CHAPTER 4

The Middle East: Syria and Israel-Palestine

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Introduction

The world is changing rapidly, and mediation is evolving as a result. Two conflicts in the Middle East, Israel/Palestine and Syria, lie at the geopolitical heart of these changes.[1] Both conflicts have not only pitted the direct conflict parties against each other, but have also involved the great powers. As parties to the conflict themselves, these states have leveraged peace processes to advance their own geopolitical interests in their competition over status, influence and military power. This has further entrenched the conflicts, leading to the most devastating humanitarian crises in recent history with appalling death tolls and unspeakable human suffering. What place is there for mediation in such contexts?

The space for mediation has drastically changed since the end of the Cold War. The 1990s provided a favourable environment for mediation, marked by a notable shift towards negotiated settlements that reflected an emerging norm of prioritizing negotiated outcomes over military victories. The change was facilitated by a unipolar global environment dominated by the United States and its promotion of liberal democratic values.[2] However, the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent "War on Terror" proclaimed and fervently fought by the United States led to a re-evaluation of stabilization over democratization, with profound consequences on the Middle East in particular. This drastically changed the global environment for mediation, serving to diffuse the norm that some conflicts – notably those with "terrorists" – can only be resolved through military means. Conflicts involving these proscribed actors were thus placed outside the realm of mediation.[3] As wars end more frequently in military victories rather than political settlements, mediation initiatives have

[1] This chapter covers the two cases as they developed until August 2025.

[2] Lise Morjé Howard and Alexandra Stark, "How civil wars end. The international system, norms, and the role of external actors", *International Security*, vol. 4, No. 3 (2017–2018), pp. 122–171; Richard Gowan and Stephen J. Stedman, "The international regime for treating civil war, 1988–2017", *Daedalus*, vol. 147, No. 1 (2018), pp. 171–184; Sara Hellmüller, "Peacemaking in a shifting world order: a macro-level analysis of UN mediation in Syria", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 48, No. 3 (2022), pp. 543–559.

[3] Julia Palmiano Federer, "We do not negotiate with terrorists: navigating liberal and illiberal norms in peace mediation", *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 12, No. 1 (2019), pp. 19–39.

subsequently declined,[4] which is also reflected in the declining number of comprehensive peace agreements.[5] Thus, while force was never absent as a tool for resolving disputes – as seen in the Gulf War (1990–1991) and Kosovo (1999) – it has re-emerged more visibly, including in the Middle East.

In both the Syrian and Israel/Palestine conflicts, belligerents and their international and regional allies have pursued military victories and prioritized them over political agreements. In both contexts, external actors (be it Russia in the case of Syria or the United States in the case of Israel/Palestine) have supported conflict parties in pursuing military strategies, and both situations have been framed as conflicts where negotiations are impossible because the "other side" is not recognized by their adversary and is often labelled as "terrorist groups". This has rendered a multilateral approach to mediation difficult, if not impossible. However, it has not resolved conflicts and led to sustainable peace but has suppressed and contained violence only for it to resurface periodically. Researchers have long distinguished between negative and positive peace.[6] It has also been widely acknowledged that negative peace, although extremely important for reducing human suffering as a direct consequence of military action, does not create the conditions for a durable end to conflict. Seeing a seeming military victory by President Assad between 2016 and 2024 in Syria and the absence of large-scale escalations between 2021 and 2023 in Israel/Palestine, many observers assumed that the conflict was petering out. This silencing of the weapons – or negative peace – gave a deceptive impression of calm, but both cases clearly show that conflicts cannot be solved by military means *alone*. Negative peace is not enough.

While military interventions can be instrumental in stopping violence and preventing massacres, a political process is indispensable for articulating lasting political structures that can bring long-term positive peace. Indeed, as demonstrated by over 13 years of civil war in Syria involving widespread and systematic attacks against the civilian population, the use of chemical weapons and other atrocity crimes, and eight decades of conflict in Israel/Palestine, culminating in forced starvation and genocide in Gaza, political solutions are urgently needed. While Syria recently moved towards a potential political transition, Israel/Palestine is still trapped in violence.

Mediation involves engaging with all actors who can contribute to the resolution of the conflict, including so-called terrorists. While this may sit uncomfortably with some leaders who have used these labels to push forward their political agendas, conflicts have never been durably resolved through military means or political exclusion. They may go silent for a while, but unresolved disputes over political status, territory and other core issues resurface and violence resumes, often with shocking human costs.

This chapter analyses mediation efforts in Syria and Israel/Palestine and shows important trends in both cases: a focus on military solutions over political ones, deadlocked multilateral

[4] Magnus Lundgren and Isak Svensson, "The surprising decline of international mediation in armed conflicts", *Research and Politics*, vol. 7, No. 2 (2020), pp. 1–7.

[5] Jan Pospisil, "Dissolving conflict. Local peace agreements and armed conflict transitions", *Peacebuilding*, vol. 10, No. 2 (2022), pp. 122–137; Monalisa Adhikar and others, "Disaggregated mediation: the localization of peace processes amid global and domestic fragmentation", *European Journal of International Relations* (2025). Available at https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661251331519 (accessed on 24 November 2025).

[6] Johan Galtung, "Violence, peace, and peace research", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 6, No. 3 (1969), pp. 167–191.

mechanisms and bilateral peacemaking attempts that prioritize short-term stabilization deals. It discusses what they mean for the mediation field and concludes with some thoughts on the way forward.

Syria

Until 8 December 2024, the situation in Syria was tacitly or openly interpreted as a military victory for Bashar al-Assad. Many saw his takeover of Aleppo in December 2016 as the death knell for the revolution that had started in 2011, and backed by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, he subsequently retook control of the majority of the country's territory. An apparent calm set in with a sharp decline in direct violence, although tensions continued to simmer beneath the surface. The revolution, however, was not dead. Around the world, observers watched in amazed disbelief in late November 2024, as an opposition military coalition led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) launched a major offensive in the north-west, rapidly capturing the country's second-largest city, Aleppo, from government forces before advancing southwards to overrun the capital, Damascus, overthrowing Assad in less than a week. This outcome followed 14 years of conflict and repeated failures to reach a negotiated political solution.

The lack of a political settlement in the Syrian conflict prior to the HTS-led takeover was partly attributable to the regime's entrenchment and consistent refusal to engage meaningfully in political dialogue. The regime often framed its position around a "military solution" to eliminate "terrorists", not distinguishing between political and military oppositions. The coalition victory clearly shows that military victories, such as the one proclaimed by Assad, do not endure; political transitions are needed. At the same time, Syria exemplifies the limitations of international mediation efforts, as the strategies, mechanisms and tools employed by the international community failed to produce a viable pathway towards peace. The result was continued conflict and the loss of over 600,000 lives, the destruction of the country and the displacement of half its population, including almost 7 million refugees.[7]

The following section discusses the three aforementioned challenges to contemporary mediation in Syria: the conflict parties' belief in a military solution, deadlocked multilateral (UN/LAS) mechanisms and bilateral peacemaking attempts that prioritize short-term stabilization deals.

Military over political solutions

Both conflict parties, the Syrian regime and the opposition, pursued military victories to solve the conflict. External parties supported this approach. In particular, the Syrian conflict included the United States, which supported the opposition, and Russia, which supported Assad. This support strengthened the conflict parties' belief in their capability to defeat the other side militarily and reduced their motivation to engage in talks. Convinced that Assad would be overthrown soon – if need be, through a US military intervention – the opposition initially refused to engage in negotiations. The US intervention did not happen, however, despite Assad crossing the red line of chemical weapons use drawn by President Obama. Russia's deployment of forces and anti-aircraft systems into the Syrian theatre in

[7] Alex Bellamy, *Syria Betrayed: Atrocities, War, and the Failure of International Diplomacy* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2022); Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Transactional peacemaking: warmakers as peacemakers in the political marketplace of peace processes", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 46, No. 2 (2025), pp. 312–342; Hellmüller, "Peacemaking in a shifting world order".

2015 emboldened Assad, who subsequently refused any meaningful engagement with the opposition, engaging instead in endless stalling tactics to delay negotiations.

Regional actors were also heavily involved. However, rather than investing in collective conflict resolution frameworks, they intensified their involvement in the war, viewing it as a means to expand their strategic influence. This was particularly the case for Iran and Saudi Arabia, with their long-standing competition for regional influence and power. Iran aimed to extend its influence by consolidating a land corridor from Tehran to Beirut, referred to as the "Shia Crescent", and providing a vital link to its ally, Hezbollah, widely considered the most powerful non-state group in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia sought to counter this extension of Iranian influence and reinforce its claims to regional leadership.[8]

Paralysed multilateral mediation

At the same time, the multilateral mechanisms that could have promoted political solutions were blocked. The UN Secretary-General appointed four mediators on Syria between 2012 and 2024, none of whom succeeded in brokering a political agreement. The UN was largely deadlocked on Syria because even though Russia rhetorically supported the UN-facilitated mediation, it used its position on the UN Security Council to undermine the mediators' mandate by repeatedly vetoing UNSC resolutions in order to provide diplomatic cover for the Assad regime.[9] A record number of 18 resolutions on Syria were vetoed between 2011 and 2023.[10] This represented a key structural impediment to effective multilateral mediation, preventing the UNSC from giving the UN Special Envoy's efforts the support they needed.

By 2024, the Syria peace process had stalled, exacerbated by intensified US-Russian rivalry. Backed by Russia, the Syrian government refused to engage meaningfully with the Office of the Special Envoy and declined to resume negotiations on the Constitutional Committee that was supposed to convene in Geneva. Meanwhile, Russia, under heavy sanctions following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and amid increased tensions with the West, accused Switzerland of aligning with EU sanctions and actively undermined efforts to hold meetings in Geneva.

The UNSC dysfunction was compounded by the absence of a comprehensive regional peace architecture: regional actors were divided, and the League of the Arab States (LAS) was not in a position to mediate in the conflict. In the first year of the Syria crisis, the Arab League prioritized negotiation and mediation, proposing a peace plan in late 2011 that called for an end to violence, the withdrawal of military forces from cities and political dialogue between the Assad regime and the opposition. It deployed an observer mission to monitor compliance, but the effort failed due to continued violence and restricted access, as well as disagreement among LAS member states on Assad's future. Consequently, the LAS supported the UN-

[8] Jubin M. Goodarzi, "Iran and the Syrian civil war", in *The War for Syria: Regional and international Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, Raymond A. Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli eds. (London, Routledge, 2019), pp. 138–155; Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (Oxon, Routledge, 2013); May Darwich, "Saudi policies in the Syrian crisis", in *The War for Syria.*

[9] Russia notably feared a repetition of the 2011 Libya scenario where Moscow perceived that the responsibility to protect (R2P) was misused by France, the United Kingdom and the United States to justify military intervention and regime change under the guise of humanitarianism.

[10] These vetoes were cast on 4 October 2011, 4 February 2012, 19 July 2012, 22 May 2012, 8 October 2016, 5 December 2016, 28 February 2017, 12 April 2017, 24 October 2017, 16 November 2017, 17 November 2017, 10 April 2018, 19 September 2019, 20 December 2019, 7 July 2019, 10 July 2019, 8 July 2022 and 11 July 2023.

facilitated mediation, appointing the two first Special Envoys to Syria jointly with the UN. However, as regional rivalries intensified, the LAS became increasingly paralysed.

Efforts to revive Arab mediation in 2023 through the Arab Ministerial Contact Group on Syria, primarily driven by the stalemate in the UN process, failed to generate meaningful change. While Arab states pursued bilateral engagements with the Syrian regime, Damascus did not deliver on key demands, such as curbing Captagon trafficking and creating a safe environment for the return of Syrian refugees.

Bilateral peacemaking attempts

The peace process was increasingly shaped by bilateralism, which sidelined multilateral efforts led by the UN.[11] External allies frequently sought to channel accrued leverage from their military involvement into their own bilateral peace initiatives. Key negotiations and decisions were driven by US-Russia deals, illustrating how bilateral consensus between major powers is a precondition for progress. However, when US-Russia relations deteriorated – particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – bilateralism no longer complemented multilateralism but displaced it. The emergence of the Astana process in 2017, driven by Russia, Türkiye and Iran, institutionalized this shift.

These bilateral processes were marked by interest-based and exclusive approaches that marginalized broader political reform. While the UN advanced a value-based, inclusive framework focused on democratic transition and civil society participation, Astana prioritized military de-escalation and power-sharing between external actors. Civil society and women were largely excluded, and opposition representation was symbolic. The emphasis on short-term military deals, such as the creation of de-escalation zones, failed to translate into sustainable peace, as most zones were recaptured by the regime. Even the creation of the Constitutional Committee under UN auspices – born out of Astana's Sochi Conference – narrowed the agenda, sidelining key elements of the original UN-led framework.

Ultimately, the peace process became transactional, reinforcing a political marketplace in which warmaking and peacemaking were conflated.[12] In recent years, regional actors also re-engaged with the Syrian regime, normalizing relations within a "step-for-step" framework. This process culminated in Syria's readmission to the Arab League and President Assad's participation in the LAS summit. However, this normalization, while symbolically significant, remained transactional in nature. It failed to produce meaningful progress in stabilizing Syria, let alone advancing a comprehensive peace.

Israel-Palestine

For more than three decades, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has been monopolized by the US, with the UN relegated to the background, providing mainly humanitarian support and advocating for adherence to international law. However, the US has "clearly fallen short of its objectives of ending the conflict between Palestinians and Israel and replacing hostility

[11] Sara Hellmüller and Bilal Salaymeh, "Multiparty mediation in a changing world: the emergence and impact of parallel processes to UN peacemaking in Syria and Libya", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, vol. 35, No. 1 (2023), pp. 129–149.

[12] Hellmüller and Salaymeh, "Transactional peacemaking".

with peaceful relations".[13] Although the Oslo Accords – notably not mediated by the US – offered a framework for peace and the conflict underwent a notable transformation in the 1990s,[14] the promises were never fully implemented as agreed. By the 2000 Camp David Summit, the process had effectively stalled, with no substantial progress in the negotiations. This stalemate became entrenched with the Second Intifada, escalating violence and the Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank. Meanwhile, the two-state solution grew further out of reach.[15] In place of a comprehensive peace process, ad-hoc and temporary military arrangements emerged, effectively maintaining the status quo in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. These arrangements have served mainly to reproduce and reinforce the asymmetric power relations between Palestinians and Israelis, in favour of the latter.

The following section examines the three challenges to contemporary mediation as illustrated by the conflict in Israel/Palestine: the belief in a military solution, as shown in the failure of a negotiated two-state solution; the prioritization of short-term, bilateral stabilization deals; and stalled mediation efforts.

Military over political solutions

The two-state solution gained popularity in the 1990s, amid a broader rise in international mediation efforts and growing optimism about the potential for a political settlement. Its origins can be traced back to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 (1947), better known as the Partition Plan for Palestine. Despite the progress made in the 1990s, this optimism was severely challenged when Israeli-Palestinian negotiations reached a deadlock at the Camp David Summit in July 2000, followed shortly afterwards by the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September of the same year. The subsequent Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank and the siege of Yasser Arafat's compound in Ramallah in 2002 pushed the prospect of a peaceful settlement further out of reach. As such, political engagement and mediation were replaced by military action, a resurgence of violence and unilateral steps, exemplified by Sharon's disengagement from Gaza in 2005.

These developments unfolded alongside a reconfiguration of the regional order following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which spurred the greater militarization of the region. While the US promoted democratization and pushed for elections in Palestinian politics in 2005 and 2006, Hamas's landslide victory in legislative elections in 2006 placed an armed group – considered by Israel, the United States and the European Union to be a terrorist organization – in charge of Palestine's political future. This unexpected outcome was not internationally recognized.[16] The situation was further complicated by the violent Hamas-Fatah conflict in 2007, which entrenched internal Palestinian divisions. The political and geographical division significantly weakened the Palestinian capacity to negotiate and provided the Israeli side with a pretext to claim that there was no unified Palestinian partner

[13] Ghassan Khatib, "American mediation in the Israel-Palestine conflict: a house built on sand", in *Conflict Mediation in the Arab World*, Ibrahim Fraihat and Isak Svensson, eds. (New York, Syracuse University Press, 2023).

[14] Louis Kriesberg, "Mediation and the transformation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 38, No. 3 (2001), pp. 373–393.

[15] Padraig O'Malley, The Two-State Delusion: *Israel and Palestine – A Tale of Two Narratives* (New York, Penguin Publishing Group, 2016).

[16] Tareq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* (Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2018).

for negotiations. During the same period, Israeli politics shifted steadily to the right, a trend consolidated by the 2009 election of Benjamin Netanyahu, who firmly opposed the two-state solution and the establishment of a Palestinian state, and who has remained in power until today.

Subsequent attempts to reinitiate the negotiation between the two parties, such as the Taba Talks (2001), the Road Map for Peace (2003), the Annapolis Conference and Talks (2007–2008), or the Kerry Talks (2013–2014), did not result in any agreement. Disagreements on the core issues remained, including over the negotiation framework. Meanwhile, shifting dynamics in the internal politics of Israel and the Palestinian Authority negatively impacted the negotiations and helped prioritize military means over political engagement. Following the collapse of the last Israeli/Palestinian talks in 2014 during the Obama Administration's second term and the subsequent election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, the peace process and direct negotiations came to a halt.

With Trump's first presidential term, the focus shifted from brokering a political agreement between Israel and Palestine to regional normalization (as proposed by the Arab Peace Initiative in 2002) between Arab states and Israel, effectively glossing over the Palestinian issue. Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy further deepened the impasse, along with his unilateral and unlawful decisions to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and to acknowledge Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.[17] On the ground, this trend empowered militarized political visions; the realization of the two-state solution was becoming impossible with deepening Israeli occupation and the multiplication of settlements in the West Bank, as well as the radicalization of public opinion, mainly in Israel.

Meanwhile, other political visions failed to attract attention, despite voices calling for an inclusive single state in Israel/Palestine or a federal/confederal state. These solutions seem unrealistic given the many challenges they would face, including the difficulties of defining equal legal and political rights,[18] the lack of a negotiation framework and the absence of political will reinforced by a dominant belief in the primacy of military solutions. As a result, the space for political negotiation and resolution has eroded, giving way to the predominance of military occupation and the normalization of violence as the governing logic on the ground.

Bilateral peacemaking attempts

Parallel to the paralysis of the multilateral political peace process and the two-state impasse, there was a shift towards bilateral arrangements. This shift was largely driven by the erosion

[17] Muhittin Ataman and Bilal Salaymeh, "Trump's decision recognizing the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights: a clear violation of international law", SETA Perspective, March 2019. Available at https://media.setav.org/en/file/2019/04/trumps-decision-recognizing-the-israeli-annexation-of-the-golan-heights-a-clear-violation-of....pdf (accessed on 24 November 2025).

[18] Leila Farsakh, "The one-state solution and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Palestinian challenges and prospects", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 65, No. 1, pp. 55–71.

of the role of multilateral institutions such as the UN, the Quartet (UN, US, EU, Russia),[19] the LAS and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which have become increasingly viewed as ineffective, particularly in addressing the recent humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Additionally, the fragmentation of the Palestinian political landscape contributed to this trend. Attempts by various actors, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Algeria, Russia and, most recently, China, to unify Palestinian factions have consistently failed. As such, in Gaza, negotiations were conducted mainly with Hamas and centred around easing the siege and managing periodic escalations, facilitated by regional states, mainly Egypt and Qatar.

In the West Bank, Israel engaged with the Palestinian Authority on day-to-day security coordination and economic issues, further entrenching the political divide. The resulting ad-hoc arrangements lacked a political framework or road map. Absent any attempt to address root causes and political aspirations, they aimed solely at containing the conflict instead of resolving it. Several ceasefire agreements have been mediated between Palestinian factions (mainly Hamas in Gaza) and Israel, typically following major rounds of violence, particularly after the Gaza wars of 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2021. The content of these deals was largely limited to Hamas promises to halt rocket attacks on Israel in exchange for Israel's commitment to easing its blockade on Gaza. The outcome was often a short-lived negative peace with fragile ceasefires and deepening grievances, as clearly shown by the sudden eruption of violence on 7 October 2023.

This shift was also reinforced at the international level. President Donald Trump facilitated the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and Gulf states such as the UAE and Bahrain. These agreements bypassed the multilateral framework of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and sidelined the Palestinian question altogether, effectively consolidating a bilateral modus operandi. Much like the bilateral arrangements in Gaza and the West Bank, they did not contribute to the peaceful settlement of the conflict and instead further marginalized Palestinian aspirations. Nevertheless, these agreements opened space for regional actors to assume a more prominent role in mediation. In addition to Egypt, which has traditionally played an important role in peace mediation due to its geographic proximity to the Gaza Strip and historical weight within LAS, Qatar has also emerged as a key mediator. Both states, though more notably Qatar, have leveraged their contacts and working relations with Hamas, which Western countries lacked (except for Switzerland until Bern's 2024 designation of Hamas as a terrorist group).[20]

Stalled mediation

Alongside the breakdown of official dialogue and the sidelining of the United Nations and its Special Coordinator's office, the last two years of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been marked by further deterioration of mediation frameworks, which have failed to broker a lasting ceasefire or to halt the war on Gaza, which has been described as

[19] The Quartet was formed in 2002 to promote negotiations for the Middle East peace process. It was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 1397 (2002) after the Second Intifada. The Quartet's leaders – the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, Russia's Foreign Minister, the UN Secretary-General and the US Secretary of State – met 54 times to advance their Performance-based Road Map to a Permanent Two-State Solution. United Nations, "Question of Palestine: the Quartet". Available at https://www.un.org/unispal/the-quartet (accessed on 24 November 2025).

[20] See chapter 8 on Qatari mediation.

constituting genocide.[21] The UNSC was repeatedly blocked by the US, which vetoed four proposed resolutions calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, thereby preventing the international community and the UN from mounting a meaningful response to the unfolding crisis.[22]

During this period, regional mediators – particularly Qatar – played a crucial role in attempts to de-escalate the violence. A breakthrough occurred in late November 2023, when Qatar, Egypt and the United States brokered a temporary ceasefire that facilitated a prisoner exchange and allowed for the increased flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza. Yet, the ceasefire lasted only one week. In late March 2024, Hamas announced its acceptance of a ceasefire proposal put forward by the three mediators, but Israel rejected the offer. Mediation came to a near standstill in the second half of 2024, but the election of President Trump for a second term surprisingly created a momentum that facilitated a three-phase ceasefire in mid-January 2025.

While the regional actors (Egypt and Qatar) played an important role in facilitating the mediation, the US was vital for the realization of the ceasefire, revealing the limitations of regional actors. Nevertheless, despite cautious optimism and what seemed to be a structured and detailed plan, the ceasefire collapsed in early March 2025 with the Israeli resumption of attacks on the Gaza Strip. By April 2025, Egypt and Qatar had proposed a more comprehensive ceasefire plan, aiming for a five- to seven-year truce. This proposal included provisions for an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, international guarantees and the release of hostages and Palestinian prisoners. Hamas expressed conditional openness to the deal, while Israel insisted on the dismantling or exile of Hamas as a prerequisite. Overall, mediation shifted gradually from a two-state solution towards addressing smaller issues that help maintain the stalemate, rather than break through it.

Moreover, the negotiation framework was effectively depoliticized, shifting attention solely towards humanitarian access and the coordination of aid, rather than addressing the root causes of the conflict. The recent push by some countries to recognize the State of Palestine at the UN General Assembly and the High-Level International Conference held from 28–30 July 2025 have yet to generate meaningful momentum for resuming negotiations on a two-state solution. Additionally, this recognition has, in some cases, been instrumentalized for narrower objectives. Certain countries, most notably the UK and Canada, have leveraged the move primarily as a means of pressuring Israel to facilitate humanitarian aid to Gaza rather than as part of a broader political strategy. As a result, the political framework of the two-state solution has become secondary to addressing urgent humanitarian needs, further undermining prospects for a comprehensive peace process. In this context, regional actors and mediators found a space for intervention, yet lacked the leverage over Israel that is needed to transform the conflict, which is solely in the hands of the US.

[21] This is central to South Africa's claim against Israel at the International Court of Justice. See also United Nations General Assembly, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967", A/79/384, 1 October 2024.

[22] The US has cast four vetoes at the UNSC, on 18 October 2023, 8 December 2023, 20 February 2024 and 4 June 2025.

Discussion

What are the implications of these developments for the future of mediation in the region? Based on the above analysis and given the prioritization of military action over political engagement to resolve conflicts, the blockage of mediation mechanisms and the dominance of bilateral, and in some cases unilateral, mechanisms prioritizing stabilization over long-term peace, we can perceive clear trends in mediation.

First, we see a narrowing space for political negotiation with an increasing focus of negotiations on securing access to basic human rights and humanitarian aid – rights that are supposed to be guaranteed under international law and international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions. Fundamental rules and laws are being violated, with the deployment of inhuman methods like siege starvation.[23] Mediators thus often attempt to secure even minimum respect for guaranteed rights.

In Syria, this trend was reflected in the debates over the renewal of UN Security Council Resolution 2165, which authorized the delivery of cross-border humanitarian aid. From 2020 onwards, Russia increasingly leveraged the renewal of the resolution to push for greater international recognition of the Syrian government's sovereignty over aid distribution. Finally in 2023, Russia vetoed the resolution to extend humanitarian access through the Bab al-Hawa crossing. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, this shift towards negotiating over basic humanitarian needs and rights was even more pronounced. Successive Gaza-Israel ceasefires have largely revolved around the lifting of the blockade and facilitating the movement of people and goods in and out of the Gaza Strip. More alarmingly, humanitarian aid, including access to food and water, has been weaponized, becoming a central point of negotiation during the ongoing Gaza war.[24] Negotiations over the supply of food and clean water continued even as the hunger crisis in Gaza reached alarming levels, with a third of the population going without food for multiple consecutive days, according to the World Food Programme.[25] The increasing focus on basic humanitarian demands has diverted attention away from core political issues, thereby undermining the ability of mediators to engage meaningfully in conflict transformation and peaceful settlement.

Second, we see a trend towards a preference for regional mediators, driven by the declining effectiveness of multilateral mechanisms, including the UN, and the accumulated experience of these regional mediators. This trend has been further reinforced by the relative trust that conflict parties place in regional mediators, particularly in the context of increasingly fragmented conflicts. In the case of Syria, Türkiye and Iran, partnering with Russia, leveraged their direct involvement on the ground to establish the Astana process as an alternative to UN-led mediation. In the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, Egypt and Qatar championed mediation, leveraging their geographic proximity, in the case of Egypt, and working relations with the different conflict parties, in the case of Qatar. However, both Syria and Israel/Palestine show the limitations of regional mediators and mediation processes. The involvement of Russia,

[23] Tom Dannenbaum, "Siege starvation: a war crime of societal torture", *Chicago Journal of International Law*, vol. 22, No. 2 (Winter 2022), pp. 368–442.

[24] Rebecca Sers, "The weaponisation of water", *The Lancet*, vol. 406, No. 10507 (2025), pp. 992–994.

[25] UN News, "People dying from lack of aid every day in Gaza: WFP official", 21 July 2025. Available at https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/07/1165454 (accessed on 24 November 2025).

a leading Syrian ally, was key to the viability of the Astana process, while in Israel/Palestine, no ceasefire was reached without US pressure, despite honest and continuous commitment to mediation by the regional mediators.

Third, against the backdrop of these developments, the UN became less relevant to shaping the mediation processes. It was sidelined in both contexts. The political role of the UN is thus diminishing, and it is likely that in mediation, it will take on more of a supporting role, especially when the great powers are involved. Supportive roles include being the guarantor and the advocate of the normative framework that member states have agreed on, such as international law. In both Syria and Israel/Palestine, for example, the Secretary-General and special rapporteurs have called out violations of human rights and humanitarian law. Supportive roles also include technical support for operations such as ceasefire monitoring, confidence-building measures and civil society inclusion. In Syria, the role of the UN and its Special Envoy Office was vital in empowering Syrian civil society and including women, both of whom became important actors in Syrian politics. In Israel/Palestine, UN Secretary-General António Guterres offered in September 2024 to help monitor a ceasefire in Gaza. In the same vein, the humanitarian role of the UN remains vital and must be safeguarded, particularly at a time when it is being undermined by private contractors such as the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, which has been accused of violating international humanitarian law and basic humanitarian standards.

Conclusion

Mediation – particularly by the UN – is at a crossroads, as illustrated by its failure to bring the conflicts in Syria and Israel-Palestine to a negotiated end. While Syria has finally embarked on a political transition, the prospect of peace in Israel/Palestine seems very distant. The two cases highlight how a declining space for political negotiation is producing a shift in the UN's role towards a focus on non-political and primarily technical issues and curtailing its political role as a mediator. If the UN wants to remain relevant, it should embrace this new role: providing technical expertise and humanitarian aid while remaining resolute in denouncing violations of international law. In a fragmenting world order, effective mediation still needs a world body to support states in fulfilling their responsibility to uphold the legal norms at the heart of international peace and security.