



CARPO - HOME INSTITUTE Webinar Summary: Deconstructing Agency and Mediation Efforts in the Middle East & Sub-Saharan African relations (September 18, 2025)

On 18 September, CARPO and the HOME Institute (Horn of Africa & Middle East Institute) launched their new webinar series “The Middle East and Africa in Flux.” The inaugural session, which was organized in partnership with the Muscat Policy Council, examined Middle Eastern engagement in mediation and conflict resolution in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a particular focus on the political, cultural, and geo-economic ties that have deepened between the two regions over the past decade. Bringing together experts from academia, policy, and civil society, the discussion shed light on the opportunities and challenges of these evolving cross-regional relations.

Agency and Shifting Power

A central theme running through the webinar discussion was the question of African agency. While much of the discussion still presents Africa as a passive recipient of external influence, speakers emphasized that states, institutions, and sub-state actors across the continent are increasingly shaping and steering the terms of engagement with external partners, including Gulf states. Examples like South Africa’s ICJ filing on Gaza and Rwanda’s selective partnerships with Gulf states underscored growing African influence in shaping international norms. CARPO’s NML Nexus explained how Middle Eastern and East African actors exercise power and strategically act:

- *Network Ability* refers to the building of relationships and use of alliances to advance strategic or diplomatic goals. For Gulf states, mediation itself often serves to expand networks to East Africa for a purpose such as food security, trade logistics and project influence. For African actors, it means embedding new partnerships within African-led frameworks such as the AU, IGAD, or the Nairobi process.
- *Maneuverability* captures how states maintain freedom of movement and hedge between multiple partners in a crowded geopolitical space. This could be in one’s local region or abroad, if needed. Ethiopia and Kenya, for instance, have welcomed Gulf engagement while remaining anchored in continental peace architectures.
- *Leveragability* is the capacity to turn moral, legal, or political positions into influence, illustrated by South Africa’s ICJ case on Gaza, which compelled regional actors to respond to an African-led initiative.



Together, these dimensions illustrate how African states are not merely reacting to external engagement but actively shaping it, aligning mediation and investment with continental priorities.

Mediation, Partnership and African Agency

Another important focus was the intersection of geopolitics and partnerships. From the Gulf perspective, engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa is driven by several overlapping priorities: Security remains a central concern, reflected in arms cooperation, defense agreements, and involvement in Sahel stability efforts. Gulf states additionally project soft power through religious and cultural ties, as well as media coverage that draw African countries and the Middle East closer together. In particular Gulf states seek to position themselves as diplomatic facilitators with the broader international community. Mediation has been a key avenue of involvement, with Qatar active in Darfur since 2008 and more recently in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), while the United Arab Emirates (UAE) brokered talks between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2018. Yet, while these efforts have often produced agreements, they have rarely secured lasting peace or stability on the ground.

Positive case studies, such as Qatar's mediation approach between Rwanda and the DRC, demonstrated how Sub-Saharan African states benefit from external engagement to use maximize their own leverage. The partnership between Rwanda and Qatar shows an example of strategic agency: Rwanda has attracted investment on its own terms, exemplified by Qatar's involvement in the Bugesera International Airport project. Local developments such as Rwanda's emergence as a hub for international conferences also hold significant potential for tourism and national branding, which may be of strategic interest to Qatar. This partnership reflects a broader trend in which Sub-Saharan African states are increasingly shaping how external engagements align with national and continental priorities, rather than passively responding to them.

Economic, Security and Societal Interdependence

Economic and security interests around the Red Sea and the Horn are deeply intertwined. From the Gulf perspective, economy is paramount with food security, trade corridors, skill diversification and resource development, land leasing driving interests for investment. Those economic interests are equally significant, particularly access to logistics routes, maritime resources, and critical minerals, although competition in this sphere also spills into political and security domains. Against this backdrop, the Red Sea was described as both a corridor for exchange and an arena for competition. Without African-led coordination, initiatives like the Red Sea Council risk creating dependency rather than shared governance.



Challenges and liabilities

Nevertheless, Gulf actors such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have each pursued distinct agendas, creating both opportunities and risks for Sub-Saharan African states. All of them engage with African partners differently, requiring governments to navigate competing agendas while aligning cooperation with domestic goals. On the one hand, these relationships diversify Sub-Saharan Africa's external options beyond traditional Western and Chinese partners, offering resources, investment, and new approaches to peace processes. On the other hand, they can create new dependencies and power imbalances, especially when Sub-Saharan African countries are caught up in Gulf rivalries – as seen during the Gulf crisis between 2017 and 2021 or in Sudan, where external competition exacerbates local fragility. Some participants thus described the mediation efforts of Gulf states as “mediation-shopping,” where short-term incentives drive negotiations rather than sustainable conflict resolution. Bilateralism further undermines African-led coordination (i.e. IGAD/AU). On an economic level, short-term food-security and land-leasing deals risk long-term economic sustainability and local social resilience.

Conclusion

The discussants agreed that while Gulf actors bring resources, visibility, and alternative forms of engagement, the long-term success of these relationships will depend on how well they are aligned with Sub-Saharan African-led frameworks and development visions. The webinar highlighted that Sub-Saharan African agency is becoming increasingly assertive, intentional, and institutionalized, and that sustainable cross-regional engagement must build on this reality if it is to foster stability and socio-economic progress rather than competition-driven fragility. In contrast, however, ‘mediation shopping’ weakens legitimacy and long-term outcomes. Hence, minilateral approaches can be flexible alternatives to the challenges of multilateralism or bilateral dependency. As a consequence, the discussants called for deeper academic and civil-society exchange to complement state-to-state diplomacy and better link political partnerships with local realities and social understanding.



CARPO

Center for Applied Research
in Partnership with the Orient

HOME

Horn of Africa & Middle-East Institute

معهد القرن الأفريقي والشرق الأوسط

Integrated. Resilient. Prosperous

مُتكامل. مرِن. مزدهر



HOME

Horn of Africa & Middle-East Institute

معهد القرن الأفريقي والشرق الأوسط

Integrated. Resilient. Prosperous

مُتكامل. مرِن. مزدهر

WEBINAR DECONSTRUCTING AGENCY AND MEDIATION EFFORTS IN MIDDLE EAST & SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN RELATIONS

Organized by CARPO and the HOME Institute (Horn of Africa and Middle East Institute)

The webinar will focus on Middle East engagement in mediation efforts and conflict resolution in Sub-Saharan Africa. Bringing together leading experts from academia, policy, and civil society, the webinar will offer new insights into the complexities and opportunities of these cross-regional relations.

SPEAKERS INCLUDE:



NIMO JIRDEH,

Director of the HOME Institute
(Horn of Africa and Middle East Institute),
leading Governance and Public Sector
Specialist



DR. SEBASTIAN SONS,

Senior Researcher at CARPO



HUBERT KINKOH,

Senior Researcher at CARPO



DR. FATUMA ALI,

Associate Professor of International
Relations- United States International
University – Africa (USIU-A), Kenya



YOUSUF AL BULUSHI,

Chairman of the Muscat Policy
Council, Oman's first independent
Think-Do Tank

Join us on Zoom for this timely conversation
by please registering through the following
link:

https:

//us06web.zoom.us/webinar/

register/WN_o_MIGxBATU-HI-MIYDQseA

Thursday, September 18, 2025

04.00 – 05.30 pm CET | 05.00 – 06.30 pm EAT

Via Zoom