Aviv

to a liaison office, citing ongoing occupation and poor progress in peace talks. Its most recent mediation offer, following Hamas's 7 October attack, was dismissed by Israel, regarding South Africa as partial (Fabricius 2023).

In December 2023, South Africa brought a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) alleging that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza and situating its actions within a longer history of apartheid, occupation, and blockade. The ICJ ordered provisional measures on 26 January 2024 but stopped short of ordering an immediate ceasefire. On 24 May, it ordered Israel to immediately halt its military offensive.

South Africa's Gaza intervention extends beyond mediation, combining legal and diplomatic action rooted in peace, justice, and anti-colonial solidarity, while using liberal institutions to pursue those ends. South Africa's approaches to third-party intervention are now considered through the typology shared above.

Normative Interests

South Africa's third-party intervention goals are shaped by its post-apartheid identity and commitment to African solidarity. From the Mbeki to Zuma eras, its approach has supported peace, democratization, and long-term stability under the principle of "African solutions to African problems" (Landsberg 2010). This orientation draws on the African Renaissance and Pan-Africanism, linking liberation from colonialism with continental integration, peace and security, and women's and human rights.

Motivated by its negotiated transition and the philosophy of *ubuntu*,² South Africa prioritizes reconciliation, quiet diplomacy, and inclusive dialogue (Hendricks 2017), favoring consensus-building and long-term legitimacy over coercion or transactional deal-making (Khadiagala 2007). Its leaders have often sought to replicate key aspects of its own history: transitional power-sharing, institutional strengthening, and negotiated settlements.

While rhetorically anti-imperialist, South Africa's practice largely facilitates negotiated, liberal democratic outcomes. Economic interests are not at the forefront of its mediation efforts, which some argue reflects a blind spot given the economic dimensions of conflict and post-conflict recovery, and is inconsistent with transformative goals.

Nonetheless, as reflected in Gaza and Ukraine, South Africa has advanced a principled commitment to international law, challenging double standards in global diplomacy and foregrounding norms of sovereignty, legality, and inclusive political process. In Ukraine, DIRCO framed its engagement explicitly around "just peace" – opposing the use of force, asserting that no imminent threat justified Russia's actions, and supporting Ukraine's peace proposal around territorial integrity, the inadmissibility of land acquisition by force, and inclusive process (Dangor 2024).

2 Ubuntu is the Nguni Bantu concept of shared humanity and communal interdependence underpinning restorative approaches to conflict redress.

While South Africa's non-alignment positioning is often controversial (viewed as anti-West or pro-Russian), it is distinct from neutrality; rather, it is an expression of sovereignty rooted in international law and the country's constitution (Lamola 2025). This position prevents the country from being drawn into major power polarization. The same structural criteria are applied, regardless of which power is the aggressor, or which alliance system is at stake – a departure from the practice of both realist and liberal third-party interventions.

Capabilities

South Africa's capabilities are rooted in political, legal, and moral authority, derived from Mandela's legacy and the country's successful management of its own peace process, as well as efforts by successive presidents to maintain this legacy (Khadiagala 2007). Soft power is leveraged through persuasion, the use of elder statesmen, and liberation-movement credentials and partnerships, particularly with the ANC. Its regional power status, economic strength, military capabilities, and diplomatic influence enable its high-level diplomacy and ability to bring parties to the table (Sidiropoulos 2008).

Regional mandates and strategic use of international institutions and global norms extend this influence, supporting multilateral responses to global challenges and building peace (Dangor 2024). Maintaining ties with the US and non-Western partners while pursuing ICJ action demonstrates diplomatic agility. Participation in BRICS and leadership of the G20 further widens its reach.

Institutionally, DIRCO houses dedicated mediation structures and collaborates with academic and policy institutions to enhance knowledge and capacity. However, its effectiveness has been uneven – often constrained by political appointments and fragmented interdepartmental coordination (Groenewald and Van der Waldt 2018).

Strategic Approaches

South Africa employs a wide range of third-party intervention modalities that reflect both its liberation history, experience navigating complex political transitions, and human rights-based foreign policy. These include formal high-level mediation, quiet diplomacy, facilitating of transitional power-sharing arrangements, legal and constitutional support, and closed-door confidence-building measures (Ajulu 2008; Shillinger 2009). It frequently operates through multilateral mechanisms, notably the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU), to enhance regional ownership and legitimacy while drawing on soft power tools such as moral persuasion, symbolic leadership, and historical affinity with anti-colonial struggles.

South Africa has also pursued culturally and politically inclusive processes. In Burundi, Mandela integrated local voices, especially women's organizations, into a people-centered process (Hendricks 2017). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Inter-Congolese Dialogue included representatives from the government, rebel groups, the opposition, and

civil society (Khadiagala 2007). In Sudan, South Africa has advocated for civilian transition, warned that elite deals without justice perpetuate violence, supported International Criminal Court (ICC) processes, emphasized civilian inclusion, and worked through the UN and AU to advance ceasefires (Dangor 2024). These impulses coexist with reliance on eminent-person diplomacy and elite settlements (Muhwezi-Mpanga 2021) – a tension that partly reflects the constraints of high-stakes mediation and limits the fuller realization of transformative inclusion. The country’s historic non-aligned identity also enables dialogue with opposing actors in complex geopolitical crises. Ukraine is illustrative: it engaged diplomatically with both Global North and Global South actors while promoting sovereignty and the rule of law.

At the same time, and in line with its own transition, South Africa has supported norm-enforcing action and popular movements alongside diplomatic engagement. Notably, its ruling ANC party’s National Executive Council has officially supported non-violent resistance in relation to Palestine through the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign opposing Israeli apartheid (BDS n.d.). It has also supported independence movements, consistently calling for a referendum in Western Sahara to uphold the Sahrawi people’s right to self-determination.

In sum, South Africa’s approach reflects transformative logic through its emphasis on justice, inclusion, and structural inequity, particularly through legal and diplomatic action on Gaza. It also draws on liberal and realist tools, engaging multilateral institutions and navigating power dynamics with strategic pragmatism – yet rooted in principled commitments. Engagement with the ICJ, the UN system, and multilateral diplomacy is directed not at stabilizing existing arrangements but at challenging their selective enforcement. BRICS and G20 positioning and alliance management preserve the diplomatic space necessary to pursue that challenge. This mobilization of multiple instruments toward transformative ends characterizes South Africa’s approach.

Qatar

Over the past three decades, Qatar has become a significant third-party intervenor, notably in hosting and mediating peace processes, in the Middle East and Africa. Its location and wealth have enabled it to pursue an independent foreign policy among larger, competing powers, including Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia (Kamrava 2011; Barakat 2024). It has carved out its niche through strategic flexibility, discreet diplomacy, and sustained humanitarian and reconstruction financing. Despite its small armed forces, Qatar deployed peacekeepers after mediating the 2010 Djibouti–Eritrea border agreement, joined Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) security operations in Bahrain in 2011, supported NATO’s Libya intervention with arms and finance in 2011, and joined the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen in 2015.

Qatar’s mediation role grew in the mid-2000s and consolidated during its 2006–2007 UN Security Council term. Its stance against Israel’s conduct in the 2006 Lebanon War and support for Hezbollah strengthened its credibility in the Arab and Islamic worlds (Barakat

2024). It subsequently facilitated dialogues in Lebanon, Yemen, and Darfur, and committed over US\$500 million to post-conflict reconstruction in Sudan (Ulrichsen 2014; Fouskas 2023).

During the Arab Spring, Qatar diverged from Gulf norms by supporting revolutionary movements, including backing anti-Qaddafi rebels in Libya through arms, funding, and diplomacy. This raised its profile within the NATO-led campaign (Ulrichsen 2014), but intensified criticism of its ties to Islamist groups and support for political Islam. A blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt from 2017 to 2021 exposed its geopolitical vulnerability. Its mediation between the US and the Taliban, culminating in the 2020 Doha Agreement and intra-Afghan dialogue, helped restore its diplomatic standing. Qatar later facilitated Chad's 2022 national dialogue among more than 40 armed groups and hosted 2023 US–Venezuela backchannel talks that produced a prisoner exchange and partial sanctions relief (Fouskas 2023).

Its most sustained and politically sensitive mediation concerns Gaza. Since 2006, Qatar has combined aid and reconstruction presence with strategic diplomacy. Hosting Hamas's political office in Doha from 2012, with tacit US approval, made Doha a rare interlocutor trusted by Hamas and Western powers (Echols 2024). After the October 7, 2023, attacks, Qatar condemned the violence while foregrounding the structural context of occupation (Middle East Monitor 2023). With Egypt and the US, it mediated the humanitarian pause, enabling the release of 105 Israeli captives and 240 Palestinian prisoners (Davies and Gritten 2024). As the war escalated and political will receded, Qatar criticized the process as serving "narrow political purposes" and suspended its mediation in November 2024, citing the parties' insincerity (Qatar MoFA 2024). This suspension marked a rare, principled withdrawal in response to the conflict party's intransigence. Qatar later resumed its role under US pressure, helping secure a six-week ceasefire before President Trump's 2025 inauguration.

Normative Interests

Qatar's motivations are rooted in its constitutional commitments and Islamic values. Article 7 of its 2004 Constitution enshrines peaceful dispute resolution as a foreign policy pillar, reinforced by Islamic teachings and the current (and former) Amir's moral commitments. Geography and prosperity, built on liquefied natural gas exports through the Strait of Hormuz, link regional stability and mediation to Qatari national security. Qatar pursues an independent foreign policy among its larger neighbors, often at odds with one another. Mediation and openness to dialogue serve as strategic tools to reduce external threats, including terrorism, and to facilitate engagement as a key Western partner (Barakat 2024).

While some external observers view Qatar's mediation efforts as state branding or "checkbox diplomacy" (Ulrichsen 2009), its commitment to Darfur – over US\$500 million in post-conflict reconstruction support – exceeded the contributions of many larger powers. This exemplifies its pairing of mediation with sustained material investment in structural drivers of conflict (McCandless and Barakat 2023). Qatar's multi-year investment in Gaza has

focused on socio-economic rehabilitation, reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, housing, and energy provision (Kamrava 2011; Alqashouti 2021).

Qatar infuses its Islamic values – centered on justice, human dignity, and peaceful resolution – into practices of adherence to international law, process integrity, and recognition of parties’ sovereignty and self-determination. This is what we conceptualize as “principled impartiality,” where conventional mediation expects substantive neutrality, while a transformative lens recognizes that treating all positions as equally legitimate risks normalizing structural injustice. Qatar holds clear normative positions on substance while remaining impartial on process, facilitating rather than prescribing, and backing engagement with sustained financial commitment (Barakat 2024).

This long-term structural orientation is also evident in Qatar’s development and peacebuilding initiatives, such as Education Above All (EAA) and *Silatech*,³ which reflect a conception of peacebuilding that addresses structural drivers of conflict – exclusion, unemployment, lack of opportunity – rather than limiting engagement to elite political negotiations.

Capabilities

Qatar’s third-party intervention capabilities derive from its combination of financial leverage, diplomatic agility, and broad-based access to conflicting parties. Though militarily modest, Qatar hosts the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East, Al Udeid Air Base, while still maintaining relationships with states and non-state armed groups excluded in Western diplomatic circles, e.g., Iran, Hamas, the Taliban, and Hezbollah.

Qatar consistently demonstrates its convening power, enabling engagement between rival, ideologically opposed, and often internationally isolated actors. Its facilitation of unity negotiations between Fatah and Hamas in 2011, despite US disapproval, illustrates a capacity to act where others cannot, making it indispensable in politically sensitive intervention contexts (Danin 2012).

Qatar’s mediation is anchored in the MoFA and supported by the Amiri Diwan and specialized envoys. A Special Envoy for Counterterrorism and Mediation in 2017 advanced the institutionalization of its diplomatic capabilities (Alqashouti 2021). Although relatively lean, its mediation bureaucracy has recently benefited from coordinated efforts to train new generations of diplomats, including younger and female mediators (Barakat 2024).

Qatar’s capacity is further bolstered by its global reach and diverse soft-power tools. With 125 diplomatic missions and Qatar Airways connections to 86 countries, it maintains dense networks spanning Western powers and diverse political actors. Public diplomacy is leveraged

3 EAA is a global initiative focused on access to quality education for marginalized populations in conflict-affected and fragile states. Silatech works to expand economic opportunity and entrepreneurship for youth in the Arab world and beyond, to counter armed-group recruitment and prevent conflict.

through soft power tools. The Doha Forum projects Qatar as a hub for multilateral dialogue and Southern perspectives. In contexts marked by disinformation and information blackouts, Al Jazeera's on-the-ground reporting shapes the informational environment within which mediation operates. Its sustained coverage from inside Gaza – when much of the Western press had limited access – has kept Palestinian casualties, humanitarian conditions, and the structural context of occupation visible in global public discourse contesting the information asymmetries that have historically allowed dominant powers to frame conflicts on their own terms.

Quasi-state instruments such as Qatar Charity, Qatar Red Crescent Society, and the Qatar Fund for Development complement diplomatic efforts, providing tangible support in fragile settings. In Gaza, these agencies have supplied fuel, cash transfers, and rebuilding support – enhancing Qatar's credibility as a mediator capable of bringing financial and development support to sustain peace outcomes.

Strategic Approaches

Qatar employs various modalities, from direct mediation and behind-the-scenes facilitation to financial inducement and public diplomacy. While its most visible interventions have been through formal mediation and peace process hosting efforts, these are supported by shuttle diplomacy – notably with hard-to-reach actors and deep engagement in humanitarian and post-conflict recovery efforts.

While mediation is predominantly state-driven, Qatar has supported Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues, often through funding independent forums or NGOs. It often begins with facilitation and deepens its involvement when requested – a phased engagement as evidenced in the US–Taliban talks, which progressed from behind-the-scenes coordination to direct hosting. In Chad and Darfur in 2024, Qatar similarly adjusted its role to changing party dynamics. Financial inducement has long featured in Qatar's strategy, providing participation and implementation incentives in Lebanon, Yemen, and Darfur (Barakat 2014). Following the 2017–21 blockade, Doha adopted a more cautious approach, recognizing the risks of dependency (Barakat 2024).

Its decision to follow the UN rather than unilateral terrorist sanctions lists enables it to retain diplomatic channels with controversial parties, including those excluded by Western norms, such as Hamas and the Taliban. Its willingness to engage politically marginalized actors, respect contextual preferences, and align financial, diplomatic, and normative tools positions it as an influential, if elite-focused, third-party intervenor.

While culturally deferential and non-prescriptive, Qatar's mediation generally emphasizes elite political settlement. Its small bureaucracy and specialized technical units limit broader inclusion (Alqashouti 2021), while civil society and grassroots actors tend to remain peripheral, as reflected in the Doha-hosted intra-Afghan and Gaza talks. Although the MoFA advocates youth participation (Qatar MoFA 2022), the structural incentives of high-stakes, elite-driven mediation sustain a gap between aspiration and practice.

Qatar's co-mediation with Egypt and the US in Gaza is demonstrating how it can work across ideological divides to facilitate more inclusive agreements. While tensions arise over lead roles and agendas, Qatar has increasingly sought multilateral coherence where strategic incentives align (Fouskas 2023).

In sum, Qatar's approach combines financial leverage, principled impartiality, and access to excluded actors – assets derived from structural position rather than material power alone. Its transformative character lies in connecting financial and diplomatic engagement to structural redress, political inclusion, and challenges to the asymmetries sustaining conflict; without these dimensions, such engagement risks becoming sophisticated crisis management. This tension is clearest in Gaza, where repeated reconstruction financing can be read as managing the consequences of occupation. Yet Qatar's recognition of occupation as a root cause, inclusion of Hamas as an excluded political actor, suspension of mediation, condemnation of Israel's bombing of Hamas negotiators on Qatari soil, and sustained reconstruction support point to a broader transformative orientation, even as its elite focus and geopolitical vulnerability remain significant limits.

South Africa, Qatar, Gaza, and the Advancement of Transformative Third-Party Intervention

South Africa and Qatar differ markedly in their histories and geopolitical contexts, yet the preceding case analyses reveal strong transformative orientations in both. This section draws the cases together to examine how distinct normative foundations shape the capabilities they develop and the strategies they pursue; how those capabilities enable and constrain transformative action; and how realist and liberal approaches are selectively deployed within broader transformative orientations. The comparison shows how different Global South pathways can advance structural redress, marginalized agency, and change in the global norms and institutions governing third-party intervention.

How Normative Foundations Shape Transformative Strategies

The cases demonstrate how distinct normative commitments shape strategic choices and capability development towards transformative outcomes. South Africa's anti-colonial solidarity and ubuntu philosophy shape normative interests towards justice and structural accountability, informing strategic preferences: recourse to international law, support for liberation movements, and principled multilateral engagement. DIRCO's "just peace" framing in Ukraine – sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-acquisition of territory by force – illustrates how these principles extend beyond Gaza. The ICJ case similarly challenges not only Israeli actions but the permissive legal framework enabling occupation.

Qatar's Islamic values and constitutional commitment to peaceful dispute resolution shape normative interests toward regional stability, overt (and constitutionally mandated)

roles in peacemaking, and principled impartiality. These commitments underpin sustained reconstruction, long-term humanitarian engagement, and dialogue across ideological divides. Its US\$500 million Darfur commitment and multi-year Gaza investments – in housing, energy, and socioeconomic rehabilitation – show how financial capabilities operationalize normative commitments to address material drivers of conflict.

Normative foundations do more than justify intervention; they shape which capabilities and strategies are cultivated, as well as their effectiveness. South Africa’s legal expertise and moral authority derive from its transition experience, while Qatar’s convening power and financial leverage derive from resource endowment, geographic position, and access. Both states’ normative positioning confounds conventional expectations: South Africa’s non-alignment is principled sovereignty rather than neutrality, applied consistently regardless of who the aggressor is; Qatar’s “principled impartiality” combines process impartiality with clear substantive positions on issues – Palestinian self-determination, Ukrainian sovereignty, and international law. Normative consistency is thus an asset to transformative credibility, not a liability. Their distinct histories generate different but complementary transformative trajectories.

That Russia accepted Qatari mediation on Ukrainian minors despite Qatar’s explicit support for Ukrainian sovereignty illustrates the point: normative consistency can strengthen transformative credibility, rather than undermine it (Barakat 2024). Their diverse pathways reveal how differing Global South histories generate distinct, yet complementary, transformative trajectories.

Capabilities Enabling and Constraining Transformative Action

South Africa’s soft-power capabilities – moral authority from its transition, legal expertise, and regional convening power through the SADC and AU – enable it to pursue ICJ litigation and high-level mediation. Limited financial resources constrain reconstruction, while fragmented bureaucratic coordination undermines sustained engagement. It therefore leverages law, elder statesmen’s moral capital, and BRICS and G20 platforms to extend its reach, galvanize Global South and civil society support, and convert potential isolation into legitimacy and visibility.

Qatar’s financial resources, access to excluded actors, Al Jazeera’s information infrastructure, and diplomatic flexibility enable a different repertoire. Reconstruction finance supports long-term engagement with socioeconomic drivers of conflict, while hosting Hamas’s political office alongside the region’s largest U.S. military base grants access across divides. Yet its small bureaucracy limits technical depth and broad inclusion, and the 2017–2021 blockade exposed vulnerabilities that discourage open confrontation (Ulrichsen 2014). Qatar, therefore, relies on calibrated diplomacy, combining financial leverage, channels to all parties, and Al Jazeera’s capacity to contest dominant conflict narratives.

Strategic Hybridity: Deploying Multiple Logics toward Transformative Ends

Both actors draw upon realist and liberal instruments within broader transformative orientations – a hybridity that reflects not inconsistency but necessity. As non-Western middle powers rather than dominant powers, both leverage available tools strategically: contemporary conflicts demand multi-level and multi-instrument engagement, and paradigmatic approaches are rarely pure in practice.

South Africa's non-alignment preserves access across competing blocs and credibility with actors in the Global North and South. It also employs liberal mechanisms – the ICJ, UN system, and multilateral diplomacy – to challenge selective enforcement and advance accountability. Its BRICS and G20 roles further pluralize authority in global governance and widen the space for more just peace and security interventions.

Qatar's hybridity is more overtly strategic, deploying financial leverage, alliance management, and mediation among rivals – Iran, Hamas, the US, and Israel – to secure influence. Akpınar and Öztürk (2026: 2-3, 10-11) read Qatar's mediation as strategic hedging, in which the state diversifies partners and preserves autonomy under external security guarantees while critiquing institutional bias from within the system. At the same time, its commitments to UN frameworks, humanitarian law, and multilateral norms lend legitimacy. Its interventions in Gaza, Darfur, and Afghanistan blend realist goals (stability and reputation) with transformative ends (inclusion of marginalized political actors and socioeconomic reconstruction) – and with explicit framing of systemic injustices as drivers requiring redress. Qatar's suspension of Gaza mediation in November 2024 and condemnation of Israel's September 2025 bombing of Hamas negotiators on Qatari soil also illustrate its readiness to prioritize principle over expediency when mediation is manipulated and sovereignty is directly violated.

This layering – realist tools for access, liberal platforms for legitimacy and collective action, and transformative purpose as orienting logic – reflects both structural constraint and strategic choice. Fully transformative postures risk exclusion from negotiation arenas; complete alignment with dominant systems risks co-optation.

Transformation is multi-scalar and long-term – operating across legal, normative, material, and political levels with uneven and nonlinear results. Neither actor achieves complete systemic change, and gaps remain between normative intent and material outcomes. South Africa's ICJ orders lack enforcement mechanisms and require political coalitions for impact. Qatar's reconstruction investments are transformative only when linked to structural redress. Yet both extend the moral and institutional boundaries of third-party intervention, demonstrating that Global South agency is reshaping how legitimacy, accountability, and authority in global peace are shaped, contested, and upheld.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This paper conceptualizes transformative third-party intervention through three criteria: pursuing structural redress over conflict management; centering marginalized voices and agency; and engaging with global institutions and norms that shape intervention contexts and outcomes. It is distinguished from realist intervention, which treats engagement as a strategic transaction while leaving structural inequities intact, and liberal intervention, which uses institutions to manage conflict and reform existing orders rather than contest the conditions that generate it.

The paper's central finding is that both South Africa and Qatar exhibit demonstrably transformative orientations grounded in distinct normative histories, capabilities, and structural positions. This logic shapes the actors engaged, norms invoked, and outcomes pursued. Both also draw on realist and liberal instruments in the service of transformative ends. This is neither inconsistency nor compromise: as non-Western middle powers operating in an unequal international order, they use existing instruments to preserve the access, leverage, and room for action needed to challenge that order from within. The conditions under which transformative actors rely on realist and liberal approaches warrant deeper investigation.

The analysis exposes genuine tensions in state-led transformative practice. Elite political settlements remain dominant in both cases, limiting the realization of transformative inclusion criteria. South Africa's structural legal and diplomatic critique coexists with mediation practices that less consistently foreground economic justice and grassroots participation. Qatar's geopolitical vulnerability and proximity to major powers can constrain the independence required by principled impartiality, while reconstruction investment falls short of transformative potential when detached from structural redress. Akpınar and Öztürk's (2026) hedging-based reading of Qatar's diplomacy likewise notes that it has secured international recognition but delivered mainly humanitarian relief and temporary ceasefires, which they attribute to small-state fragility and the limits of hedging. Geopolitical resistance – including US backlash against South Africa's ICJ case and Qatar's blockade – reveals the political, reputational, and material costs of challenging entrenched hierarchies.

Conceptually, the paper positions transformative third-party intervention as a paradigm under formation – whose significance is inseparable from the present geopolitical moment. As the rules-based order fractures, Western gatekeeping of peace processes faces unprecedented challenges, and the question of who intervenes, on what normative basis, and toward what structural ends becomes increasingly consequential.

Empirically, South Africa and Qatar demonstrate that Global South actors are not peripheral responders but active norm entrepreneurs reshaping standards of legitimacy, accountability, and authority in international peacemaking. Gaza – as a site of concentrated moral and political urgency, global mobilization, and the visible failure of dominant paradigms – has sharpened these dynamics and amplified their stakes.

Looking forward, the challenge is consolidation. For transformative intervention to endure beyond critical junctures, normative vision must be matched by institutional capacity, coalitional solidarity, and demonstrated outcomes on the ground. The framework offered here – linking normative foundations, capabilities, and strategic approaches – provides a basis for analyzing and supporting such efforts. Together, these cases show that transformation in global peacemaking does not await a new international order. It is already being practiced – imperfectly, under pressure, and consequently, in the fractures of the existing one.

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AI Statement

Generative AI tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript for limited research support, including assistance with locating sources, organizing research material, and improving the clarity and presentation of the text. The authors independently developed the analysis, interpretation, and arguments and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

Acknowledgement

Grateful for research support received from Daria Bobarykina, HBKU and Nontando Ndlovu, UJ. This publication was made possible through funding received for the project HBKU-INT-VPR-SRG-03-07, led by Sultan Barakat.