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The Doha Model

Qatar's Expanding Role in
International Crisis Diplomacy and
the Case for an Institutionalised
Mediation Hub



Dr Tahir Mahmood Azad
Executive Director, London Dialogue (LD)



Dr. Kristian Alexander
Non-Resident Fellow, London Dialogue



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The Doha Model:

Qatar's Expanding Role in International Crisis Diplomacy and the Case for an Institutionalised Mediation Hub

The failure of the Islamabad track and the unravelling of the June 2026 memorandum of understanding have created an opening for Qatar to move from convening the Iran–United States process to anchoring it. This paper argues that the opening should be institutionalised through a United Nations-affiliated mediation hub in Doha.

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This paper offers a policy analysis and a set of recommendations rather than a definitive account of any single event. Its arguments rest on information available at the time of writing, and readers should treat the diplomatic developments it discusses as a fast-moving context against which the paper's central proposal is set.

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Authors: Dr Tahir Mahmood Azad and Dr Kristian Alexander

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Contact

Executive Director: Dr Tahir Mahmood Azad

Email: executive.director@londondialogue.org

Website: www.londondialogue.org

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over roughly two decades, the State of Qatar has converted a structural vulnerability, that of a small, gas-rich peninsula wedged between far larger neighbours, into a durable instrument of influence. It has done so not through hard power but through mediation. From the 2008 Doha Agreement that ended Lebanon's political paralysis to the 2020 accord between the United States and the Taliban, from two years of shuttle diplomacy on Gaza to the reopening of channels between Washington and Tehran, Doha has made itself the address to which parties in the most intractable disputes are sent when direct contact is impossible. This paper examines the foundations, record, and limits of that model and sets out a policy case for placing it on a more permanent institutional footing.

The paper advances four arguments. First, Qatar's mediation is not mere opportunism; two decades of consistent practice have hardened it into something close to a state doctrine. It rests on a constitutional commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes, on the material base provided by liquefied natural gas revenues, and on a deliberate strategy of engagement without alignment that keeps channels open to state and non-state actors alike. Second, the model has proven resilient. When Israeli aircraft struck Hamas negotiators on Qatari soil in September 2025, an act Doha condemned as state terrorism, Qatar was nonetheless back at the centre of the mediation that produced the October 2025 Gaza ceasefire within weeks. That episode demonstrated the resilience of Qatar's mediating role even in the face of a direct assault.

Third, the collapse of the Pakistan-brokered Islamabad talks in April 2026 and the rapid unravelling of the June 2026 memorandum of understanding between the United States and Iran exposed a structural weakness common to all trusted regional mediators. They command the trust needed to bring parties to a table, but not the leverage needed to make an agreement endure through the hazardous phase of implementation. Qatar has moved steadily to the centre of the broadened mediation coalition, hosting the Iran–United States technical track in Doha through mid-2026, and it is well placed to help lead the next phase in concert with others. Leadership alone, however, will not close the implementation gap.

Fourth, the paper therefore proposes the establishment of a United Nations-affiliated mediation hub in Doha: a standing centre that would co-locate mediation-support expertise, an implementation and verification cell, a training academy, and a research function, linked to the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs but drawing on Qatar's convening power and financial capacity. Such a hub would institutionalise the handoff from trusted conveners to capable guarantors, help address the mediation gap felt most acutely in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and parts of South Asia, and give the international system a second, southern node of mediation infrastructure to complement the New York headquarters. The paper closes with recommendations for Qatar, the UN, and external guarantor states.

1. Introduction: Small State, Large Role

Qatar is a country of paradoxes. Its citizen population is smaller than that of many mid-sized European cities, its landmass would fit comfortably inside a single province of its larger neighbours, and its security ultimately rests on the presence of foreign forces at Al Udeid Air Base. Yet for two decades, it has exercised an influence on regional and global affairs disproportionate to its size. Mediation has been the instrument of that influence. Uniquely for a state of its size, Qatar has become one of the world's most proactive brokers of conflict, seeking to position itself as a trusted intermediary in disputes across and beyond the Middle East.¹

The scholarly literature has long recognised this as a deliberate strategy rather than an accident of wealth. Mehran Kamrava's influential formulation describes it as niche diplomacy: concentrating finite diplomatic and financial resources on a small number of high-profile mediation cases to accumulate international prestige and, in turn, security. A decade and a half on, the description holds, but the scale has changed. A state once characterised as a small country with big politics is now, on any reasonable reading, a small country operating in the register of mega politics, capable of shaping outcomes in theatres from Kabul to Gaza to the Strait of Hormuz.

This paper is written at a particular moment. In the first half of 2026, a war between the United States and Iran, and the fragile diplomacy meant to end it, dominated the Gulf's strategic landscape. Pakistan brokered a ceasefire and hosted the Islamabad talks of April 2026; those talks failed; a memorandum of understanding signed in June briefly restored calm before unravelling within weeks. As the mediation effort broadened into a coalition, Qatar moved from a supporting role to the centre of the process, hosting the technical track in Doha. The question this paper addresses is whether Qatar's model, having reached the frontier of what informal, personalised mediation can achieve, should now be institutionalised, and if so, how.²

The argument proceeds in eight steps. Section 2 sets out the foundations of Qatar's mediation diplomacy: its constitutional basis, its material underpinnings, and the doctrine of engagement without alignment. Section 3 locates the model in the scholarly literature and introduces the analytical distinction between trust and leverage, on which the rest of the paper turns. Section 4 surveys the Doha record with the great powers. Section 5 examines the Iran–United States file and the limits exposed by the Islamabad track. Section 6 widens the lens to the Global South and the trust deficit in the international system. Section 7 sets out the central proposal: a United Nations-affiliated mediation hub in Doha. Sections 8 and 9 address the risks and offer recommendations.

¹ Mehran Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 4 (2011): 539–556, at 539.

² Sultan Barakat, "The Missing Half of Mediation," *Al Jazeera*, 23 July 2026.

2. The Foundations of Qatar's Mediation Diplomacy

2.1 A Constitutional Commitment

Qatar's mediation is not merely a tactical preference; it is also grounded in its basic law. Article 7 of the Permanent Constitution of 2003 states that the state's foreign policy is founded on strengthening international peace and security by encouraging the *peaceful resolution of international disputes*.³ Qatari officials treat this not as boilerplate but as an obligation. In a lecture at Chatham House in July 2026, the Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs described mediation as the reflection of a deep-rooted constitutional conviction rather than one tool among many and framed the capacity to keep channels open when others believe dialogue impossible as among the most valuable forms of contemporary influence.⁴

Legal scholars have gone further, arguing that Qatar's consistent state practice, sustained over two decades and accompanied by an expressed sense of legal duty, contributes to the development of the customary international law principle of the peaceful settlement of disputes, including by states that are not themselves parties to the conflicts they help to resolve.⁵ Whatever the precise doctrinal status of that claim, its rhetorical function is clear. It allows Qatar to present mediation as principled and predictable, not transactional, and predictability is itself an asset for a broker.

A note of caution belongs here. A constitutional clause and a series of ministerial speeches do not, by themselves, amount to a foreign-policy doctrine; declared intentions and actual conduct can diverge. What converts Article 7 from rhetoric into something closer to doctrine is its consistent enactment over time: two decades of sustained mediation across successive emirs, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs that has built dedicated mediation expertise and a standing institutional practice, and a continuity of message from the leadership that treats brokerage as a defining function of the state rather than an occasional tactic. It is the combination of constitutional text, institutional practice, and sustained behaviour, not any one of them alone, that makes it reasonable to speak of a Qatari mediation doctrine.

2.2 The Material Base

Doctrine would be inert without resources. Qatar's mediation is underwritten by one of the world's largest natural gas reserves, which has made it, per capita, among the wealthiest states on earth. That

³ Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar (2003), art. 7; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, "Mediation," accessed 29 July 2026, <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/foreign-policy/mediation>.

⁴ Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Al Khulaifi, "Qatar: The Future of Diplomacy and Mediation, Opportunities and Challenges" (lecture, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, London, 9 July 2026), reported by *Qatar News Agency*, 9 July 2026.

⁵ See "Significance of Qatar's Foreign Policy in International Law," *University of Illinois Law Review Online* (2024), discussing the constitutional obligation to mediate and its alignment with the United Nations Charter.

wealth performs three functions in the mediation model. It funds the logistics of hosting: the venues, the security, the sustained presence of delegations over months or years. It lets Qatar attach financial inducements to diplomacy in the form of humanitarian assistance, reconstruction pledges, and, in some cases, funds that lubricate prisoner exchanges. And it buys a measure of strategic autonomy, allowing Doha to maintain relationships that more dependent states could not sustain.

A second material foundation is Qatar's hosting of Al Udeid Air Base, one of the largest and most strategically important United States military installations in the Middle East and home to the forward headquarters of United States Central Command. This anchors a close security relationship with Washington. That relationship is real and consequential, but it is not an automatic or comprehensive guarantee. Qatar's security rests on a broader architecture that includes the United States partnership and formal defence agreements, membership of the Gulf Cooperation Council, a widening range of international relationships, and Qatar's own defence capabilities. The hostilities of 2026 illustrated the distinction: Iranian missiles struck the American-operated base at Al Udeid, and Qatari territory was affected, while the American response was calibrated to manage escalation rather than to provide blanket protection of the host state. Hosting United States forces is, in short, not the same as possessing an automatic and comprehensive security guarantee. The base is also, on the surface, in tension with Doha's parallel relationships with Iran, with Islamist movements, and with a range of non-state actors. The model's genius is that Qatar has made this apparent contradiction productive: because it is trusted in Washington and yet talks to everyone, it can carry messages between adversaries who will not speak directly.

A third asset, less tangible but not less important, is media reach. The Al Jazeera network gives Qatar a global platform and amplifies its diplomatic profile. Scholars have noted that, unlike Oman, which conducts its mediation quietly and often more effectively out of the public eye, Qatar tends to conduct mediation in full view, treating visibility itself as a source of prestige and deterrence. The approach has costs, but it has helped make Doha synonymous with dialogue.

2.3 Engagement Without Alignment

The organising principle of Qatari statecraft is engagement without alignment. Doha keeps lines open to actors' others will not touch, and it treats maintaining a relationship as distinct from endorsing the party at the other end. As the Minister of State put it, engaging with all sides should not be understood as agreement with them.⁶ However, it is important not to mistake this posture for neutrality in the Swiss sense. Qatar is not a disinterested party. It is a Major Non-NATO Ally of the US, designated in 2022; it hosts the forward headquarters of United States Central Command; it

⁶ Al Khulaifi, "The Future of Diplomacy and Mediation."

maintains a close strategic partnership with Washington; and, as its conduct during the Arab Spring showed, it has at times backed particular actors in regional conflicts rather than holding the ring between them.⁷ What Qatar has developed is different from, and arguably more useful for mediation than, neutrality: broad access, transactional credibility, and acceptability as an intermediary even when it is not politically impartial. Mediation, the wider literature suggests, does not strictly require neutrality; it requires enough confidence from the relevant parties that the mediator can carry messages, preserve confidentiality, and help assemble an agreement. Qatar's advantage is that it retains that confidence across an unusually wide range of actors, several of whom will not speak to one another, not that it stands above the contest.

This posture once set Qatar apart from its larger Gulf neighbours, but the contrast is narrowing and should not be overdrawn. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have historically leaned toward hard power, regional primacy, and tighter alignment with chosen partners, yet both have expanded their diplomatic brokerage in recent years. Riyadh has hosted United States–Russia and United States–Ukraine talks and worked to keep tensions between India and Pakistan from escalating, while Abu Dhabi has facilitated the exchange of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian prisoners and made its own approaches on the India–Pakistan file.⁸ Qatar's distinctiveness therefore lies less in being the only Gulf convener than in a particular combination it brings to the role: unusually deep relationships with non-state actors, a willingness to sustain long and visible processes, and the fusion of mediation with humanitarian and financial diplomacy. It has cultivated the role of convener rather than hegemon, and it is that specialisation, not a monopoly, that sets it apart. The strategy has not been costless. Between 2017 and 2021, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a land, sea, and air blockade on Qatar, in part over precisely these relationships. Yet Doha weathered the blockade without abandoning its networks and emerged with enhanced soft power and diplomatic centrality, rather than diminished. The episode is often read, correctly, as the moment Qatar's model proved its resilience.

2.4 The Evolution of the Model

The model is not static. Its origins lie in the accession of a reform-minded emir in 1995 and the decision, formalised in the 2003 constitution, to place the peaceful settlement of disputes at the centre of foreign policy. In its first phase, through the 2008 Lebanon accord and the Darfur

⁷ Memorandum on the Designation of the State of Qatar as a Major Non-NATO Ally, Presidential Determination No. 2022-10, 10 March 2022. On the shift from honest broker to more partisan involvement after 2011, see *Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

⁸ On the widening field of Gulf mediation, see “Forget Geneva: The World's New Peacemakers Are in the Global South,” *Time*, 11 May 2026; and “Gulf Mediation in the Ukraine Crisis” (Washington, DC: Arab Gulf States Institute, 2025).

negotiations, mediation largely involved hosting and financing. A second phase, associated with the upheavals of 2011, saw Doha experiment with more assertive and at times more partisan engagement in Libya and Syria, an approach that strained its reputation for impartiality. The current phase, consolidated after the 2017 blockade and the leadership transition to Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, marks a return to the disciplined, broadly even-handed brokerage that had served Qatar best, now conducted on a far larger stage and with far greater institutional confidence.⁹

In the process, mediation has become part of Qatar's national identity, not merely its foreign policy. Analysts based in Doha describe it as a hallmark that has hardened, over two decades, from a discretionary tool into a settled expectation of the state's conduct. This matters for the argument that follows. A capacity that is bound up with identity and underwritten by constitution and resources alike is a capacity that can be built upon and, potentially, institutionalised, rather than one that will fade with a change of personnel or priorities.

3. Niche Diplomacy, Small-State Power, and the Trust–Leverage Gap

To understand both the reach and the ceiling of the Doha model, it helps to place it within the scholarship on small-state mediation. Kamrava's account remains the starting point. He argues that Qatar's brokerage is driven by a combination of prestige-seeking and survival and that it succeeds in reducing tensions in Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, and elsewhere while frequently failing to resolve the underlying conflicts.¹⁰ The distinction between reducing and resolving is central. It is not a criticism of Qatari competence; it is a structural feature of what small-state mediators can and cannot do.

The reason lies in the sources of a mediator's influence. Broadly, a mediator can bring two things to a dispute. The first is trust: access to the parties, credibility as an honest broker, the ability to carry messages and to convene without either side losing face. The second is leverage, which comes in more than one form. There is relational and material leverage, the ability to offer financial inducements, reconstruction and humanitarian assistance, access to venues and channels, and the standing that flows from being one of the few actors able to speak to every side. And there is coercive or enforcement leverage, the capacity to compel a party to act against its immediate preference and to guarantee that a commitment, once made, is honoured. Trusted mediators lower the transaction costs of talking; powerful mediators can alter the payoffs of the underlying game. These capacities

⁹ On the phases of Qatari foreign policy and the shift from “big” to “mega” politics, see ORSAM, “Small State, Mega Politics: Understanding Contemporary Qatari Foreign Policy through Mediation Diplomacy” (Ankara: ORSAM, 2024).

¹⁰ Kamrava, “Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy,” 542–549; see also Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

are often conflated, but they are not the same, and they are rarely held in equal measure by the same actor.

Qatar sits high in trust, and its access is exceptionally broad: it talks to the United States and to Iran, to Israel indirectly and to Hamas directly, to the Taliban and to Western governments. It is not, however, simply a high-trust, low-leverage actor. Qatar commands considerable relational and financial leverage: the wealth to fund reconstruction and humanitarian relief, the venues and relationships that give it a seat others cannot claim, and the influence that flows from being, for some parties, the only viable channel of communication. What it lacks is coercive and enforcement leverage. Doha cannot compel Washington to lift sanctions on a fixed timetable, nor compel Tehran to freeze enrichment, nor guarantee that either will honour commitments once the cameras have moved on. This is the same limit that constrains Oman, Pakistan, and, to a lesser degree, Egypt. The gap the international system needs to close is therefore narrower and sharper than a general absence of leverage: it is the missing capacity for implementation and enforcement at the point where trusted conveners reach the end of what relational and financial influence can achieve.

3.1 What Small-State Mediators Can and Cannot Do

Comparative experience sharpens the point. The small-state mediation tradition includes Norway, whose facilitation of the Oslo process and later engagements rested on discretion and long-term relationship-building; Switzerland, whose good offices are grounded in a doctrine of permanent neutrality; and, within the Gulf, Oman, whose quiet back-channel diplomacy has repeatedly opened doors between Washington and Tehran. These actors share with Qatar a lack of coercive weight and a presence of trust. What distinguishes them is style. Oman succeeds by remaining invisible; Qatar by remaining visible. Norway succeeds through patient facilitation; Qatar through the mobilisation of resources at scale.

The comparison with Oman deserves to be pressed, because it is the sharpest test of what a distinctively Qatari model actually is. On the United States–Iran file in particular, Oman has arguably held the deeper and more durable credibility: Muscat quietly opened the back channel that led to the 2015 nuclear agreement, and it hosted the nuclear talks that immediately preceded the 2026 war, so that the diplomatic prelude to that conflict ran through Oman before it ran through anyone else.¹¹ If trusted access to Tehran and Washington were the whole story, Oman, not Qatar, would be the natural centre of gravity. What, then, is the Doha model, and what does Qatar do that Oman does not? The distinction is not one of trust but of capacity and style. Qatar brings far greater

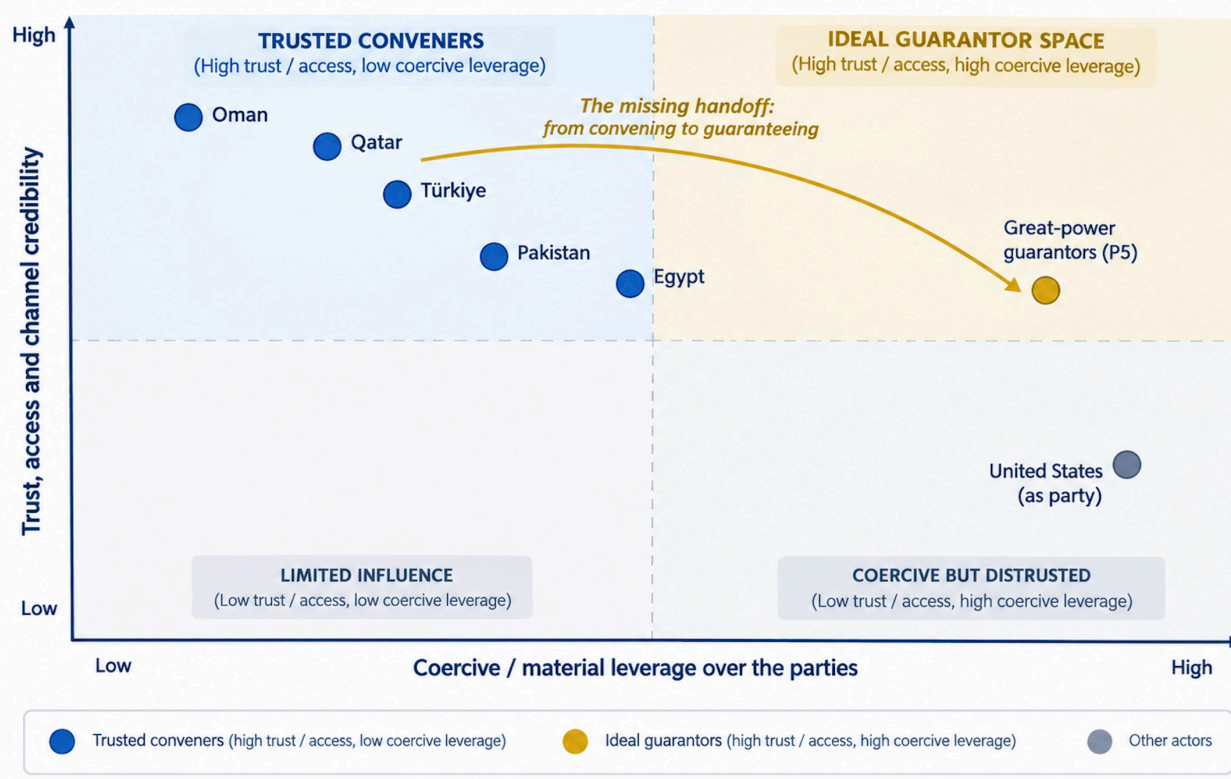
¹¹ On Oman’s facilitation of the back-channel that produced the 2015 nuclear agreement and its hosting of the 2025 and early-2026 talks, see “Riyadh and the New Halls of Mediation,” *Eurasia Review*, 18 March 2025.

financial weight, a willingness to operate in full public view, a large and reusable logistical and institutional infrastructure able to host substantial delegations for months, unusually extensive relationships with non-state actors such as the Taliban and Hamas, and a readiness to fuse mediation with humanitarian and financial diplomacy. Oman relies, by contrast, on discretion, continuity, and long-cultivated strategic trust. The two are better understood as complementary instruments than as rivals, and a serious mediation architecture would want access to both registers rather than privileging one.

The common ceiling, however, is the same in every case. Small-state mediators excel at the front half of the mediation lifecycle, the building of channels, the framing of proposals, and the reduction of tension, and they are structurally weak at the back half, the enforcement of terms, and the management of implementation. The literature on Qatari mediation records this pattern explicitly: success in de-escalation and recurrent difficulty in resolution, precisely because the mediator cannot alter the disputants' fundamental preferences through power projection or sustained follow-up.¹² The policy question, then, is not how to find a better small-state mediator. Qatar is already close to the best available. The question is how to supplement what even the best small-state mediator cannot provide.

¹² Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy," 549–553; and, on humanitarian and follow-up dimensions, "Examining Qatari Humanitarian Diplomacy: Key Features, Challenges and Prospects," *Third World Quarterly* (2024).

Figure 1. Trusted Conveners Such as Qatar and Oman Rank High on Trust and Access but Low on Coercive Leverage; Durable Settlements Require a Handoff to Actors That Can Guarantee Implementation.



The trust–leverage gap is not peripheral. As Sultan Barakat argued after the June 2026 memorandum, it is the missing half of the mediation process. The states that secured that agreement possessed sufficient trust to bring the parties together but not sufficient leverage to compel them to resolve disputes or to honour commitments once implementation began.¹³ A signature, on this view, is not the culmination of mediation but the beginning of its most demanding phase. Implementation, Barakat writes, is diplomacy by other means, and every disagreement over sequencing, verification, or interpretation requires continued mediation if an agreement is to endure. The policy implication, developed in Section 7, is that the international system needs not merely more trusted conveners but a mechanism to bridge trust and leverage across the life of an agreement.

¹³ Barakat, “The Missing Half of Mediation.”

4. Influencing Great Powers: The Doha Record

The abstract case for Qatar's centrality is best made concrete through its record with the great powers. Four episodes stand out: Afghanistan, Gaza, the September 2025 strike, and the Iran–United States channel. Table 1 situates these within the broader arc of Qatari mediation since 2008.

Table 1: Selected Qatari Mediation Engagements, 2008–2026.

Year	Conflict/parties	Qatari role	Outcome
2008	Lebanon's political crisis	Hosted Doha Agreement talks between rival factions	Ended an eighteen-month deadlock; presidential election enabled
2010–11	Darfur / Sudan	Hosted negotiations, funded process	Doha Document for Peace in Darfur; partial, contested
2020	United States and the Taliban	Hosted the multi-year talks; provided venue and logistics	Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan signed in Doha
2023	United States and Iran	Shuttle diplomacy escrow arrangements	Five-for-five prisoner exchange; release of frozen funds
2023–25	Israel and Hamas	Hosted Hamas political office; core mediator with Egypt	Multiple hostage releases; humanitarian pauses
Oct 2025	Israel and Hamas (Gaza)	Co-mediator with Egypt and Türkiye alongside the US	Comprehensive Gaza ceasefire; hostage and prisoner exchange
2026	United States and Iran	Co-mediator with Pakistan and Oman; hosted Doha technical track	Ongoing; June MoU signed then suspended (see Section 5)

Sources: US Department of State (2020); Al Jazeera (2023, 2025); UN Security Council Resolution 2803 (2025); author's compilation.

4.1 Afghanistan: The Doha Agreement of 2020

The clearest demonstration of Qatar's capacity to convene adversaries at the level of great powers was the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, signed in Doha on 29 February 2020 between the United States and the Taliban.¹⁴ For years Qatar had hosted the Taliban's political office, a decision that drew criticism at the time but that positioned Doha as a venue acceptable to both sides when few others were. Qatar provided the venue, the logistics, and the sustained diplomatic attention

¹⁴ US Department of State, "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan ... and the United States of America," signed in Doha, 29 February 2020.

the talks required, and sustaining a channel between Washington and the Taliban over several years was itself a considerable achievement.

Afghanistan is, however, better read as a critical case for this paper's argument than as an unqualified success. Doha created and held the negotiating channel; it could not secure the political settlement inside Afghanistan that the 2020 agreement was meant to enable. The agreement structured an American withdrawal but did not produce a durable intra-Afghan settlement, and the Republic collapsed the following year. The lesson is precisely the trust–leverage lesson. Convening power, however impressive, secures a process; it does not by itself secure an outcome, and where no actor supplies the leverage to enforce or underwrite implementation, even a well-hosted agreement can fail to hold. What Doha achieved, and what it could not achieve, in Afghanistan is the template for much of what follows.

4.2 Gaza: Two Years of Shuttle Diplomacy

Since the war that began in October 2023, Qatar, working alongside Egypt, the United States, and later Türkiye, has been one of the most important and frequently relied-upon channels between Israel and Hamas, two parties that will not negotiate directly. Doha hosts Hamas's political leadership, giving it a unique and essential line of communication for mediation.¹⁵ Qatari diplomats drafted proposals, carried messages, and structured the sequencing of the hostage and prisoner exchanges that punctuated the war. The path was strewn with collapsed truces: a brief pause in November 2023 and a ceasefire in January 2025 that unravelled by March. But each iteration ran through Doha.

The culmination came in October 2025. Building on a twenty-point plan advanced by the United States, indirect negotiations hosted at Sharm el-Sheikh produced a comprehensive ceasefire. On 9 October, the parties agreed on the provisions and implementation mechanisms of the first phase; hostilities ceased on 10 October; and on 13 October, world leaders convened at Sharm el-Sheikh, where the United States, Qatar, Egypt, and Türkiye signed as mediators and guarantors.¹⁶ The plan was subsequently annexed to a United Nations Security Council resolution, giving it a measure of international legal endorsement.¹⁷ The United Nations Secretary-General, present at the summit, described the moment as one of fragile hope and thanked the mediators by name.

The episode also shows the limits of convening power taken alone. The breakthrough owed as much to the leverage of the United States, able to press the Israeli government in ways no regional

¹⁵ “Israel-Hamas Ceasefire Deal: October 2025 Agreement Explained,” *GovFacts*, updated 2026, describing Egypt and Qatar as the primary mediators alongside the United States.

¹⁶ “World Reacts to Gaza Ceasefire Deal Announced by Trump,” *Al Jazeera*, 9 October 2025; and reporting on the Sharm el-Sheikh summit of 13 October 2025.

¹⁷ UN Security Council, Resolution 2803 (2025), which references the Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict.

mediator could, as to the trusted channels that Qatar and Egypt supplied. Qatar was essential to the process without being sufficient for the outcome, and the Security Council resolution accordingly recognised the constructive roles of the United States, Qatar, Egypt, and Türkiye together, rather than singling out any one of them.

4.3 The September 2025 Strike: Resilience Under Fire

The most revealing episode in Qatar's recent record is one in which it was the victim, not the broker. On 9 September 2025, Israeli aircraft struck a residential compound in the Leqtaifiya district of Doha, targeting the senior Hamas leadership as it met to consider an American ceasefire proposal. It was Israel's first known attack on Qatari soil and its first direct strike on a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council.¹⁸ The strike killed several people, including a Qatari security officer, but failed in its principal aim; the negotiating delegation survived.¹⁹

Qatar condemned the attack as state terrorism and a flagrant violation of its sovereignty. The condemnation was near-universal. Even Washington, Israel's closest ally and the host of the ceasefire proposal the Hamas leaders had gathered to discuss, distanced itself, with the United States president expressing displeasure at the manner of the operation. The attack threatened to derail the very negotiations it interrupted.

This matters for this paper's argument because of what happened next. Within weeks, Qatar was not merely back at the table but again close to the centre of it, co-mediating the October 2025 Gaza ceasefire. A state that had just been bombed by one of the parties returned to help broker peace between that party and its adversary. Few episodes show more clearly the depth of Qatar's investment in the mediator role or the extent to which the parties continue to rely on Doha. A mediating role that survives a direct military strike on its own soil and resumes within weeks is resilient, though resilience should not be mistaken for indispensability: the Gaza process continued to depend on Egypt, the United States, and later Türkiye.

4.4 The Iran–United States Channel

Qatar's standing with both Washington and Tehran has made it a recurring conduit between them. In September 2023, it brokered a prisoner exchange in which five Americans and five Iranians were released, and roughly six billion dollars in frozen Iranian funds were transferred under supervised arrangements; the United States president telephoned the Emir to thank him for Doha's efforts.²⁰ Qatar's Foreign Ministry described the country as a reliable international mediator that had

¹⁸ "What Happened in the Strike on Hamas Leadership in Doha," *CNN*, 10 September 2025.

¹⁹ "Israel's Attacks on Hamas in Qatar Stun the Gulf," *NPR*, 10 September 2025.

²⁰ "Biden Thanks Qatar's Emir for Rare Iran-US Prisoner Swap Deal," *Al Jazeera*, 3 October 2023.

established realistic controls acceptable to both parties. The same channel, deepened and tested, would prove central during the war of 2026, to which the paper now turns.

4.5 Humanitarian Diplomacy and the Russia–Ukraine Question

Alongside high-politics mediation, Qatar has developed a distinct line of humanitarian diplomacy: using its channels to secure prisoner exchanges, the return of separated children, and negotiated access for aid, often in conflicts where it is not the principal broker. This work is less visible than the Afghanistan or Gaza files, but it is strategically significant because it builds and demonstrates trust in low-controversy settings that can later be drawn upon in higher-stakes ones.²¹ It is also a domain in which the trust–leverage asymmetry matters less, because humanitarian outcomes depend more on access and goodwill than on the capacity to coerce.

The Russia–Ukraine war illustrates both the promise and the boundary of this role. The principal diplomatic tracks on that conflict have run through Europe, Türkiye, and the Gulf more broadly, and Qatar is unlikely to displace them. Its contributions there have been humanitarian and quiet rather than headline mediation; it has, for instance, been involved in negotiating the return of Ukrainian children taken to Russia.²² Its ability to maintain working relationships across an unusually wide range of actors positions it well for the humanitarian and confidence-building margins of such a conflict: facilitating exchanges, supporting negotiated arrangements on food and energy security, and keeping quiet channels open when formal ones close. The lesson is consistent with the argument of this paper. Qatar’s comparative advantage lies in access and convening, not in the leverage required to broker a comprehensive settlement between Moscow and Kyiv. An institution designed around that advantage, and coupled with guarantors who supply the leverage, would extend the model’s reach without overstating its capacity.

4.6 The Wider Portfolio

The four headline files sit atop a broader record that is easy to overlook but important to the argument, because it establishes consistency rather than one-off success. Qatar brokered the 2008 Doha Agreement that resolved Lebanon’s presidential deadlock; it hosted and financed the Darfur negotiations that produced the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur; and it has engaged, with varying results, in Yemen, Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea, and a range of intra-regional disputes.²³ The pattern across these cases confirms the analytical claim of Section 3. Qatar has been consistently effective

²¹ “Examining Qatari Humanitarian Diplomacy,” *Third World Quarterly* (2024), analysing the humanitarian dimension of Qatari foreign policy and its limits.

²² On Qatar’s involvement in returning Ukrainian children taken to Russia, see “Once Neutral on the Ukraine War, Arab States Increasingly Favour Moscow” (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2026).

²³ Kamrava, “Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy,” 542–549, surveying the Lebanon, Sudan, and Yemen cases; Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*.

at convening parties and reducing the temperature of a dispute but consistently limited in its ability to ensure settlements endure once the mediator's attention shifts. The record shows reliable de-escalation and uneven resolution.

This is not a counsel of despair; it is a specification of requirements. The very consistency of the pattern, across two decades and a dozen theatres, tells us what an institution built on the Qatari model would reliably deliver and what it would reliably need supplied from elsewhere. It would deliver access, convening, process design, and de-escalation. It would also need the implementation machinery and the guarantor leverage that turn a pause into a peace. A hub designed around exactly that division of labour would be building on evidence, not aspiration.

5. The Iran–United States File and the Limits of the Islamabad Track

The 2026 war between the United States and Iran, and the diplomacy intended to end it, is the immediate context for this paper and the clearest illustration of the trust–leverage gap. It also marks the moment at which the case for Qatari leadership, and for institutionalisation, becomes concrete.

5.1 From Muscat to Islamabad

The diplomatic prelude ran through Oman. Muscat had hosted rounds of United States and Iran nuclear talks in 2025 and again in early 2026, drawing on its long-established reputation as a discreet Gulf intermediary.²⁴ When war broke out in late February 2026, however, the centre of gravity shifted to Pakistan, which leveraged its relationships with Washington, Tehran, and the Gulf capitals to broker a ceasefire and to host face-to-face negotiations.

The Islamabad talks of 11 and 12 April 2026 were the most ambitious mediation Pakistan had attempted in decades. A large United States delegation led by the vice-president met an Iranian team led by the speaker of parliament, with the Pakistani leadership moderating. After more than 12 hours of negotiation the talks ended without agreement; no memorandum was issued.²⁵ Within a day, the United States imposed a naval blockade on Iran. The failure, as one careful analysis noted, did not reflect diplomatic incompetence; it reflected the structural limitation of mediation when neither belligerent is prepared to compromise on fundamental interests. Mediators can offer communication, proposals, and confidence-building measures, but they cannot substitute their own political will for that of sovereign states.

²⁴ “US and Iran to Hold Direct Nuclear Talks in Oman,” *All India Radio News*, 6 February 2026; and reporting on the April 2025 Muscat round.

²⁵ “No Deal: U.S.-Iran Peace Talks in Islamabad Fall Through,” *NPR*, 12 April 2026; “Pakistan Eyes Narrow Window to Resuscitate US-Iran Talks after Breakdown,” *Al Jazeera*, 13 April 2026.

5.2 The June Memorandum and Its Unravelling

After further shuttle diplomacy, and with mediation now broadening to include Qatar, the two sides reached a memorandum of understanding in June 2026 and signed it remotely on 17 June. Brokered by Qatar and Pakistan, it extended the ceasefire, envisaged reopening the Strait of Hormuz, provided limited sanctions relief, and set a timeframe for a final settlement.²⁶ For a brief period, the indicators were encouraging. Commercial shipping through the Strait, which carries roughly a fifth of the world's traded oil, began to recover, with several hundred vessels transiting in the last week of June, the busiest period since hostilities began.

Within weeks, the agreement fell apart. Ships again disappeared from the Strait, military exchanges resumed, and on 18 July Iran announced it was suspending its commitments under the memorandum, citing alleged American breaches.²⁷ The reasons were instructive. The memorandum rested on constructive ambiguity: it referred to maintaining a nuclear status quo without defining permitted activity, to sanctions relief without specifying which restrictions would lift or when, and to freezing assets without establishing how they would be released or monitored. It required Iran to use its best efforts to ensure safe passage through the Strait and to negotiate its future administration with Oman, but it established no framework for navigation, inspection, or dispute resolution. Ambiguity allowed the parties to sign; the absence of implementation machinery ensured their disagreements simply migrated to the phase where trust was lowest and the costs of failure highest.

The concrete disputes bear this out. On the maritime file, the memorandum asked Iran to make its best efforts to ensure safe passage while committing it to define the Strait's future administration with Oman, language open enough that Tehran could read into it a recognised role in managing one of the world's most important waterways. On sanctions, a temporary 60-day waiver was too short to persuade insurers, refiners, and banks to restore long-term commercial relationships worth billions, so the promised economic relief never fully materialised. On the frozen assets, understood to be in the order of twelve billion dollars, the parties disagreed over whether the funds would sit in supervised escrow or pass to unrestricted Iranian control.²⁸ Each of these was an implementation question dressed as a drafting choice, and each was deferred rather than resolved. The pause, meanwhile, let both sides prepare for the failure of diplomacy, replenishing stocks and repositioning assets, so time worked against settlement rather than for it.

²⁶ "Iran to Open 'Communication Channel' on MoU with US after Talks in Qatar," *Al Jazeera*, 1 July 2026.

²⁷ "With US-Iran Trust Broken Again, Can Pakistan Bring Them Back to Talks?" *Al Jazeera*, 14 July 2026; Barakat, "The Missing Half of Mediation."

²⁸ Barakat, "The Missing Half of Mediation," on the maritime, sanctions, and escrow provisions and the sixty-day waiver.

This is the trust–leverage gap in its purest form. The mediators had enough trust to produce a text but not enough leverage to make it stick. As the mediation broadened into a coalition, spreading the political and logistical burden and adding resilience, the additional brokers shared the same profile: trusted interlocutors with limited capacity to alter Washington's or Tehran's strategic calculus. Expanding the circle of mediators, without diversifying its composition to include actors capable of guaranteeing implementation, could not close the gap.

5.3 Qatar's Comparative Advantages

Through this period Qatar moved from the wings to the centre. It hosted the Iran–US technical track in Doha in early July; the Emir received the American envoys and reaffirmed Qatar's continued mediation; and by late July, Qatar and Oman were jointly pressing both the diplomacy and the implementation of the agreement.²⁹ Qatar's claim to lead the next phase rests on a specific combination of attributes. Table 2 and Figure 2 compare the principal mediators across the relevant dimensions.

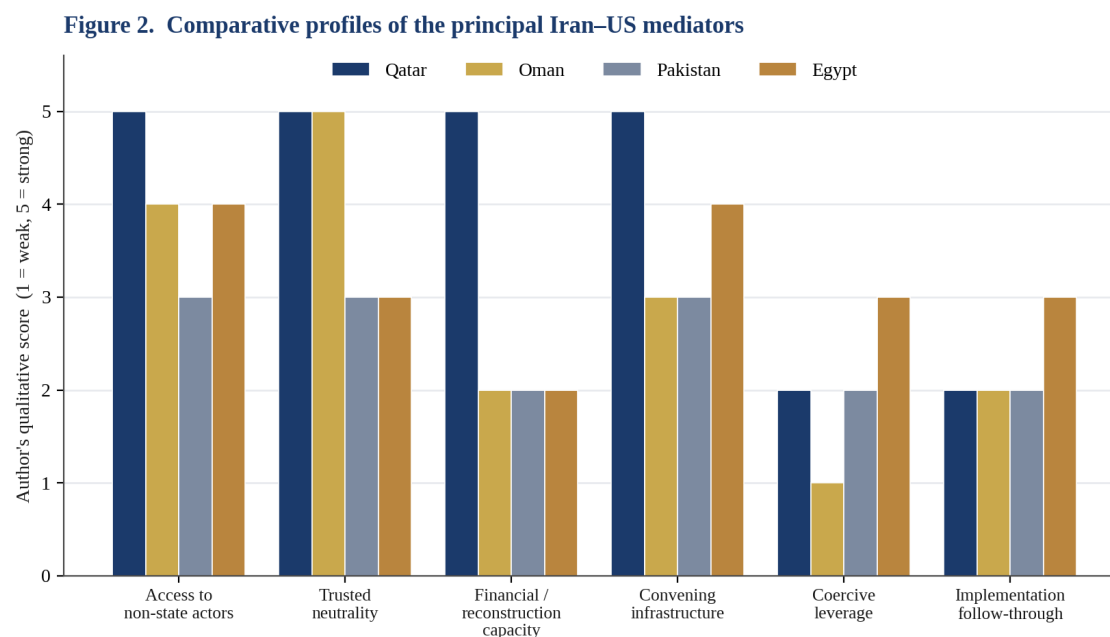
Table 2: Comparative Advantages and Constraints of the Principal Mediators.

Mediator	Comparative advantage	Principal constraint
Qatar	Access to all parties including non-state actors; deep financial and reconstruction capacity; established Doha venue; standing US and Iran channels	Limited coercive leverage and perception risk from hosting contested actors; visibility can politicise the process.
Oman	Long record of discreet, trusted back-channel diplomacy; credibility with Tehran	Modest financial and convening capacity; low leverage; prefers quiet role
Pakistan	Relationships with Washington, Tehran and the Gulf; brokered the 2026 ceasefire	Constrained resources; domestic and regional exposure; limited leverage over the parties
Egypt	Border stake in Gaza; established mediation machinery; some regional weight	Economic fragility; competing priorities; limited leverage over Iran
Great-power guarantors	Material and strategic leverage to reward and penalise; capacity to underwrite implementation	Distrusted as parties or partisans; cannot serve as honest brokers

Source: author's assessment, drawing on the sources cited in Sections 4 and 5.

²⁹ "U.S. and Iran Hold Separate Meetings in Qatar," *NPR*, 2 July 2026; "Qatar, Oman Push Diplomacy, Implementation of US-Iran Agreement," *Iran International*, 26 July 2026.

Figure 2: The Four Regional Mediators Share High Trust but Limited Coercive Leverage. None Can, On Its Own, Guarantee That a Signed Agreement Will Survive Implementation.



The comparison yields a clear conclusion. Among the trusted conveners, Qatar is the strongest on almost every dimension that a mediator controls: access, financial depth, convening infrastructure, and standing channels to both Washington and Tehran. That makes it one of the strongest candidates to help anchor the next phase of the Iran–US process. Even here, Oman’s credibility on the Iran file runs deeper still, so leadership is best understood as shared. But Figure 2 also makes plain what leadership cannot supply. On coercive leverage and implementation follow-through, every regional mediator scores low. No better broker can fill that gap. It requires a different kind of actor and a different kind of arrangement, which Sections 6 and 7 address.

6. The Global South, the Trust Deficit, and the Mediation Gap

The Iran–US file is one instance of a wider condition. The contemporary international system suffers from a deepening trust deficit. Great-power competition has hardened, alliances have fragmented, and the multilateral institutions built to manage disputes are frequently paralysed by the very rivalries they were meant to contain. In this environment, the number of armed conflicts has risen while the supply of credible, universally acceptable mediators has not kept pace. The result is a mediation gap: a growing distance between the demand for impartial brokerage and the availability of actors able to provide it.

This gap falls most heavily on the Global South. Conflicts across the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia unfold in regions where the traditional Western-led mediation

architecture is sometimes viewed with suspicion, as an extension of interests rather than a neutral service. Where the broker is distrusted, the brokerage fails before it begins. What the system lacks is not goodwill but credible intermediaries positioned outside the fault lines of great-power rivalry and trusted by parties precisely because they are not aligned with the major blocs.

The transition to a more multipolar order aggravates the condition. As power diffuses, the number of actors whose consent is needed for a settlement rises, and the authority of any single external guarantor falls. This is why the mediation of the Iran file has passed through so many hands, Oman, then Pakistan, then Qatar and a widening coalition, in the space of a single year. In a unipolar moment, a hegemon could impose terms; in a fragmented one, terms must be negotiated, and negotiation requires trusted intermediaries in far greater supply than the system currently provides. The mediation gap is thus not a temporary shortfall but a structural feature of the emerging order, and it will widen unless the capacity to mediate is deliberately expanded.

Qatar has spent two decades building a particular kind of credibility, and it is important to be precise about its scope. It would overstate the case to claim that Qatar can fill a general Global South mediation gap. The Global South spans regions and political systems as different as Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, and acceptability in Gaza, Afghanistan, or the United States–Iran file does not automatically transfer to conflicts far from Qatar’s networks. Nor does the absence of a colonial record translate directly into perceptions of impartiality, particularly given Qatar’s close strategic relationship with Washington and its hosting of a major American base. The more defensible claim is narrower and better supported by the record: Qatar is especially well placed to mediate in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and parts of South Asia, and in conflicts involving actors with whom Western states have limited direct contact. Within that domain, it offers a wealthy Southern state, able to sustain long processes and disciplined enough to keep talking to all sides.

Qatar’s officials increasingly frame mediation as a global public good, and the Chatham House lecture of July 2026 cast the maintenance of open channels, when others deem dialogue impossible, as the distinctive contribution Qatar can make to a fractured order.³⁰ The argument of this paper is that a contribution of this importance, within the domain where Qatar is genuinely well placed, should not depend indefinitely on the initiative and resources of a single state. It should be embedded in institutions.

³⁰ Al Khulaifi, “The Future of Diplomacy and Mediation.”

7: The Case for a United Nations-Affiliated Mediation Hub in Doha

7.1 The Existing Architecture and Its Limits

The United Nations already possesses a mediation infrastructure, but it is thin and concentrated. The Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, formed in 2019, is the principal support structure for the Secretary-General's good offices, providing conflict analysis and support to envoys and overseeing field-based political missions.³¹ Within it, the Mediation Support Unit, created in 2006, serves as the system-wide focal point for peace-making, maintaining the online United Nations Peacemaker repository and managing the Standby Team of Senior Mediation Advisers, an on-call roster established in 2008 whose experts can deploy within seventy-two hours to advise on ceasefires, power-sharing, constitution-making, and related matters.³²

This apparatus is valuable but structurally limited in three ways. It is small, relative to the demand placed upon it. It is centralised in New York, distant from most of the theatres in which it operates and from the Southern actors it increasingly relies upon. And it is oriented overwhelmingly towards the phases of analysis, process design, and negotiation, with far weaker machinery for the implementation phase, where, as the June 2026 memorandum showed, agreements most often fail. The system is rich in trusted expertise and poor in the sustained, on-the-ground, implementation-focused capacity that turns a signed text into a durable settlement.

7.2 The Proposal

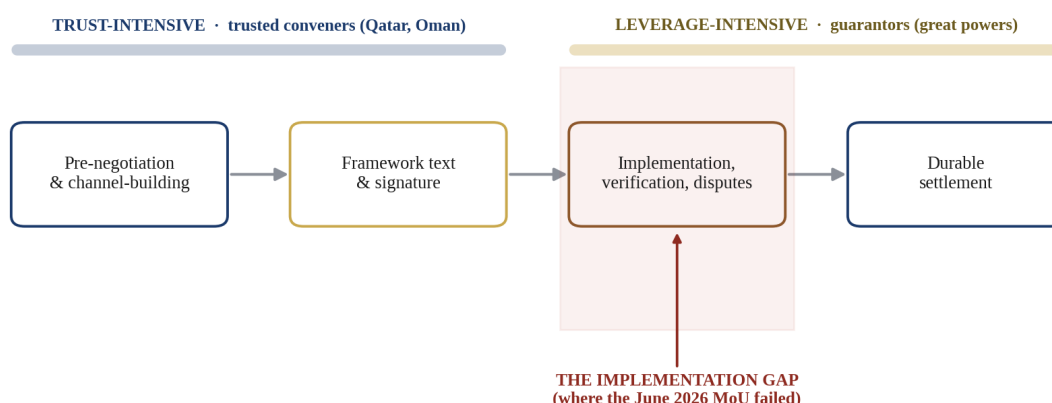
This paper proposes establishing a United Nations-affiliated mediation hub in Doha. The hub would be a standing institution, formally linked to the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and operating under United Nations principles and the Charter, but co-located in Doha and drawing on Qatar's convening power, financial capacity, and network of relationships. It would function as a second, Southern node of the international mediation system, complementing rather than replacing the New York headquarters. Figure 3 situates its purpose within the mediation lifecycle.

³¹ United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, "Prevention and Mediation," accessed 29 July 2026, <https://dppa.un.org/en/prevention-and-mediation>.

³² United Nations, "Mediation Support Unit," UN Peacemaker, accessed 29 July 2026, <https://peacemaker.un.org/en/mediation-support-unit>; and the *Guidance for Effective Mediation* (United Nations, 2012), endorsed by General Assembly resolution 66/291.

Figure 3: A Doha Hub Would Institutionalise the Handoff from Trust-Intensive Convening to Leverage-Intensive Guaranteeing, Embedding the Implementation Machinery Whose Absence Doomed the June 2026 Memorandum.

Figure 3. The mediation lifecycle and the missing half



A proposed Doha mediation hub would institutionalise the handoff: sustaining trusted channels while embedding verification, dispute-resolution and guarantor engagement so that a signed text survives contact with implementation.

The hub would perform four functions, each mapped in Table 3 to a specific weakness in the current arrangement. First, a mediation-support and standby function: a permanently staffed, regionally embedded complement to the New York Standby Team, able to deploy expertise across the Middle East, the Horn, and South Asia at short notice. Second, and most distinctively, an implementation and verification cell: a standing capacity to design and monitor the sequencing, verification, dispute-resolution, and confidence-building mechanisms that trusted conveners rarely possess in-house and that great powers are reluctant to build. Third, a training and knowledge academy, professionalising a new generation of mediators, especially from the Global South, and codifying lessons across cases. Fourth, a research and early-warning function, anchored in the region's own analytical community rather than in distant capitals.

The phrase 'United Nations-affiliated' needs to be made precise, because the available forms carry very different implications. The hub is not conceived as an independent institution competing with the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, nor as a new peace operation. The most workable form is the lightest: a jointly funded centre established under a memorandum of understanding between the United Nations and the State of Qatar, operating as a regional mediation-support presence of the Department, reporting through the Mediation Support Unit, and governed by United Nations mandate and standards while hosted and substantially financed by Qatar. In institutional terms, it would be an extension of existing Department machinery into a Southern node, not a rival to it; the innovation lies in what it houses, a standing implementation-and-verification capacity, rather than in the creation of a parallel bureaucracy. In principle, the Department could achieve much of what the hub would do by expanding itself; the argument for a Doha node is that

this is the most credible and best-resourced way to do so in the region that generates the greatest share of demand.

Table 3: Proposed Hub Functions Mapped to Gaps in the Current Architecture.

Hub function	Gap it addresses	Illustrative activity
Mediation support and standby	New York roster is small, centralised and distant from Southern theatres	Regionally embedded advisers deployable within days across the Middle East, Horn and South Asia
Implementation and verification cell	Agreements fail in implementation; conveners lack verification machinery	Design and monitoring of sequencing, verification and dispute-resolution mechanisms for signed accords
Training and knowledge academy	Shortage of trusted Southern mediators; weak codification of lessons	Professional training; case libraries; certification of mediators and process designers
Research and early warning	Analysis concentrated in distant capitals; weak regional ownership	Region-anchored conflict analysis feeding preventive diplomacy

Source: author's proposal.

7.3 Governance and Safeguards

The proposal's credibility depends on its governance. Three safeguards are essential. First, the hub must be genuinely multilateral in authority, operating under a United Nations mandate and reporting to the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, so its legitimacy derives from the international community rather than any single host. Qatar would provide the venue, funding, and relationships; the UN would provide the mandate, the standards, and the impartial imprimatur. This division answers the most obvious objection, that a hub in Doha would simply be an instrument of Qatari foreign policy, by anchoring its authority outside Doha.

Second, the hub must bridge trust and leverage rather than pretend to substitute one for the other. Its implementation cell should be explicitly designed to bring in external guarantors, major powers with the economic and strategic weight to underwrite compliance, at the point in the lifecycle where their leverage is needed, while insulating the trusted-convener function from their partisanship. The hub would not itself possess leverage; it would be the mechanism that couples leverage to trust at the right moment. Third, participation and funding should diversify over time, so the institution does not remain dependent on a single patron and cannot be captured by one.

A caveat belongs at the centre of the proposal, not only in its list of risks. An implementation-and-verification cell can design sequencing, monitor compliance, and surface breaches early; it cannot

by itself compel a determined party to keep its word. The hub should therefore be presented for what it is: a mechanism that markedly reduces the rate of implementation failure by supplying currently missing machinery and lowering the cost of bringing guarantors in at the right moment, not a device that closes the trust–leverage gap on its own. The claim is that it narrows the gap reliably, not that it abolishes it.

7.4 Precedents: The Case for a Second Node

The proposal is less radical than it may first appear, because the United Nations already operates regional platforms for preventive diplomacy away from headquarters. Field-based political offices with explicit mandates to strengthen the mediation capacity of states and regional actors already exist for regions such as Central Asia and West Africa, and they function precisely as the department’s forward presence for good offices and early warning.³³ A Doha hub would extend this logic to the Gulf and its neighbouring theatres, a region that has generated a disproportionate share of the world’s mediation demand and that currently has no comparable United Nations node. It would not create a new principle; it would apply an existing one where it is most needed.

Nor would the hub be built on empty ground. Qatar has spent two decades assembling the physical and human infrastructure of a mediation centre: the venues and security apparatus that have hosted the Taliban, Hamas, and the Iran technical track; a diplomatic corps experienced in shuttle diplomacy; an established annual convening platform in the Doha Forum; and a growing research community, including internationally staffed institutions based in Education City. The marginal cost of adding a United Nations-affiliated hub to this base is far lower than building equivalent capacity elsewhere. The proposal, in essence, is to place a multilateral mandate and a set of standards on top of infrastructure that Qatar has already built and is willing to fund, and to add the one capacity, implementation support, that neither Qatar nor the wider system currently supplies at scale.

Moreover, Qatar has an existing United Nations footprint to build on. In March 2023, Qatar inaugurated the United Nations House in Doha, which brings together the regional offices of a dozen United Nations agencies under a single roof, and which the Secretary-General marked by describing Doha as a centre for diplomacy on some of the world’s most complex conflicts.³⁴ That presence is, tellingly, operational and developmental rather than political: it houses agencies for refugees, migration, labour, health, and children, but no dedicated peace-making or mediation-support function. The proposed hub would supply precisely the dimension the existing House lacks, and

³³ “Prevention and Mediation,” United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, describing regional offices with explicit preventive-diplomacy mandates.

³⁴ United Nations Secretary-General and the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Qatar, remarks at the inauguration of the United Nations House, Doha, 4 March 2023; the House gathers twelve United Nations agency offices under an agreement first concluded in 2018.

could plausibly be developed in association with it so that the political and the operational arms of the United Nations presence in Doha reinforce one another. That turns the proposal from building something wholly new into completing a presence already substantially in place.

7.5 A Phased Pathway to Establishment

A proposal of this kind should not be attempted in a single leap, and it need not be. A phased pathway would allow the concept to be tested, refined, and legitimised incrementally. In a first phase, Qatar and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs could establish a modest implementation-support cell in Doha under an existing mediation mandate, attached to the live Iran file, tasked narrowly with designing the verification, sequencing, and dispute-resolution mechanisms that the June memorandum lacked. This would demonstrate value where the need is most acute and the appetite greatest, without first requiring a new institution.

A second phase would formalise the relationship through a memorandum between Qatar and the United Nations, defining the hub's mandate, governance, funding, and reporting lines, and folding in the training and research functions. A third phase would seek broader multilateral endorsement, ideally a General Assembly resolution, that would give the hub the standing of a recognised part of the international mediation architecture and open its governance and funding to diversified participation. Sequencing it this way turns an ambitious proposal into a series of tractable steps, each delivering value in its own right and building the trust and evidence needed for the next. It also ensures that the hub earns its legitimacy through demonstrated usefulness rather than asserting it by design.

8. Challenges, Limitations, and Risks

Intellectual honesty requires testing the proposal against its difficulties, of which there are several. The leverage problem is fundamental and cannot be wished away. A hub can convene, design, and monitor, but it cannot compel. If Washington and Tehran, or any pair of belligerents, judge that their core interests are better served by fighting than by settling, no institution will change that calculus. The hub's value lies in lowering the transaction costs of settlement and in making implementation more robust when the parties do wish to settle; it is not a substitute for political will.³⁵

The legitimisation objection is real. Engagement with contested actors, the very quality that makes Qatar useful, exposes it to the charge of conferring standing on groups that others seek to isolate. The September 2025 strike was, in part, an expression of that objection pursued by force. The hub does not dissolve this tension, but a United Nations mandate reframes engagement as a service to

³⁵ This echoes the classic finding that Qatari mediation reduces tensions more readily than it resolves conflicts: Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy," 549–553.

the international community rather than an endorsement and distributes the political cost across the institution rather than concentrating it on a single state.

There is a risk of over-personalisation. Much of Qatar's success has depended on the direct involvement of its most senior leadership and on relationships of personal trust. Institutions can ossify what individuals achieve through agility, and a poorly designed hub could bureaucratised a process whose strength has been its flexibility. The remedy is to design the hub as a light, expert, deployable body rather than a heavy secretariat, preserving the responsiveness that has characterised Doha's diplomacy.

This tension goes to the heart of the proposal and should be stated plainly. Qatar's small, centralised foreign-policy apparatus has been a genuine source of advantage: decisions can be taken quickly, the most senior figures can intervene personally, and channels can be opened or adjusted without the friction of a large bureaucracy. Yet analysts of Qatar's earlier record have noted that this same reliance on personalised, leader-driven decision-making also made it hard to institutionalise outcomes, most visibly in post-2011 Libya, where influence proved difficult to convert into durable results.³⁶ Institutionalisation, therefore, cuts both ways. It would allow the Qatari model to outlast particular individuals and spread across the wider system, but it could also blunt the very agility that has made the model work. The design implication is not to bureaucratised Qatari diplomacy but to build, alongside it, a lean standing capacity that captures and transmits its expertise, an implementation and knowledge function that complements rather than replaces the personalised convening at which Qatar excels.

Great-power ambivalence is perhaps the most consequential risk. Guarantors are essential to the model, yet major powers may be reluctant to bind themselves to underwrite agreements they did not fully shape or to accept a mediation architecture anchored in a small Gulf state rather than in their own capitals. The Security Council's own divisions could stall the mandate the hub requires. The response is to design the hub so that it lowers the cost of guarantor involvement rather than raising it: by presenting guarantors with well-specified, pre-negotiated implementation packages to endorse, rather than open-ended commitments to author, the hub can make the exercise of leverage more attractive and more precise than it is under present, ad hoc arrangements.

The guarantor concept carries a deeper dilemma the proposal must face honestly. The states with the greatest enforcement leverage are frequently the very states that one or more parties distrust, so

³⁶ On personalised, leader-driven decision-making and the difficulty of institutionalising outcomes in post-2011 Libya, see *Qatar and the Arab Spring: Policy Drivers and Regional Implications* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014).

bringing a great power into the implementation phase can strengthen enforcement while weakening the perceived impartiality of the whole exercise. A guarantor may also be a party's strategic patron or a party itself, as the United States has been in both the Gaza and Iran files. This raises questions the model cannot leave unanswered: who selects the guarantors, and must all parties consent to them? Can a guarantor that is also a partisan actor be trusted to verify compliance; who adjudicates whether a breach has occurred? And what happens when the permanent members of the Security Council are themselves divided over enforcement? The hub does not resolve these questions, but it is a better place to manage them than the present ad hoc arrangements, because it can separate the trusted-convenor function from the guarantor function institutionally, insist that guarantors be accepted by the parties rather than imposed, and vest verification in a body operating under a United Nations mandate rather than in any single interested power. That is mitigation, not a cure, and the paper claims no more.

Regional rivalry is a further hazard. Other capitals with mediation ambitions, and other Gulf states with competing visions of regional order, may resist consolidating mediation infrastructure in Doha. Careful design, including rotating advisory participation and transparent, diversified funding, can mitigate but not eliminate this. Finally, host dependence, the reliance of the hub on Qatari resources and goodwill, must be managed through the phased diversification of funding and governance described above. None of these challenges is trivial. None, in the author's assessment, is disqualifying.

9. Recommendations

1. For the State of Qatar: Convert its convening role in the Iran–United States process into sustained leadership of the next phase, in close coordination with Oman, Egypt, and Pakistan, and formally propose a United Nations-affiliated mediation hub in Doha, offering venue, core funding, and its network while ceding mandate and standards to the United Nations.

2. For the United Nations: Task the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs to scope a Southern mediation node co-located in Doha, with a distinct implementation-and-verification capacity that the current architecture lacks, reporting through the Mediation Support Unit and operating under existing United Nations mediation guidance.

3. For External Guarantor States: Accept that trusted conveners cannot guarantee implementation, and commit, at the appropriate stage of an agreement, to the leverage, incentives, reassurance, and, where necessary, pressure that only major powers can supply, working through rather than around the trusted mediators.

4. For the Mediation Coalition in Iran: Prioritise the implementation machinery whose absence doomed the June memorandum: define ambiguous terms, agree on sequencing and verification, establish a standing dispute-resolution channel, and pair every political commitment with a monitoring mechanism.

5. For the Research and Policy Community: Develop the comparative study of Southern mediation and of the trust–leverage handoff so that the design of any future hub rests on evidence rather than assertion, and so that the Global South’s mediation capacity is strengthened on its own terms.

10. Conclusion

Qatar’s trajectory over two decades demonstrates that a small state can shape world politics through strategic engagement and mediation. By keeping channels open to a wider range of actors than any of its peers, and by providing acceptable ground when few other capitals could, Doha has become one of the most important and frequently relied-upon channels in contemporary crisis diplomacy. The September 2025 strike and Qatar’s swift return to the centre of the Gaza mediation that followed showed how resilient that role has become, even as the same episodes confirmed that Qatar works alongside others, Egypt, the United States, Türkiye, Oman, and Pakistan, rather than in their place.

Yet the same period has exposed the model’s ceiling. The collapse of the Islamabad talks and the unravelling of the June 2026 memorandum revealed that trust, however deep, cannot by itself carry an agreement through implementation. Trusted conveners bring parties to the table; they cannot compel them to stay or to comply. This is not a failure of Qatari, Omani, or Pakistani skill. It is a structural property of small-state mediation, the missing half of the mediation process.

The response should be to institutionalise what Qatar has built and to bridge what it lacks. A United Nations-affiliated mediation hub in Doha would give the international system a second, Southern node of mediation infrastructure; it would embed the implementation and verification machinery whose absence has repeatedly proven fatal; and it would couple the trust of regional conveners to the leverage of external guarantors at the point in an agreement’s life where that coupling matters most. In a fragmented order, the capacity of small states to serve as credible intermediaries is one of the more hopeful features of contemporary diplomacy. Qatar’s experience shows that size and military power are not the only currencies of peace-making. Credibility, connectivity, and the ability to convene are currencies too. The task now is to mint them into institutions.

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