Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

Knowledge for All

17th Gulf Research Meeting

Cambridge, 20-22 July 2027

Workshop No. 7

Mediating Alongside the System: Gulf States, the United Nations, and the Future of Conflict Diplomacy

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2. **Abstract**

Gulf states have become prominent intermediaries in conflicts extending from the Middle East and the Horn of Africa to Afghanistan and Europe. Yet their mediation is usually bilateral or conducted through small groups, even when it intersects with conflicts formally addressed by the United Nations and regional organizations. This workshop examines that institutional interface. It asks when Gulf-led mediation works with established bodies, when it fills gaps left by institutional paralysis, when it creates parallel tracks, and when it competes with official mandates or other diplomatic initiatives.

The workshop is conceived as the next step after the GRM 2026 workshop on Humanitarian Diplomacy and Mediation in the Gulf: Pathways to Regional Stability and the third Qatar Mediation Forum (December 2026), Mediation in a Fractured World. Rather than repeating country-by-country accounts or general debates about

Gulf mediation, it focuses on how Gulf initiatives relate to the wider conflict-management system. Comparative and process-based studies will examine coordination, sequencing, legitimacy, information sharing, implementation, and the movement of agreements between informal channels and formal institutions. By bringing Gulf foreign-policy research into conversation with scholarship on mediation, institutional adaptation, and regional order, the workshop will explain whether Gulf initiatives are reinforcing, bypassing, or reshaping the architecture of contemporary conflict diplomacy. It will also identify the conditions under which flexible Gulf channels and institutional mandates can become complementary rather than fragmented or competitive.

3. Context

The international conflict-management structure is increasingly fragmented. Geopolitical rivalry constrains collective action in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), regional organizations often face internal divisions, and conflicts involve armed groups and external sponsors that cannot easily be brought together through formal diplomacy (Deely 2026; Richmond & Mac Ginty 2026). These conditions have increased demand for states able to communicate across political and ideological divides. Gulf states have responded through discreet bilateral channels, leadership-level engagement, small-group diplomacy, humanitarian negotiations, and relationships with actors excluded from conventional diplomatic forums (Akpınar & Öztürk 2026; Al-Ansari, Aras & Yorulmazlar 2021; Milton & Elkahlout 2026).

These initiatives do not take place outside an institutional environment. They frequently intersect with UN special envoys, peace operations, sanctions regimes, humanitarian agencies, the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), and major-power diplomacy (Abdelkhalek 2022; Ruggie 1992; Keohane 1990; Convergne 2016; Badache, Hellmüller & Salaymeh 2022). A Gulf state may open a channel that the United Nations (UN) cannot establish, host talks under an informal format, broker a limited agreement, or provide material support for implementation (Aras & Akpınar 2026). At other times, parallel initiatives may generate rivalry, forum shopping, inconsistent incentives, or uncertainty over mandates and ownership.

This workshop builds directly on two bodies of work. GRM 2026 workshop on *Humanitarian Diplomacy and Mediation in the Gulf: Pathways to Regional Stability* which generated an edited volume with chapters on Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain. The third Qatar Mediation Forum (December 2026), *Mediation in a Fractured World*, which examines the wider pressures confronting mediation under conditions of geopolitical and institutional fragmentation. The proposed

workshop advances beyond both by making the relationship between Gulf-led initiatives and the established international and regional system its principal object of inquiry.
The relevant scholarly gap is therefore not whether Gulf states mediate or why they seek mediation roles. Existing work has already developed important accounts of soft power, hedging, status, strategic autonomy, humanitarian diplomacy, and small-state statecraft (Ulrichsen 2021; Kamrava 2013; Akpınar 2026; Alarabeed 2023; Milton & Elkahlout 2026; Alqashouti 2021). What remains less well understood is how predominantly bilateral or small-group initiatives connect to multilateral institutions: who sets agendas, how mandates are negotiated, how tracks are sequenced, where information and agreements move, and which actor provides legitimacy, monitoring, resources, or implementation capacity. These questions require comparison across processes rather than another collection organized principally around individual GCC states.

The workshop treats the relationship between flexible diplomacy and institutional multilateralism as an empirical question rather than assuming either harmony or competition. It will investigate when Gulf mediation complements formal mechanisms, substitutes for institutional absence, bypasses blocked processes, or creates competing tracks. It will also consider how agreements reached through Gulf channels are transferred to institutional frameworks and whether such interaction improves inclusion implementation, durability, and accountability. This focus connects Gulf international relations to wider debates about regional agency, institutional adaptation, and the future of conflict diplomacy

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4. Workshop Focus/Objectives

The workshop has six connected objectives. First, it will develop a framework for analyzing the institutional interface between Gulf-led mediation and the international conflict-management system. Instead of describing Gulf mediation as multilateral in form, it will distinguish bilateral and small-group mediation from the multilateral environment in which it operates. Contributors will identify the actors, mandates, resources, and stages of a process and trace how Gulf initiatives relate to formal institutions over time.

Second, the workshop will compare four possible relationships: complementarity, substitution, parallelism, and competition. Complementarity may involve division of labor, information sharing, joint convening, or institutional endorsement. Substitution occurs when Gulf actors assume functions that established bodies cannot perform. Parallelism describes simultaneous tracks with limited coordination, while competition may involve rival mandates, venues, incentives, or claims to diplomatic ownership. Papers should examine movement between these relationships rather than treat them as fixed categories.

Third, it will investigate coordination and sequencing. Particular attention will be given to when informal Gulf channels prepare the ground for formal negotiations, when UN or regional mandates provide legitimacy and implementation support, and when premature institutionalization restricts access or flexibility. Studies may address co-mediation, contact groups, special-envoy relationships, backchannels, humanitarian arrangements, ceasefires, detainee exchanges, and transitions from limited agreements to broader political processes.

Fourth, the workshop will assess how institutional relationships shape effectiveness. It will move beyond counting comprehensive peace agreements to consider access, de-escalation, crisis communication, humanitarian outcomes, implementation, monitoring, and preservation of future diplomatic possibilities. Contributors will ask whether coordination improves durability and accountability, and whether parallel or competitive tracks sometimes create leverage or instead fragment negotiations.

Fifth, it will examine legitimacy, ownership, and inclusion. Gulf-led initiatives may derive authority from access, consent, resources, regional proximity, or leadership relationships, while international organizations contribute mandates, technical capacity, and broader recognition. Papers will analyze how these different sources of legitimacy interact and how local actors, women, civil society, and conflict-affected communities are represented when agreements move between informal and institutional settings.

Finally, the workshop will identify the implications for regional and global order. It will ask whether Gulf mediation represents institutional entrepreneurship, pragmatic burden sharing, or a redistribution of diplomatic authority away from established organizations. Through comparison across conflicts and organizations, the workshop will generate a clearer account of how Gulf states operate alongside, around, and at times in competition with the system, while producing practical recommendations for better coordination, mandate clarity, institutional learning, and implementation.

5. Paper Focus/Topics

We welcome theoretically informed and empirically grounded proposals on: Gulf mediation and UN special envoys; relations with the Arab League, GCC, OIC, African Union, European Union, and other regional bodies; bilateral and small-group mediation within multilateral conflict settings; complementarity, substitution, parallel tracks, and competition; co-mediation, contact groups, and divisions of labor; agenda-setting, mandate negotiation, diplomatic ownership, and information-sharing; transitions from backchannels to formal negotiations; institutional endorsement, monitoring, and implementation of Gulf-brokered agreements; forum-shopping and the politics of venue; legitimacy, consent, local ownership, and inclusion; humanitarian negotiations, ceasefires, detainee exchanges, crisis communication, and political settlements; sanctions and counterterrorism restrictions

affecting coordination; and methods for evaluating successful, failed, frozen, or preventive mediation.

Relevant cases may include Gaza and other Israeli–Palestinian negotiations, Iran, Yemen, Iraq, Sudan, the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria, and Russia–Ukraine. Comparative studies across states, conflicts, institutions, or time periods are particularly encouraged. Strong single-case studies are also welcome when they explain whether and under what conditions Gulf mediation reinforces, bypasses, substitutes for, or competes with established conflict-management institutions.

6. Publication Plans

The principal publication output will be an edited volume provisionally titled *Mediating Alongside the System: Gulf States, Multilateralism, and the Future of Conflict Diplomacy*. Developed in consultation with GRC/GRCC, the volume will bring together thematic and comparative chapters organized around a shared analytical framework. Potential publishers include Hurst and Bloomsbury, subject to their interest and editorial review.

The volume will examine four forms of institutional relationship—complementarity, substitution, parallelism, and competition—and assess how these evolve across conflict processes. Proposed chapters will address the changing conflict-management system; Gulf mediation formats and their institutional interfaces; relations with the UN and regional organizations; coordination and sequencing across diplomatic tracks; legitimacy, inclusion, and implementation; and implications for the future of conflict diplomacy. A shared set of questions and systematic comparison across contributions will establish a coherent argument accessible to scholars, diplomats, international organizations, and mediation practitioners.

Depending on the quality, thematic coherence, and theoretical contribution of the papers, a journal special issue may also be considered. Potential outlets include Third World Quarterly and Alternatives: Global, Local, Political, subject to editorial interest and peer review. The choice of publication format will be made in consultation with GRC/GRCC following an assessment of the workshop contributions.

Publication potential and alignment with the shared analytical framework will inform paper selection. Before the meeting, contributors will receive guidance on evidence, comparison, and institutional mapping. Following the workshop, the directors will finalize the publication structure, confirm contributions, and coordinate revisions in accordance with the GRM submission deadline of 20 September 2027. The publication process will remain subject to GRC/GRCC requirements and the selected publisher's or journal's review procedures. Strong papers not included in the collective publication will be considered for submission to peer-reviewed journals or GRC-compliant working-paper

outlets. A concise policy note on coordination between Gulf mediators and international institutions will accompany the academic output.

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8. Workshop Directors

Dr. Ghassan Elkahlout is the Director of the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) in Doha, Qatar, and an Associate Professor of Conflict Management and Humanitarian Action at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. His work focuses on peacebuilding, humanitarian diplomacy, and mediation, with a particular emphasis on the MENA region and Palestine. He is the Chief Editor of the Journal of Peacebuilding and Development and has contributed to leading academic journals, including Third World Quarterly and the Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction. He has also edited key volumes such as Gaza's Cycle of Destruction and Rebuilding and Forced Migration in the Arab World. His Arabic-language book on humanitarian action provides a critical analysis of the sector's challenges and evolving role in conflict settings. His recent book with Hurst, *From Gulf to Global: Qatar's Rising Role in Conflict Mediation*, explores Qatar's expanding influence in international diplomacy and crisis resolution. Through his work, Dr. Elkahlout remains committed to bridging academic research with policy and practice, contributing to global debates on humanitarian action, mediation, and peacebuilding in conflict zones.

Dr. Pınar Akpınar is Assistant Professor of Gulf Studies and graduate faculty in the Department of International Affairs and the Gulf Studies Program at the College of Arts and Sciences, Qatar University. She holds a PhD in Politics and International Relations from Keele University, where her dissertation examined Türkiye's mediation in the Syrian–Israeli talks and in Somalia. Her work bridges academic research and policy engagement on international mediation, conflict resolution, foreign policy, diplomacy, peacebuilding, and humanitarianism, with particular emphasis on Türkiye, the Gulf, and the wider Middle East. She has taught at Qatar University, Sabancı University, Kadir Has University, and Keele University, and previously served as a visiting scholar at George Mason University’s School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. Her work has appeared in journals including Third World Quarterly, Contemporary Politics, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, Turkish Studies, and International Peacekeeping. Alongside her academic work, Dr. Akpınar has delivered professional trainings in conflict resolution and mediation and advised Turkish and Qatari institutions on mediation and regional politics.