

The Arab Approach to Mediation—Reshaping Diplomacy in a Multipolar World

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Articles & Testimony

Given their unique cultural concepts and major economic and political clout, the Gulf states are poised to play an even more significant role in future peace and security initiatives.

The increasing engagement of Gulf states in mediation efforts is a testament to the growing influence of middle powers in international politics. It is also a reflection of the struggle of traditional mediators to adapt to the complexities of an increasingly multipolar, interconnected, and networked world.

Amidst the growing need for cooperation in conflict resolution, the current system of international relations is strained by the burden of longstanding and emerging geopolitical and geoeconomic rivalries. In this context, new actors like the Gulf states are stepping into the international mediation arena, playing a significant role in filling the gaps left by traditional powers. Their fresh perspectives on conflict resolution in an increasingly complex world are invaluable.

Traditional powerhouses in mediation, such as the United States and European nations, sometimes find their tried-and-tested methods ill-suited to the specifics of new conflicts, deeply rooted in local contexts and regional power dynamics. Their approach to mediation, which often relies on formal, structured, and legalistic processes, may need to be more flexible to adapt to these conflicts' fluid and dynamic nature. Moreover, the history of political, economic, and military involvement in conflict regions, which can lead to a perception of bias or vested interests, makes it increasingly difficult for some countries to be seen as neutral and impartial mediators. Under the pressure of public opinion, prioritizing quick, tangible results may push for rapid settlements that do not adequately address the underlying root causes of conflicts. This approach often stems from a lack of sensitivity to historical drivers, a culture of 'progress' at all costs, and a 'one size fits all' approach to both political and governance systems. Such an

approach has inhibited effectiveness and is not shared by regional actors. In contrast, the Gulf states' mediation style may be better suited to navigating these challenges.

Gulf countries have been critical in mediation efforts across regional and international disputes. For instance, Qatar has been active, with its successful mediation in the 2008 Lebanese crisis, hosting the U.S.-Taliban talks in Doha, and most recently mediating between Israel and Hamas. Kuwait played a crucial role in attempting to resolve Qatar's feud with some of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries from 2017 to 2021. Saudi Arabia has traditionally tried to mediate the intra-Palestinian conflict with the Mecca Agreement and hosting the Jeddah talks between warring Sudanese factions. Oman's discreet diplomacy facilitated the early discussions between the United States and Iran that led to the 2015 nuclear deal. The United Arab Emirates has actively stepped into the mediation arena, notably with its pivotal role in the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace agreement in 2018, facilitating prisoner-of-war exchanges between Russia and Ukraine and in the multilateral arena by hosting the COP28 summit in Dubai.

An obvious starting point would be to consider the mediation style of Gulf countries and why it might be more appropriate for the current geopolitical turmoil. Although defining a specific 'style' of mediation and conflict resolution may be premature, several common elements are emerging. One such element is the concept of "Sulh," a traditional Arab method of conflict resolution that emphasizes reconciliation and restoration of relationships. This concept, deeply rooted in the Arab culture, plays a significant role in shaping the Gulf's mediation style. Nonetheless, each country contributes its unique cultural and historical perspective, which defines its added value to international efforts. Many factors, ranging from the role of the majlis and the concept of Sulh to more modern factors like the federal structure of the United Arab Emirates, the region's foreign policy of multiple overlapping alliances, or its strong links with the Global North and South outline the emerging style of Gulf mediation and conflict resolution.

Some analysts opine that the personal nature characteristic of the Gulf's mediation approach is intertwined with its monarchical governance, where decisionmaking is highly centralized. This stability, they argue, allows for a consistent approach to policy and diplomacy, including mediation efforts, which could be advantageous when cultivating trust and understanding among conflicting parties.

However, attributing the Gulf's mediation style solely to its political system might overlook a more profound cultural inclination toward fostering enduring relationships to resolve conflicts. In contrast to the more Western focus on swiftly identifying problems and executing interventions, the Gulf approach significantly emphasizes the slow and careful building of trust and rapport.

The Distinctive Features of the Gulf's Mediation Style

There is a growing recognition in the Gulf of the symbiotic relationship between regional stability and national prosperity. This is most evident in the United Arab Emirates, which has focused on de-escalation and normalization with the region's vital states—namely Iran, Israel, Turkey, Qatar, and Syria—and focused on diversifying its economy. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's de-escalation with Iran is part of a more significant foreign policy focus on supporting its socio-economic development plan, Vision 2030.

As all countries in the region strive towards a future beyond hydrocarbons, they are increasingly aware that sustainable economic diversification relies on peace and security in the region and beyond. Thus, the Gulf states' involvement in mediation is as much about contributing to a regional agreement as it is about protecting their economic interests, resource supply lines, trade routes, and ultimately, the success of their economic diversification strategies.

This focus on stability—a departure from Western nations' approach that typically centers on promoting democratic values and human rights in conflict resolution efforts—is a key aspect of the Gulf states' mediation strategy. Their

approach is more pragmatic and less prescriptive, which can provide a sense of reassurance in the face of complex conflicts.

The Gulf states have also cultivated distinctive approaches to mediation characterized by discretion and a focus on forming enduring relationships. This method is rooted in the sociocultural fabric of the region, where diplomacy is often conducted away from the public eye and where the subtleties of negotiation are valued over overt displays of disagreement. It is an approach steeped in Arab tradition. By emphasizing this style, the Gulf states have become adept at offering a secure and trustworthy environment for conflicting parties who may be wary of the potential repercussions of high-profile public diplomacy.

From a country that almost intervened on the side of Saddam Hussein in the 1980s Iraq-Iran War by allowing its facilities to be used for Iraqi strikes against Iran to the 'Switzerland of the Middle East,' Oman has embraced the role of a backchannel and quiet facilitator. In 1980, the United States had to mediate to avert Oman's involvement in the strikes on Iran. In 2015, Oman helped quietly broker the U.S.-Iran deal that led to the JCPOA, turning it into what James Worrall has aptly called an 'interlocutor state,' a term that refers to a state that acts as a mediator or facilitator in international negotiations, often due to its perceived neutrality and diplomatic skills.

This focus on discretion and quiet diplomacy has also characterized the UAE's successful effort to mediate the largest exchange of prisoners of war between Russia and Ukraine in January 2024. Most recently, it has also been critical to ensure agreement between the European Commission, Cyprus, the United States, and the United Kingdom on activating the maritime corridor to deliver humanitarian assistance to Gaza. During its two-year successful tenure in the UN Security Council (2022-2023), the UAE focused on being a "bridge builder" between the Global North and South while representing Middle Eastern sensitivities and demonstrating that national interest can be subtly served through altruism. This approach has successfully gained support for their initiatives by adopting a "positive" mediation style that focuses on achieving broad objectives rather than maintaining rigid redline positions.

In this vein, it is essential to note that the Gulf states' approach to conflict resolution is not only strategic but also culturally sensitive. The emphasis on consensus-based solutions reflects a deep understanding of the importance of face-saving in diplomatic relations, particularly in a region where honor and reputation carry significant weight. Quiet diplomacy, which operates on mutual respect and confidentiality principles, has proven particularly effective in resolving disputes that might otherwise escalate under the harsh spotlight of social media polarization and global attention. It is worth noting that these methodologies do not adopt the common Western carrot and stick approach, partly due to a cultural antipathy to this tactic and partly because it is not so obviously available. Instead, the Gulf states leverage their economic strength as middle powers with a more potent tool than the political-military prowess of superpowers.

Moreover, the Gulf states' mediation approach is more than just about brokering deals; it is about fostering relationships. These nations believe that conflict resolution is not a singular event but a process that requires nurturing understanding, cooperation, and interdependence among former adversaries. Qatar, for example, has received widespread attention for facilitating the Afghan peace agreement in 2020 and, most recently, brokering the release of some Israeli hostages held in Gaza. Its ability to take on such high-profile mediations is shaped by its long-term relationships with the Taliban and Hamas. Doha has been adamant that it has engaged in these high-profile cases at the request of the United States. Long-term relationship building is critical to the Gulf's approach, not just in the high-profile examples above. Saudi Arabia's longstanding relationship with Sudan is instrumental in bringing together the warring factions in the Jeddah process. Similarly, the UAE's deep relationship with Egypt and Ethiopia has allowed it to mediate the GERD dispute between the two countries.

The Gulf states' strategic positions as crossroads endow them with symbolic and practical roles as bridges in international affairs. This geographic advantage, combined with their robust international trade relations and

ambitions to become global hubs for business and innovation, adds substantial layers of influence and capability to their mediation efforts.

The significance of these attributes for the Gulf's approach to mediation—focus on stability and economic interests, discretion and confidentiality, and consensus-building—cannot be overstated. In conflict-ridden regions, where the balance of power is delicate or the potential for miscommunication and escalation is high, the role of a mediator should extend beyond mere facilitation of dialogue. The Gulf states' commitment to such principles has thus transformed their mediation services into a valuable diplomatic tool, one that is sought after for its ability to produce outcomes that are both effective and respectful of the parties' needs for privacy and trust.

The Gulf states, each with unique foreign policy nuances, share a foundational approach to conflict resolution deeply rooted in cultural values of honor and consensus. However, there are also subtle differences.

Oman, “the Interlocutor State”

Oman employs a blend of traditional diplomacy and cultural wisdom, prioritizing mediation and non-interference. Oman's conflict resolution style is characterized by a pragmatic and diplomatic approach, focusing on mediation, problem-solving, and confidence-building.

Muscat's efforts are primarily focused on the Middle East and its immediate neighborhood, aiming to achieve win-win outcomes rather than rapid gains. Oman's mediation activities are also influenced by its unique role as a backchannel facilitator, enabling particular forms of intervention under particular circumstances. Its mediation is more likely to occur in situations where neighboring states accept its actions. Furthermore, Oman's style is influenced by its commitment to maintaining the confidence of all sides involved in the mediation process and its strategic partnerships with core partners such as the United States.

Qatar, “the High-Stakes Mediator”

Qatar asserts itself as a dynamic conflict mediator, embracing a multifaceted diplomacy framework and showcasing resilience in the international peacebuilding arena post-2020. Qatar's conflict resolution style involves engaging in multiple forms of conflict resolution, including preventive diplomacy, third-party mediation, and support for multilateral conflict prevention. Qatar's role diminished following the 2017 Gulf Crisis but re-emerged with a return to third-party mediation in the early 2020s, receiving widespread attention following the U.S.-Taliban agreement and, most recently, the Gaza crisis.

Qatar typically agrees to mediate when formally requested by the conflict parties. This was evident in the case of the U.S.-Taliban negotiations, where the Taliban evaluated various regional third-party contenders and selected Qatar based on their acceptance of pre-conditions and non-involvement in the Afghan conflict. Additionally, Qatar's acceptability as an intermediary is influenced by its relations with other countries, including the United States.

The UAE, “the Consensus Builder”

The UAE champions discreet, consensus-driven diplomacy, fostering long-term stability and robust partnerships. A balance of national interests and the common good, strong relationship-building, consistency, innovation, a positive negotiation approach, and persistence characterize the UAE's conflict resolution style. The UAE approaches conflict by developing long-term understandings and remaining open to locally developed solutions. Abu Dhabi's approach is driven by its need for security and stability in the broader region as the country transitions from relying on oil revenues towards a sustainable, diversified economy. The UAE's style is visibly characterized by a quiet and discreet approach, trust in their ability to ensure confidentiality, and the capacity to talk with all sides of a conflict. The focus on consensus-based solutions is deeply rooted in the country's federal history, the values of tolerance and its national identity. The UAE is likely to refrain from actively seeking out mediation opportunities. It may agree if

the conditions align with its interests and where it perceives it can play a role or secure a win-win outcome.

Beneath the commonalities and the differences between the approaches of Gulf countries to mediation lie two deeply embedded cultural concepts that may provide the key to understanding how the region approaches conflict resolution and management, but also why its approach can serve as a valuable diplomatic tool in a multipolar world plagued by instability.

The Majlis

The first concept is the idea of the majlis, which in the Arab world denotes a dedicated section of a residence for the reception of guests. It is the opposite of a setting for power lunches, stand-up meetings, or brainstorming sessions. It is a venue for relaxed social interaction, exchange of opinions, and in-depth discussion. A majlis, however, is more than just a place—it is an event, an occasion that brings people together. As such, it has been recognized by UNESCO for its cultural significance in fostering “community dialogue, conflict resolution and strengthening social ties.”

Being able to step back from the fast pace of our world, away from the cameras and the pressure of social media, into a majlis, where certain conduct like maligning others or slander is prohibited, and engaging in deep and dignified discussion may be what many parties to conflicts need to foster agreement. Some have argued that the majlis was one of the critical instruments in fostering the groundbreaking UAE Consensus at the recent COP28 negotiations. In his closing speech, Sultan Al Jaber, the COP28 President, spoke of how he believes that the change-makers majlis hosted at COP allowed delegates to “reconnect” and “start speaking to each other from the heart.”

Sulh

The second concept is Sulh, an Arabic term that signifies peace, in contrast to conflict or war. This concept shares its linguistic roots with the word Musalaha, which broadly translates as reconciliation. In Islamic tradition, Sulh, however, also signifies an amicable settlement and mediation. It is the preferred result and process in any form of dispute resolution. Perhaps these attributes make the ideas of ‘amicable settlement’ and the majlis—both of which are so critical to Gulf cultures—fit to deal with conflict mediation in a fragmented and ever more polarized world.

The concepts of the majlis and Sulh are fundamental to understanding the Gulf’s approach to mediation. The majlis provides the physical and cultural space for conflict resolution. Sulh, on the other hand, provides the intangible framework for the Gulf’s approach to mediation. It emphasizes the importance of reaching an amicable settlement and restoring peace rather than resolving an immediate dispute. Together, these two notions create a powerful combination.

Several vital differences emerge when comparing the Gulf states’ mediation style with traditional Western mediators. Western mediation often focuses on a more formalized, structured approach that emphasizes the importance of legal frameworks, institutional processes, and the adherence to norms and principles. This approach often involves a more direct and assertive style of engagement, with mediators actively proposing solutions and applying pressure on the conflicting parties to reach an agreement. In contrast, the Gulf states’ approach is characterized by a greater emphasis on informal networks, personal relationships, and cultural understanding. Such an approach is more valuable when dealing with conflicts where traditional Western mediators struggle to establish trust and credibility due to historical grievances or perceptions of bias.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite the growing influence of the Gulf states in international mediation, they face several challenges and limitations that could impact the effectiveness and perception of their efforts. One significant challenge is the potential for their mediation to be viewed as biased or motivated by self-interest, particularly in cases where they

have strong ties to one of the conflicting parties. This perception of bias could undermine their credibility as mediators and limit some actors' acceptance of their efforts. Furthermore, while effective in some contexts, reliance on personal relationships and informal communication channels may limit their ability to engage in more formal and institutionalized processes. As the Gulf states continue to expand their mediation role, they will need to navigate these challenges and limitations to ensure the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of their efforts.

They also face particular risks and potential unintended consequences associated with it. One such risk is that their efforts could inadvertently exacerbate regional rivalries. Given the complex web of political, economic, and ideological competition in the region, their mediation initiatives could be seen as an extension of these rivalries, rather than as a neutral and impartial effort to promote peace. Additionally, if the Gulf states' mediation efforts are perceived as being driven primarily by their own economic or geopolitical interests, as opposed to a genuine commitment to conflict resolution, it could undermine the legitimacy of their initiatives. To mitigate such risks, the Gulf states must demonstrate high transparency, impartiality, and inclusivity and work closely with other regional and international partners to build trust and support for their initiatives.

The Gulf states' growing role in international mediation also raises important questions about how their efforts interact with and complement the work of established international organizations, particularly the United Nations. As the primary global body responsible for maintaining international peace and security, the UN is critical in coordinating and supporting conflict resolution worldwide. However, the UN's mediation capacity has been increasingly stretched and challenged in recent years. In this context, the Gulf states' emergence as regional mediators presents opportunities and challenges for collaboration and coordination with the UN. Their cultural and linguistic affinity with many of the conflict-affected regions in the Middle East and beyond can be a significant asset. Their economic and political clout can help mobilize resources and incentives to support mediation efforts, complementing the UN's peacebuilding and development initiatives.

On the other hand, the Gulf states' mediation efforts could sometimes operate in parallel or even in competition with the UN's initiatives, leading to duplication, fragmentation, or even contradictory approaches. To mitigate these risks and maximize the potential for collaboration, the Gulf states and the UN will need to establish clear frameworks and mechanisms for communication, coordination, and mutual support. Ultimately, the goal should be to leverage the comparative advantages and complementary strengths of both the Gulf states and the UN.

The Gulf states' role in international mediation is likely to continue evolving and expanding, shaped by various factors, including the changing geopolitical landscape, generational shifts, and technological advancements. As the global power dynamics continue to shift towards a more multipolar world, the Gulf states are well-positioned to assert their influence and take on a more prominent role in conflict resolution. Their strategic location, economic clout, and growing diplomatic capabilities will enable them to play a more active role in shaping the outcomes of regional and international disputes. Moreover, as a younger generation of leaders emerges in the Gulf states, they will likely bring fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to mediation, drawing on their exposure to global education, diverse networks, and technological savvy. This generational change could lead to a more dynamic and adaptive mediation style that leverages new communication tools, information-sharing, and trust-building tools and platforms.

At the same time, the Gulf states will need to resist becoming overconfident about their mediating abilities and stretch themselves into uncharted territories, navigate the challenges posed by the increasing complexity of global conflicts, such as the growing role of non-state actors, which they have uniquely had to contend with over the last three decades in a way not seen in the West to the same degree. Climate change and the potential for cyber threats to undermine peace processes also bring new challenges to the arena. While mediation and conflict resolution are essential, Gulf countries should invest more in conflict management and preventive diplomacy.

The Gulf states' emerging role in international mediation also offers valuable lessons for the broader international community. One such lesson is the importance of adopting a culturally sensitive and context-specific approach to mediation. Another is the need for patience, persistence, and a long-term perspective in conflict resolution efforts. The Gulf states' experience also underscores the importance of leveraging economic incentives and regional cooperation frameworks. By linking mediation efforts to broader initiatives to promote economic integration, infrastructure development, shared prosperity and cultural preservation, the Gulf states can demonstrate how peacebuilding can be embedded into a broader vision for stability and growth. Finally, the Gulf states' experience highlights the potential for regional actors to play a more prominent role in international mediation efforts.

As we look to the future, the Gulf states are poised to play an even more significant role in shaping the contours of international peace and security, and their approach to mediation will be a critical factor in determining the success of these efforts. It is important to note that some recent mediation initiatives have also emphasized protecting civilians and preserving society as a characteristic of the regional approach. This aligns with classic human rights principles in a region not normally considered attuned to such ideas. For example, the two Gaza resolutions, advanced by the UAE in the UN Security Council in 2023, the Ukraine-Russia prisoner exchanges, advocacy for women's rights, and genuine anger about the Taliban's crackdowns on the Afghan population are all examples of the active protection of human rights. However, the full implications of the Gulf's emerging negotiation style will become more apparent with time as more cases of their mediation efforts unfold and as the global community observes the long-term outcomes of their interventions. Monitoring these developments will be crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the Gulf's role and methods in international conflict resolution and their commitment to upholding human rights principles in the process.

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