



Interrogating Different Modes of GCC Conflict Mediation

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This research is supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) for the benefit of developing countries. The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors. Nothing herein constitutes the views of FCDO. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

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Key Findings

- ▶ Not all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states act in the same manner when it comes to how and why they approach the field of conflict mediation. Considerable literature has shown how small states mediate differently from, for instance, superpowers or even regional powers (Fraihat; 2020). This paper contributes to this literature by demonstrating that not all oil-wealthy states, whether large or small, act similarly in the conflict mediation field: some tend to focus on local issues, while others solely become involved in mediation at the multilateral and global level.
- ▶ The Gulf states will continue to be active in conflict mediation, particularly outside of the Middle East. We see this trend with recent Emirati and Saudi actions and, given the perceived withdrawal of the UK and US from the region, such activism is likely to remain in the medium to long term.
- ▶ The GCC states have in many ways viewed each other as competitors in the conflict mediation area, particularly during the period between June 2017 and January 2021. Now, there is a real opportunity to change this perception and help to foster greater intra-regional cooperation.

Policy Recommendations

- ▶ Western policymakers should recognise that each of the six GCC states, despite some similarities, takes a different approach to conflict mediation and undertakes it for specific reasons. As such, policymakers should take into consideration these specifics when approaching GCC states for assistance with conflict mediation.
- ▶ Engaging GCC conflict-mediating states with multilateral organisations can help to expand their legitimacy, as well as the possibility of success in terms of putting forward sustainable solutions to previously intractable conflicts. For instance, going through such channels may diminish the likelihood of these states favouring traditional petrodplomacy associated with the wealthy Gulf states.
- ▶ Western policymakers should try, where possible, to foster greater intra-GCC unity when it comes to conflict mediation, since the period of previous disunity (2017-2021) adversely affected states where GCC actors were involved, for instance Libya and Somalia.

Introduction

When it comes to conflict mediation strategies of the Gulf states, terms like petrodplomacy or riyal-politik are often used, as these countries are well known for their vast hydrocarbon wealth. They have, at times, used financial incentives to push progress on mediation deals and incentivise the passage of treaties. But what motivates the Gulf states in these efforts? How do they choose where to mediate, and how do they view other mediators in the region? What differences exist among the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) when it comes to conflict mediation? This paper discusses into those questions, using comprehensive data from the database compiled by PeaceRep.

Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are by far the most active among the GCC states. While individual states have their own initiatives, the politics between them is also key to understanding their approaches. Crucially, between the period of June 2017 and January 2021, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt cut off all diplomatic ties with Qatar, consequentially viewing each other as competitors in the conflict mediation space, and often backing different parties in conflicts in Libya and Somalia, as detailed below. Since the signing of the Al Ula Accords in January 2021, however, there has been encouraging movement towards greater intra-Gulf cooperation in areas such as economic investment and trade. It is still too early, to tell whether this will extend to the conflict mediation field as well.

This paper will first provide an overview of all the instances when the GCC states were involved as third parties to peace agreements, drawing on the first edition of the PeaceRep Global Peacemaking Database (for more, see Badanjak; 2023).. This edition uses natural language processing on the existing PA-X Database (Bell and Badanjak; 2019). The body of the paper qualitatively assesses all six members of the GCC's approaches to mediation and concludes with a short summary of analysis.

Overview of the involvement of the GCC states in mediation

The data shows that Qatar and the UAE are by far the most active individual states among the members of the GCC. Qatar is the only state to have hosted mediation efforts, and the UAE, particularly since the 2010s, has tied its involvement in conflict mediation to investment strategies, particularly in the Horn of Africa.

Saudi Arabia tends to become involved in multilateral efforts at conflict mediation: as the largest state in the GCC, it rarely needs to use unilateral conflict mediation efforts to enhance its regional branding. Bahrain is also inclined towards involvement in multilateral conflict mediation efforts but has had far lower profile engagement than its neighbouring states.

Kuwait and Oman are often referred to as the mediators of the Gulf due to their neutral position during the GCC Crisis (June 2017-January 2021), and efforts to mediate between their neighbours. Both states have become involved in mediating primarily Arab and Middle Eastern regional conflicts, with Kuwait particularly focused on maintaining the unity of the GCC.

Overall, the data draws attention to cases of mediation less covered in the literature and policy discourse by experts in their respective countries. This allowed our case study experts to uncover broader patterns of intervention and query their logic through deeper engagement. In turn, the case studies highlighted new methodologies in mediation by these countries, which the data focused work cannot capture in its granularity.

Individual approaches to mediation

As noted above, Qatar and the UAE are the most high-profile Gulf actors in conflict mediation, often tying their conflict mediation efforts to economic interests. Saudi Arabia has become involved primarily in multilateral conflict mediation efforts, and the two so-called Gulf mediators of Kuwait and Oman tend to become involved in regional disputes, while Bahrain has largely refrained from high-profile conflict mediation.

Qatar

Qatar has expanded its mediation efforts considerably since the rule of Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani (r. 1995-2013) put the country on the world stage. It was involved in resolving conflict between Eritrea and Sudan in 1999, Chad and Sudan in 2009, Djibouti and Eritrea in 2010, and hosted the Darfur-Sudan peace process in 2009-2013. Regionally, Qatar has been involved in the Lebanon peace process (2008), Yemen peace process (2008, 2011), intra-Palestinian peace process (2012), and peace processes in Afghanistan (2006, 2011, 2019), Syria (2012, 2015), Libya (2018, 2021), and Sudan (2020). Qatar has been involved in the mediation of nearly all regional conflicts since 1995, making the small state – with no prior status as a regional superpower – not only relevant on both a regional and global scale, but indispensable in the protection and alliance it can afford other GCC states.

Previous papers have interrogated the rationale for Qatar's engagement in peacemaking and peacebuilding, finding that Qatar's conflict mediation was perhaps initially motivated by Shaykh Hamad's ambition for it to be recognised on the global stage as a mediator (Freer; 2022), with a state-identity that reflects this perception. The value placed on conflict mediation by the government is evident in Article 7 of the Qatari Constitution (2003), which states that "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" (State of Qatar; 2003). Qatar's ventures in this field are therefore unsurprising, with Shaykh Hamad and his successor Shaykh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani (r. 2013-present) having successfully distinguished the state from its larger neighbour, Saudi Arabia, through activist foreign policy and by becoming a key player in attempting to resolve major regional conflicts (Kamrava; 2011).

In the period that Qatar faced blockade from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt (2017-2021), its involvement in certain states – such as Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Syria – was considered to support Islamist groups. Literature persists which suggests that the blockade was prompted by Qatar's willingness (whether perceived or real) to extend aid to Islamist groups in the region (Roberts; 2019). Previous papers indicate that Qatar has been linked to Islamism largely due to "its belief that maintaining contact is the best way to maintain leverage – hence its hosting of groups like Hamas and the Taliban" (Freer; 2022). Further, conflict mediation is seen as a major part of Islamic culture and tradition for many Qataris (ibid). Those on the other side of the GCC rift, most notably the Emiratis, have not used religious language to explain their interest in conflict mediation, and the UAE has supported groups which have presented the most viable opposition to Qatar-supported parties, including nationalists. After the signing of the Al-Ula Accords signalled the end of this rift in January 2021, there is potential for greater intra-regional cooperation in the conflict mediation space, particularly when it comes to multilateral issues such as Afghanistan and relief for the February 2023 earthquake in Syria and Turkey.

The UAE

The UAE has become involved in attempting conflict mediation in Afghanistan (2006, 2011, 2019), Somalia-Puntland (2016), Syria (2015), and Libya (2018, 2021). It was also party to resolving the conflict in Sri Lanka. The UAE, like Qatar, has catapulted itself onto both the regional and global stages through conflict mediation. Unlike Qatar, it has been less focused on the immediate Middle East region and has used other means, like investments, to develop its state-identity abroad. Moreover, development of the UAE's state-identity abroad has not been linked with conflict mediation as much as Qatar's; rather, investments tend to be aligned with areas of conflict mediation (ibid). The UAE in the 1990s and early 2000s was inclined to join pre-existing multilateral conflict mediation efforts (Somalia in 1992, Bosnia in 1995, the Balkans in 1999, Afghanistan in 2002), rather than start them independently, although this approach shifted in the 2010s (ibid).

In 2018, the UAE, along with Saudi Arabia, mediated a peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and in 2021 between India and Pakistan. Some analysts consider this a self-conscious shift away from regional conflicts, like Libya and Yemen, where their interests have not necessarily been served (Ibish; 2021).

The negotiations between India and Pakistan will be particularly high-profile, showing a shift away from the more military, prior approach of the UAE, which former American Defence Secretary James Mattis dubbed "Little Sparta," and towards a focus on conflict management and mitigation. Emirati efforts at conflict mitigation, at least in India and Pakistan, as well as in the Horn of Africa, have also followed previous national investments, indicating the extent to which the two are aligned (Economist Intelligence Unit; 2021).

Within the region, the UAE has sought to re-integrate Syria under the Asad regime as well as re-engage Iran, both bilaterally rather than through regional organisations (Freer; 2022). Such a tactic is "a more nuanced approach in which the country marries its economic strength and diverse web of international alliances to insert itself as a mediator in hotspots ranging from South Asia to the Horn of Africa" (Economist Intelligence Unit; 2021).

Saudi Arabia

The data demonstrates that Saudi Arabia tends to be involved as a signatory in multilateral agreements, rather than seeking to use conflict mediation to develop its image on the global stage. Saudi Arabia, as the largest state in the GCC and home to the two holiest sites in Islam is less in need of using foreign policy to promote itself or to protect itself from its neighbours. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia has participated in regional conflicts, notably taking a leading role hosting talks to end the Lebanese civil war in Taif (1989), between Fatah and Hamas in the Arab-Israeli conflict (2007) and in Yemen through the GCC (2011, 2015). Although these efforts cannot be deemed a straightforward success, Mehran Kamrava argues that "conflict mediation continues to be one of the most salient features of Saudi foreign policy" (Kamrava; 2013). Unlike other states, America's pressure on Saudi Arabia is considerable, with the Bush Administration allegedly pushing Saudi Arabia to put forward its 2002 initiative for Arab-Israeli peace (ibid). What Nonneman terms the "polygamous" relations of Saudi Arabia have been pursued for years, with Saudi Arabia aiming to maintain relations with actors across geopolitical divides, a dynamic with which the Biden Administration in particular appears uncomfortable, as it tries to keep Saudi Arabia firmly within the American sphere of influence (Nonneman; 2005).

As the largest state in the GCC, Saudi Arabia takes a more institutionalized and less personalistic approach to conflict mediation than Qatar (Kamrava; 2013) and the UAE. While Qatari and Emirati leaderships often publicly endorse, or are involved in conflict mediation, Saudi efforts tend to go through the ministry of foreign affairs (ibid).

This strategy appears sensible, particularly given the uneven record of success for Saudi conflict mediation. Kostiner, in his 2002 analysis of the Arab Peace Initiative highlights how “[a]ssuming the posture of a mediator or coordinator of different regional policies exercised by different parties, was a logical pursuit for Saudi Arabia, reflecting the Kingdom’s need to balance various regional security options, as well as its leaders’ wish to resolve such problems through diplomatic means” (Kostiner; 2005). Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia, “did not develop a mechanism to lead or actively participate in such mediation” (ibid), which Kamrava further suggests may be due to weak capacity of foreign ministry (2013).

Although conflict mediation is an important part of Saudi foreign policy, Kamrava highlights, “[t]he inability to translate mediation efforts into lasting conflict resolution is only one of the drawbacks associated with Saudi mediation politics” (ibid). By primarily entering the conflict mediation space through multilateral projects, Saudi Arabia mitigates the risk of embarrassment by failing to end the conflicts which it has sought to mediate.

Kuwait

Kuwaiti mediation became visible in recent years during the GCC dispute between 2017 and 2021, as its leadership, along with that of Oman, remained neutral while Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, along with Egypt, broke off all ties with Qatar. Despite the Kuwaiti (and Omani) role in healing that rift (Cafiero and Ulrichsen; 2021), Kuwait’s history with conflict mediation long predates disunity in the GCC and even the GCC itself. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen tracks Kuwait’s involvement in regional conflict mediation to its pre-independence era, specifically to the 1938 dispute between Bahrain and Qatar over the Hawar Islands (Ulrichsen; 2021).

The Kuwaiti leadership continued to seek regional integration and engagement after independence. Indeed, In December 1961, shortly after independence, Kuwait established the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (KFAED). In Walid E. Mubarak’s words, Kuwait’s aid policy, the first in the GCC to be well formulated, “is specifically designed to add muscle to its posture of neutrality and non-involvement in inter-Arab and Gulf disputes. Its policy strives to invite multiple Arab interests in its revenues and as such assure its independence” (1987). Mubarak concludes that Kuwait’s role as “a neutral distributor of aid” has bolstered its regional reputation as a mediator, which is critical to its foreign policy (ibid).

This model of engagement continued, with Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah (r. 2006-2020) serving as foreign minister between 1963 and 2003. In that period, Kuwait was involved in mediation efforts between Bahrain and Iran (1968), between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, leading to the establishment of the UAE (1971), North and South Yemen (1972, 1978), the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), and Qatar and Saudi Arabia (2003) (Ulrichsen; 2021). It is therefore unsurprising that Kuwait was a major driver in the establishment of the GCC (ibid) and that its first secretary general was a Kuwaiti diplomat, Abdullah Bishara.

Kuwait has also been involved in regional and multilateral mediation efforts in Iraq and Syria, hosting a February 2018 conference to help fundraise for rebuilding efforts in Iraq (UN News; 2017). At the conference, over \$30 billion was pledged in loans and credits, falling short of Iraq's requested \$80 billion, but still a major step in enhancing relations between Iraq and neighbouring Gulf states (Young; 2018). In Haddad's words, "[t]he conference crowned a string of recent improvements in Iraq's relations with its Arab neighbours. Whatever their ambivalence about the political changes since 2003, there is today greater acceptance of Iraqi realities by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and beyond" (ibid). Kuwait's involvement in leading the Gulf's reintegration of Iraq is emblematic of its approach towards conflict mediation generally: within the Middle East it is seen as a regional connector, a willing discussant with any party. Between 2013 and 2015, the Kuwaiti Government, along with the UN, organised three conferences to raise funds for displaced people within Syria, Syrian refugees, and communities hosting refugees (Ulrichsen; 2021). It also partnered with the UK, Germany, Norway, Qatar, the EU, and the UN between 2016 and 2017 for similar such events. In so doing, "Kuwait presented itself as a bridge between the regional and international communities, and later did the same during a two-year spell on the United Nations Security Council in 2018-2019" (ibid).

Immediately following the death of Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah, who, as foreign minister (1963-2003) and later Amir (2006-2020), was the architect of such an approach, there were concerns that Kuwait would change course (DeLozier; 2020). Kuwait, however, appears to remain committed to playing the role of mediator both within the Gulf and among Arab states more broadly. Abdul-Reda Assiri concludes that Kuwaiti foreign policy has traditionally had three major goals: (1) to achieve political and military security; (2) to promote Arabic ideology and Islamic values; and (3) to accomplish "the mission to invest and share the nation's wealth with less fortunate Arab and Moslem countries" (Assiri; 1990).

These three goals are also popular internally, as they position Kuwait as both protected from and independent of its powerful neighbours, while projecting Kuwaiti power outward in a way to reaffirm its Arab identity and place in the Arab world as a trusted mediator.

Although it has focused primarily on mediating conflict within the Arab states of the Middle East, as shown by the dataset, Kuwait was also a mediator in the Sri Lanka 2002 multilateral mediation process, along with Oman and the UAE. Recognizing its vulnerability as a small state with an historically aggressive Iraqi neighbour, Kuwait has sought to preserve regional order above all; in Ulrichsen's words, "To the extent that an ideational aspect to Kuwaiti mediation existed, it lay in Emir Sabah's commitment to the GCC and his efforts both in 2013-14 and again in 2017 to prevent the organisation from fracturing" (Ulrichsen; 2021). Kuwait's conflict mediation strategy, moreover, is linked to promoting Arab unity more broadly: it has drawn comparisons to Oman (*ibid*), as a result of its involvement in mediating local, Arab conflicts.

Oman

Oman's role in conflict mediation has led it to be dubbed "Switzerland of the Middle East" or "Switzerland of Arabia" (Worrall; 2021). Unlike Switzerland, however, Oman has long been an eager member of the Arab League and the United Nations, joining both shortly after Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970 (*ibid*). Further, Oman has been actively engaged in multilateral negotiations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, as well as outside of the Middle East in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Sri Lanka. Oman is also a member of the UN Group of Friends of Mediation, founded in 2010 "to promote and advance the use of mediation in the peaceful settlement of disputes, conflict prevention and resolution, as well as to generate support for the development of mediation"; Iraq and Qatar are the only other Arab members (United Nations; 2010). Oman has additionally signed a memorandum of understanding in 2019 with Switzerland to promote learning about mediation and peacebuilding (Worrall; 2021).

Despite its participation in conflict mediation efforts outside of the Middle East, Oman has prized participation in the Arab world (ibid), with Sultan Qaboos (r. 1970-2020) ending Oman's previous regional isolation as a means of legitimisation and integration (ibid). It is unsurprising then, that "Omani mediation is clearly focused very much on the Middle East, and its immediate neighbourhood in particular, although some have referred to mediation work further afield. There also appears to be a real increase in the ambition of Omani mediation over time. One of the hallmarks of Omani approaches is their pragmatism; the country clearly engages where it thinks its efforts are most likely to bear fruit and consistently does so on similar issues, in similar places" (ibid). O'Reilly has dubbed this counter-balancing – of relations with Iran and the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel – as Omanibalancing (O'Reilly; 1998).

Notably, not all of Oman's mediation efforts are high-profile, although it is perhaps best known for its involvement in the brokering the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran and the United States in 2015, and in brokering intra-GCC peace alongside Kuwait in 2021. Some have questioned whether Omani actions are more closely aligned to mediation or facilitation (Worrall; 2021). According to Worrall and confirmed by the dataset, "Oman clearly focuses on those instances which are closer to its borders and to its core foreign policy relationships. This strongly suggests the strength of its wider networks with its neighbours and the ways in which its foreign policy relationships with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen are crucial in enabling mediation to take place, which, in turn, strengthens those relations. There is also a clear pattern of helping core partners such as the US and UK to deal with problems in the region" (ibid).

Jones and Ridout also hypothesise that the adoption of Islam was connected to a flurry of diplomatic activity, in particular with Saudi Arabia and other centres of Islamic learning and soft power (Jones and Riddout; 2012). Again, focusing on its immediate neighbourhood, Oman used common religion to end isolation: "With the further spread of Islam to other neighbouring peoples, including, eventually, the Persians, a new political order took shape in which diplomacy between its participants was no longer just a matter of relations between different political powers, but also a question of negotiations and alliances between members of the same religious community" (ibid).

Jones and Ridout further identify five features of Ibadism, which have also become part of Omani culture, and affected diplomatic practice in Oman: "(1) anti-absolutism, (2) abstention from political violence, (3) tolerant anti-sectarianism, (4) the practice of 'secrecy' (kitman), and (5) the concept of wuquf (reservation)" (ibid). These characteristics have been particularly important, given Oman's geographic location and ties to countries on both sides of the Arabian Gulf. Oman, like Kuwait, has tended to focus conflict mediation efforts locally, also assisting Western partners with maintaining their ties in the neighbourhood.

Bahrain

Bahrain, the smallest and one of the less wealthy GCC states, tends to involve itself in conflict mediation efforts abroad only when multilateral groups are also involved. As such, it was a party in the Kosovo process (1999) mediated through the UN, in addition to being involved in multilateral conflict mediation in the Middle East in the Afghanistan post-intervention process (2006, 2011), the Iraq peace process in 2004, and Bahrain's own internal reform process (2011).

For two reasons, Bahrain is unique among Gulf states regarding conflict mediation. First, it does not appear to have shifted its strategy meaningfully since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, or since the Arab Spring-inspired protests in 2011. Second, unlike its neighbouring states, Bahrain has engaged in internal conflict mediation. This process emerged following large-scale protests in the country beginning in 2011. Although this conflict mediation process did include relatively diverse participation, with 300 members including people from civil society and political societies, the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission Inquiry, were ultimately not put into place by the government (POMDE; 2012). This practice indicates that the formation of the commission and public moves towards internal conflict mediation may have been intended primarily to appease international critics, rather than to effect systemic political or social change at home. In the internal process, at least, "going through the motions" was more important than effecting major change, while abroad Bahrain avoids asserting itself independently from more powerful neighbouring states through conflict mediation.

Conclusions

The above analysis demonstrates the extent to which generalisations about the use of petrodplomacy or riyal-politik fail to consider important local considerations and nuances that influence each GCC state's participation in local, subregional, regional, and global conflict mediation efforts. While all the states analysed here have been involved in conflict mediation efforts, they have different motivations and priorities in so doing, and have therefore taken different trajectories in boosting their global positions. The Gulf states as mediators are likely to become only more relevant. As perceptions of US and UK withdrawal from the region leads the Gulf States to increasingly take matters into their own hands, this may be through organising events or facilitating connections, rather than creating sustainable peace in the Middle East.

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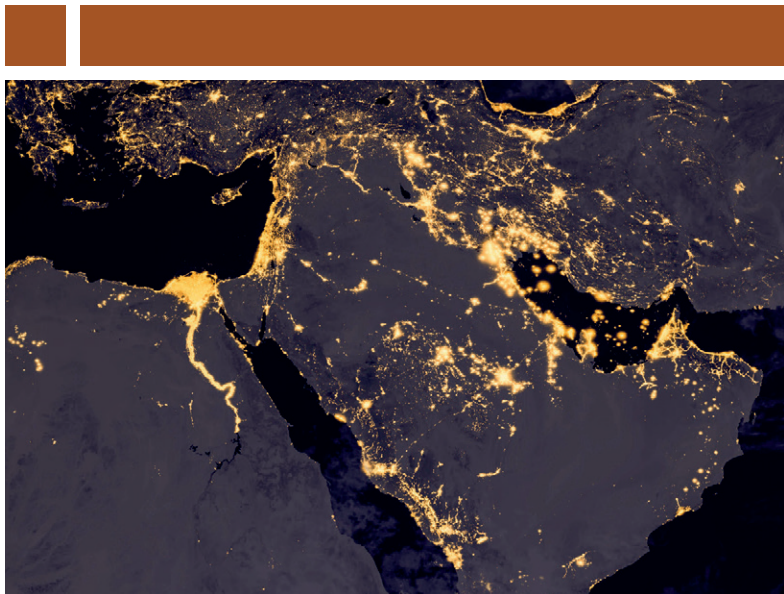
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