



Small States and Conflict Mediation: A Comparative Analysis of Norway's Role in the Israeli–Palestinian Peace Process (1993) and Pakistan's Role in the US–Israel–Iran War (2026)

Alia Anjum¹, Sana Izhar², Mahnoor Bashir³

¹ Lecturer in Political Science, Government Degree College No. 2, Sheikh Maltoon, Mardan. Currently pursuing her M.Phil. studies in the Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

Email: daniagulabham@gmail.com

² Lecturer in Political Science, Government Girls Degree College, Ghari Kapura, Mardan. Currently pursuing her M.Phil. studies in the Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

Email: syedumarbacha81@gmail.com

³ M.Phil. Scholar, Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

Email: jannekim77@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: July 16, 2026	This article explores the nature of small and middle state mediation in asymmetric international conflicts—with a focus on the comparison of two cases more than three decades apart: Norway's mediation of the secret Israeli–Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) back channel that achieved the 1993 Declaration of Principles, and Pakistan's involvement in mediation between the United States and Iran during the 2026 US–Israel–Iran war. The article underlines that Norway and Pakistan sought to make up for this material lack by capitalizing on relational dynamics (access to the mediators), perceived neutrality, and low liability (low risk to the parties).). All of which falls under the scope of mediation theory, as advanced by Saadia Touval and I. William Zartman (1985), Bercovitch (1997), and small state international relations literature associated with Keohane (1969) and Ingebritsen et al. (2006). But there's significant difference in mediation type – Norway adopted a civilian, academically-mediated, non-housing hard-power mediated back channel and for Pakistan it was militarized, state-centric with very direct security interests at its boundaries. In light of Kleiboer's (1996) contingency model of mediation success, the paper concludes that the durability of any agreement achieved through small-state mediation will be determined by the nature of the power imbalance between the primary parties in conflict rather than that of the mediator's skills and intentions at mediation.
Revised: August 05, 2026	
Accepted: August 21, 2026	
Available Online: September 01, 2026	
Keywords: <i>small-state mediation, Norway, Oslo Accords, Pakistan, Iran war, middle powers, conflict resolution</i>	
Corresponding author: Alia Anjum Email: daniagulabham@gmail.com	

Introduction

Mediation by small and middle powers is an underexplored area in the study of international conflict management. Classical realist and neorealist theories of international relations emphasise great powers as the only agents with the will and capacity to settle interstate disputes, as they alone have the security and economic resources—both carrot and stick—which are considered necessary to encourage belligerents to settle by compromise (Touval and Zartman, 1985).

But the historical record is replete with smaller powers that have played a role as mediators in exactly those types of conflicts great powers find most intractable: Algeria during the Iran hostage crisis (1979–1981) (Slim, 1992); Norway during the Oslo back-channel (1993); Qatar on the Gaza front; and, most recently, Pakistan between Washington and Tehran during the 2026 US - Israel - Iran war. These cases present a shared analytical challenge: how can states with neither the traditional tools of coercive power nor the incentives to exercise them achieve a central mediating role—as indeed often do—in conflicts between far more powerful and more directly concerned actors, and how can (or does) their success result in long lasting outcomes?

This article is an attempt to answer that puzzle in the light of a deliberate, and limited, comparison of two cases. The first is how Norway facilitated the secret negotiations between Israel and the PLO that led to the Declaration of Principles signed in Washington in September, 1993, popularly referred to as the “Oslo Agreement” The second was Pakistan’s orchestration of the mediation of the war that began on 28 February 2026, when the US- and Israeli aerial bombardment resulted in the killing of Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. Pakistan’s shuttle diplomacy lasted for months, which eventually culminated in a ceasefire between Washington and Tehran that Islamabad helped facilitate. The US and Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in June 2026 in France. The MOU is officially called the “Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran” (Treene, Liptak, & Mostafa, 2026).

It is apt to note here that two cases under study are different yet the same. For example, both cases are thirty years apart, geographically quite far from each other, and quite different in the international context. The similarity of the cases lies in the presence of a state of much lesser relative importance—PLO in the case of Norway and Iran in the case of Pakistan—and the presence of two parties with far greater relative importance—Israel in the case of Norway and US/Israel in the case of Pakistan.

Structurally, there are four parts of the paper. The first part examines the theory that underpins small state mediation and places Norway and Pakistan in contesting conceptions of ‘smallness’ in international relations. The second part explores the Norwegian case which, based on a vast scholarly literature, that has revisited the Oslo back-channel since opening of the Norwegian governmental archives. The third part explores the example of Islamabad’s policies related to the US-Israel and Iran war, and it utilizes contemporary reporting, policy analysis, and what is now a relatively sparse but expanding literature of research on Pakistan’s policies. The final part presents a comparison of the two along the parameters of mediator type, source of leverage, perceived impartiality and durability of the outcome, and it draws implications for mediation theory.

Theoretical Framework: Small States and Mediation

Defining Small and Middle Powers

The analysis of small states in international relations has proceeded from an early focus on the material attributes of states—population, territory (Vital, 1967) to a focus on the relational analysis of small states, which emphasizes the position and behaviour of small states in a particular international structure (Keohane, 1969). Keohane's (1969) basic categorization of “system-affecting” and “system-influencing” and “system-effecting” and small “system-ineffectual” states moved the analysis of size of the state from the predominant focus to “how much influence can the state exert relative to its resources?” The relational turn is key to this comparison—Norway and Pakistan are not really comparable in any standard material sense. Norway is a rich nation of approximately five million people with minimal independent influence across the Middle East; and Pakistan is a nation of approximately 240 million, nuclear powered with a large standing army, and a long land border with Iran (International Crisis Group, 2026). What they have in common analytically is not size, but location: in each of these conflicts, the mediator was materially on the periphery of the main military dynamic between the leading actors; but at the same time geographically, historically, and/or on the plane of trust, the mediator had something larger, more powerful actors did not.

Ingebritsen, Neumann and Gstöhl (2006) propose that there are compensatory strategies available to small states to punch “above their weight,” such as niche diplomacy, norm entrepreneurship and coalition-building to overcome the limitations on material capacity. The notion of niche diplomacy, closely related to that of Wivel and Ingebritsen (2019), fits well for Norway, which has intentionally built an image as an honest broker in peacebuilding efforts from central America to the Middle East and Sri Lanka. But the label of “small state” does not quite apply to Pakistan and is better captured by the related, if different idea of “middle power” diplomacy, whereby a state of moderate size and regional weight is still not powerful enough to engage in coerce but still resorts to balancing, bridging and convening actions (Yusuf, 2026). The comparison is thus not of two states of comparable size but of two mediators, each of whom, as a part of their state’s structures, were materially subordinate to the parties they mediated.

Mediation Theory and the Sources of Small-State Leverage

According to classic theory, there are three kinds of mediator's leverage: the ability to affect the mediator's perceptions of the costs of continuing the conflict, the ability to shower the mediator with incentives, and the ability to withhold or to provide resources to which the mediator has access but the disputants do not. Bercovitch (1997) theorizes that great powers tend to use the second and third sources, whereas small and middle powers, without such means, tend to use the first source more extensively. The 1992 Slim's study of Algeria's role as a mediator in the Iran hostage crisis was one of the first studies to substantiate this argument; Algeria's role was to transport messages that neither superpower could have credibly delivered on their own because of their ideological perceptions about Algeria and their own diplomatic ventures.

Additional complications to any simple equation between the mediator characteristics and mediation success can be seen in the contingency model of Kleiboer (1996), which suggests something about the impact of a mediator's approach, the characteristics of the conflict (most importantly, the power symmetry between the parties) and the timing of the mediation in relation to the conflict's "ripeness" for mediation (Zartman, 2001). This model is directly relevant in both of the scenarios examined here; in one, the mediator was resource poor when compared to the contestants, yet was still able to intervene at a time when both had an interest in exploring a negotiated exit—whether motivated by the political cost of continued secrecy on behalf of Israeli and Palestinian leaders in 1993, or by the economic and military burden of an otherwise infinite war between the United States and Iran in 2026.

A third area of theory that is applicable to both cases is the issue of bias and impartiality. Unlike impartiality, which is often viewed as an inherent quality rather than a perceived one, it is suggested here that impartiality is an actively managed perception by the mediator and that there is validity in the "biased" mediators, those who are clearly connected to one side's interest, sometimes being more effective because they can give more convincing guarantees to the side they favour (Touval, 1975; Kydd, 2003, as cited in Beardsley et al., 2006). This dichotomy of neutrality and credibility appears repeatedly in the empirical analysis below, as during the conflict, Norway and Pakistan were perceived as being lacking in impartiality, despite their unequivocal commitment to being even-handed mediators.

Case One: Norway and the Oslo Back-Channel (1993)

It is important to note that Norway's contribution to Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy has not started with 1993 but has been a fruit of decades of activity by various Nordic labour-movement, institutions, academic research and diplomacy, carried out with Israeli and Palestinian actors (Waage, 2005). Indeed, since the late 1980s, the Norwegian research institute Fafo had been conducting studies on living conditions in the Occupied Territories, providing its researchers, notably Terje Rød-Larsen, with direct access to Palestinian officials, and Norwegian diplomats had unusual access in Jerusalem resulting from the close ties historically maintained by Norway and the Israeli Labour Party, beginning from the 1950s. They were not a result of any conscious design, but they were the basis for the development of relationships which enabled Norwegian intermediaries, already in early 1992, to put forward a proposal for an alternative academic level channel between an Israeli academic team and the PLO officials in London which developed into an official Oslo negotiating channel by January 1993.

The research by Waage (2005), commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself, shows the evolution from Norway as a low-key facilitator where venues were provided, logistics arranged and confidentiality kept, to Norway as an active mediator who at times drafted the texts as well as shuttled positions between the two delegations. Most importantly, perhaps, argues Waage (2005), this was not due to Norway's desire to have a more assertive role, but because the activity in the back channel, done so hermetically tight that it was kept out of the multilateral side of the table formalized at the 1991 Madrid Conference, left the host state to fill. Messages were becoming a central issue for the two delegations, and by several occasions they were the Deputy Foreign Minister Jan Egeland, and Foreign Minister Johan Jørgen Holst, that played a role as central messengers (Holst, 1994).

Norway's suitability as a venue lay in the very thing that much of the theoretical literature has attributed to a small state's mediation: a small foreign-policy bureaucracy that can make decisions in a hurry, without much publicity and can intervene with foreign policy that is broadly viewed by both sides as neutral, yet is not institutionally bound into the security establishment of either side, and an absence of the "great power baggage" that rendered the United States, despite hosting the parallel Washington track, a less trusted intermediary in this case for the explorations. (Beyond Intractability summarizing Egeland's own account of the process). Given a lack of capacity to force either side, and no temporal or material resources to offer as leverage other than the benign nature of the process and confidentiality, both sides were able to engage without fear that the process in itself was

being used to obtain unilateral concessions—which is what Touval and Zartman (1985) would suggest would be the basis of leverage for weak mediators.

But the very openness that allowed for access also limited the extent to which Norway could influence what happened during substantive negotiations. Waage (2005) emphasizes the absence of independent leverage by which Norway could offset the balance of power between an existing state, Israel, with an occupying military force and the PLO, an organization that was then in its most fragile state, having lost its base in Beirut and having a diminished patronage status in the Gulf after the 1991 Gulf War. While Israeli negotiators could credibly threaten to end the negotiations, PLO's chief Yasser Arafat had limited room to do so as the organization was growing irrelevant in the Occupied Territories as well as with respect to the emerging Islamist movement, Hamas (Waage, 2005). Furthermore, Stensland (2023) suggests that indeed the “minimal political heft” of Norway served as an enabling factor when opening up the channel, but also as a structural limitation when it came to Norwegian facilitators’ ability to offer “a level playing field” for a genuine equilibrium to emerge among the parties.

That Declaration of Principles, which was signed on the White House lawn on 13 September 1993, put off for later, final-status negotiations certain issues in the conflict that were the most contentious – those of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, borders and settlements – under a formula critics later called “constructive ambiguity” (Jamal, 2000). In retrospect, as summarized by others (Chiluwa, 2022), “Oslo Accords,” in its section on the failure of the Camp David Summit of 2000 and the onset of the Second Intifada), some commentators conclude that this postponement, in conjunction with the lack of any enforcement mechanism akin to that which might be provided by other treaties, actively helped to ultimately bring about the collapse of the Oslo process. The mediation channel of the Oslo is also part of a wider pattern of small-scale mediation in the Nordic countries, as seen in Eriksson’s (2015) comparative study on Norwegian and Swedish mediation in the conflict, which argues that the specific character of the mediator, comprising the mediation strategy and the relationship mediator has with each party, still counts analytically even though it was ultimately not that important for long term results.

Case Two: Pakistan and the 2026 US–Israel–Iran War

On 28 February 2026, the protracted conflict started with the United States and Israel launching missile and drone strikes at Iran, killing their Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other senior officials, which was countered by Iranian missile and drone attacks against Israel and the Gulf states (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026). Pakistan, with a roughly nine-hundred-kilometer border with Iran and the world’s second-largest Shia Muslim population, 15-20 per cent of its total population of about 240 million, was immediately facing domestic and strategic pressures due to the outbreak of the war (International Crisis Group, 2026). The assassination of Khamenei promptly unleashed violent protests in various parts of the Pakistani cities, most crucially in the Shia heartland of Karachi and Gilgit-Baltistan, while at the same time the government sought to maintain its recently inked Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Saudi Arabia in which aggression against one signatory is defined as aggression against the other, though military activation is not mandatory to counter such aggression (International Crisis Group, 2026).

In Pakistan, the foreign ministry took a formal neutral tone, criticizing at the time both the American and Israeli assaults on Iran and more recently, Iranian attacks on states in the Gulf, as Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and army chief Field Marshal Asim Munir travelled on alternative tracks of reassuring Riyadh and courting Tehran (Dawn, 226). This stance of no direct involvement in the conflict allows Pakistan to benefit from this attitude through a position as a credible interlocutor between the Gulf States and Iran (International Cooperation Center, 2026). Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, conducted constant shuttle diplomacy such as, coordination with Chinese officials, which led to a joint China-Pakistan five-point peace initiative on 31 March 2026 (Ellis-Petersen & Baloch, 2025).

In early April of 2026 Pakistan’s mediation became pivotal. On March 23, after some preliminary cessation of U.S. attack on Iranian energy installations, Sharif publicly proposed to hold direct talks between the U.S. and Iran in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad (International Crisis Group, 2026). On 8 April, as another strike was threatened to happen in the following few days, Pakistan intervened by arranging a two-week ceasefire between both nations, which was later extended indefinitely at the personal request of Munir & Sharif. The Talks between 11 and 12 April saw a three-hundred-member delegation led by Vice President JD Vance and a seventy-member delegation led by the speaker of Iran’s parliament, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, in Islamabad, Pakistan, and constituted the highest level of direct US-Iran negotiations since the 1979 Iranian revolution (Khwaja, 2026). While the talks left no lasting and all-encompassing agreement, primarily due to disagreements regarding Iran's nuclear programme and the Strait of Hormuz, the discussions provided a forum for diplomatic engagement and dialogue, which observers attributed to Pakistan’s shuttle diplomacy efforts in the subsequent weeks (International Crisis Group, 2026).

According to analysts, Pakistan's mediation in the conflict was novel and involved a military approach, which is not usually seen in small state mediation. Ahmad, in remarks quoted in Al Jazeera, said Pakistan was doing the “first time” in its history to mediate between two adversaries without their direct contact while other analysts pointed out that there was no a niche diplomacy in Pakistan that could have developed into such a process, rather, “contingent factors” like its relations with Washington through intelligence and military channels and its religious and civilizational links with Tehran were to blame (Al Jazeera, 2026). Mir and Ayub (2026) also conducted a follow-up qualitative study and argued that Pakistan's mediation was a titration of shuttle diplomacy, backchannel communication, and incremental proposals of building trust, while Pakistan was conducting proactive deescalation diplomacy in coordination with China, Turkey, and Gulf countries in the region.

The continued centrality of Pakistan was formalized in the Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding that was reached around 12 June 2026, and a fourteen-point text of the US-Iran agreement was released on 17 June (Treene, Llptak, & Saleem, 2026). But Pakistan-brokered arrangements did not last long. Since mid-May 2026, analysts have already indicated that Pakistan's mediation was on the verge of becoming insignificant if Washington or Tehran resorted to other mediators like Oman or Qatar (Al Jazeera, 2026). They had again become embroiled in war on by early July 2026, when the foreign ministry of Pakistan issued statements calling for more caution and warning against renewed conflict because, it said, it cannot be “in anyone's interest” (The Express Tribune, 2026).

The mediation of Pakistan also was criticized in regard to its impartiality. US Senator Lindsey Graham, amid controversies over Pakistan's stance towards Israel and its refusal to fall on the side of the Abraham Accords, publicly said that he didn't trust Pakistan for the negotiations (Iran International, 2026). Pakistan's own defence minister joined a controversy when he gave comments – later deleted – in which Pakistan was scathing and highly critical of Israel during the war (Middle East Monitor, 2026). Simultaneously, The Diplomat's commentary stated that Pakistan's economic fragility-imposed limits on potential gains from a diplomatic burst of energy and that Islamabad's mediation role was an example of how “tactical success can recognise the potential practical limits of middle power diplomacy in the face of structural weakness of its economies” (The Diplomat, 2026).

Comparative Analysis

Sources of Leverage

Touval and Zartman (1985) argued that both Norway and Pakistan's mediate gained leverage more from relations than from material power. Norway's leverage was based on many years of behind-the-scenes civil-society and diplomatic contacts with both Israeli and Palestinian actors (Waage, 2005; Beyond Intractability), and on the confidentiality that a small and centralized foreign-policy bureaucracy could provide. The leverage that Pakistan had was based on a different setup: military-to-military trust conditions between the army chief in Pakistan and the Americans, historic Intelligence Cooperation from the Cold War and the post-9/11 era, direct geographic proximity with Iran, and religious and civilizational proximity with the Iranian people, supported by large Shia population in Pakistan (International Crisis Group, 2026). Whereas Norwegian leverage was nearly entirely non-coercive and civilian in nature, Pakistani leverage was also civilian – and included the credibility that comes from being a nuclear power with an army directly involved in the mediation process as exemplified by the personal telephone diplomacy that Field Marshal Munir conducted with President Trump (Al Jazeera, 2026). While both held a materially subordinate third-party stance in relation to the main protagonists of the conflict, this demarcation projects a middle-power rather than a small-state interpretation of Pakistan's role.

Impartiality and Bias

Both mediators expressed on public occasions their impartiality, and were accused of bias on repeated occasions by at least one of the participants. Norway was criticized to have effectively embraced Israeli negotiating positions during the back channel, in Waage's retrospective account (2005) this development occurred over the course of the back channel, whereby the relationship with the Israeli Labour establishment rather than with the PLO became closer. Pakistan was also subject to a different kind of criticism – specifically from the United States, where lawmakers and commentators were skeptical about the credibility of the country with a past of cool relations with Israel and its failure to join the Abraham Accords (Iran International, 2026). In both instances, the mediator's relationship—historical and invariably of the kind deemed more or less credible to or by the other, in one case geographic and theological, in the second political—was one that inevitably called forth suspicion from, or about, the other.

Institutional Form of Mediation

Thus, there is an important difference in the nature of the institutional mediation. Norway's Oslo channel was an example of what could be called "track one-and-a-half" mediation, which is an informal process conducted by a handful of people with little or no bureaucratic input, but with an academic start that gradually took on formal, diplomatic dimensions (Waage, 2005; Wilcox, 2023). The Pakistani mediation, in contrast, was from the very beginning a formal, state-to-state effort by the Pakistani prime minister, foreign minister and army chief, with a large-scale summitry, including the twenty-one-hour Islamabad Talks between 500 to 1,000 officials from the respective delegations, and it was acknowledged as such (Jones, 2026). This difference partly resulted from the diplomatic process being performed in different decades or eras, since diplomacy in 1993 was geared more toward creating total secrecy than diplomacy in 2026 was, which necessarily involved state-level mediation machinery including military involvement in the diplomatic process.

Durability of Outcomes

The most obvious similarities in the two cases are the tenuous nature of the mediation settlements they achieved. The Declaration of Principles lasted only just over seven years until the whole of Oslo fell apart upon failure to negotiate with the Palestinians at Camp David and the initiation of the Second Intifada, a collapse scholars argue was largely due to the deferral of core issues and the asymmetry of power between Israel and the Palestinians that Norwegian facilitation failed to overcome (Middle East Institute, 2018; Waage, 2005). In the same way, the Islamabad MoU and the ceasefires that Pakistan brokered in 2026 were frequently violated, with repeated rounds of fighting erupting within weeks of the June agreement, despite Pakistan's appeals for calm – and in the interest of all parties (Al Jazeera, 2026). In both instances, the mediator proved effective in accomplishing the more modest objective of keeping lines of communication open, so that parties who could not, or would not, talk to each other did, which make mediation as "an eclectic regime" (Nissioti, 2022). But in neither instance did the mediator manage to mold, or prescribe, solutions for the central, nay, ultimate questions Jerusalem, refugees, borders in the former, Iran's nuclear programme, the Strait of Hormuz, reparations in latter—that finally would decide the conflict's outcome. This pattern strongly endorses the contingency argument of Kleiboer (1996) that the identity of the mediators and the process in which they engage are crucial aspects especially at the processual level in order for talks to start and continue, and that it is at the deep-rooted structural level of power and interests that the principal parties themselves play key roles in the durability of the outcome.

Conclusion

Overall, the juxtaposition of Norway's involvement in the back channels behind the earlier Oslo Accords and Pakistan's involvement in the ongoing (28th February 2026–) U.S.-Israel-Iran war shows the advantages, disadvantages, and limitations of small- and middle-state mediation in asymmetric conflict. In each instance, a materially subordinate third party successfully interposed itself between more powerful parties to a conflict and benefited from historical relationships, geographic proximity, leadership credibility, etc.—assets that were not available to the great powers. Both mediators were confronted with a similar conundrum of neutrality, which implied they were biased toward one party (the US) even as they pretended neutrality. Both, in fact, were more effective in establishing a line of communication than in resolving the substance issues at the heart of the conflict, as has been found in the broader literature on mediation: the degree of outcome durability hinges more on the nature or "ripeness" of the conflict and its power structure than on the identity or skill of the mediator (Kleiboer, 1996; Zartman, 2001).

Meanwhile, there are differences that are interesting from a theoretical perspective. The mediation of Norway exemplifies the classical "small state" mediation model: a small state actor with a range of civil society connections and agency, which eventually led to a successful mediation. In the present context, Pakistan's mediation is more a model of an emergent "middle power" with a vested interest in the region that enjoys access to channels of direct state-to-state and military-to-military relations, acting in coordination with other regional powers like China, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to mediate an ongoing war on multiple fronts rather than resolve a territorial dispute (as was Norway's case). Future studies will benefit from contemporary middle-power mediators, including Qatar, Turkey, and Oman, to examine if the example of Pakistan in the 2026 US/Israel and Iran war was an isolated phenomenon or a new trend in middle powers' mediation potential in asymmetric conflicts.

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