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Opinion – The Politics of Presence: Do High-Level Visits Matter in Preventing War?

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ALI BALCI, OCT 7 2025

At a Joint Summit of the Arab League (AL) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Riyadh on November 11, 2023, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Palestine, along with the secretaries-general of the AL and OIC, were tasked with launching international initiatives to achieve a lasting and comprehensive peace in Gaza. This group—dubbed the “Gaza Contact Group”—began its work by engaging the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, whose support was essential for any binding resolution, as well as other influential states. Within its first month, the Contact Group held meetings in Beijing, Moscow, London, Paris, Barcelona, and New York. With the exception of Spain, each destination was a permanent member of the Security Council. The group met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron, French President Emmanuel Macron and Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly. This high-level initiative ended in failure when the United States vetoed a Security Council draft resolution demanding “an immediate humanitarian ceasefire” on December 8, 2023.

A few days later, on December 12, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for an “immediate, sustained humanitarian truce.” The resolution passed with 151 votes in favor, 10 against, and 23 abstentions. Following this, members of the Gaza Contact Group expanded their outreach to European states, visiting Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. The diplomatic logic of these visits, however, remains unclear. Denmark, Finland, and Sweden had abstained on an earlier truce resolution (ES-10/21) on October 27, 2023, but supported the subsequent one (ES-10/22). The Netherlands, meanwhile, continued to abstain. Although some reports suggested the purpose of these visits was to broaden the pro-Palestinian camp, most of the countries visited had already voted in favor of a truce. It is also uncertain whether the shifts in voting behavior by states such as Japan, India, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Finland, and Greece resulted from the Contact Group’s diplomatic efforts, as some claimed, or were simply a response to the worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza. In the end, the initiative has been harshly criticized of not moving beyond “the usual family photo opportunity, a couple of meetings and more talk”. For critics, such high-level diplomatic initiatives are “disconnected from the realities on the ground... to end the war”.

Are the critics right in their bold claim? The Gaza Contact Group’s shuttle diplomacy failed to stop the war, but does that mean such initiatives are futile? The literature is clear that visits by great power leaders can have a deterrent effect. Studies show that such visits significantly reduce the likelihood of interstate disputes, in some cases even more effectively than alliances, especially when accompanied by supportive statements. They also serve as credible signals of resolve that can deter domestic opponents from attempting coups or revolutions, with evidence suggesting that hosting or receiving a U.S. presidential visit can lower the risk of removal from office by more than half. Yet the effects are not uniform: while U.S. and other Western leaders’ visits often bolster deterrence, Chinese leader visits, for instance, appear to have little impact on regime survival in autocratic states. Other work highlights that outcomes depend heavily on regime type and context—visits by democratic leaders may deter external threats but also invite domestic challenges. Overall, the deterrent value of high-level visits is strongest when tied to great powers, but it remains conditional on political institutions, audience perceptions, and the credibility of external guarantees.

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We lack empirical studies on how visits by smaller-power leaders influence great powers' positions on third-party conflicts. The case of the Gaza Contact Group offers an instructive example. Comprising Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, Indonesia, and Nigeria—each an influential player in its own region—the group sought to signal collective resolve by touring the capitals of UN Security Council permanent members. Yet their efforts fell short. On December 8, 2023, the United States vetoed a draft resolution calling for a humanitarian truce in Gaza, while the United Kingdom abstained, leaving the tally at 13 votes in favor, one against, and one abstention. Despite subsequent outreach, the distribution of votes remained unchanged in the February 20, 2024 draft. On April 18, 2024, when the Council voted on the admission of Palestine as a UN member, Switzerland joined the UK in abstaining, further underlining the limited sway of the Contact Group's diplomacy. Ironically, it was not until November 20, 2024, that the UK shifted to the “yes” camp—this time without any new visit from the Contact Group. This shift was important since it left the US isolated.

Can we conclude that such visits have no effect? Posing this question is akin to asking whether non-permanent votes in the UN Security Council matter. While it is often argued that the votes of smaller powers have little impact on outcomes, recent scholarship shows that non-permanent members can significantly shape the legitimacy of both adopted and failed resolutions. By the same logic, visits by smaller states may not alter the immediate balance of power or prevent vetoes, but they do influence the broader legitimacy game in international politics. These visits contribute to framing conflicts, mobilizing international opinion, and signaling solidarity—effects that may only be visible in the longer run. We do not know what ultimately led the United Kingdom to change its vote in late 2024, but it is reasonable to suggest that sustained international pressure—amplified and voiced through such high-level contacts—may have played a role, not only by generating personal and political costs of shame, but also by shaping broader notions of legitimacy in international politics.

Also, shifting the U.S. vote on resolutions related to Israel is a herculean task, and judging the effectiveness of smaller powers' visits solely through this case is therefore misleading. A more instructive precedent is the OIC's activism during the Bosnian war. In 1992, the OIC established a “Contact Group” that not only coordinated positions within the UN but also mandated ministerial-level missions to the capitals of the Permanent Members of the Security Council in order “to explain the provisions of this resolution and to seek their agreement for the necessary follow-up action”. This initiative quickly translated into a high-level tour of foreign ministers (Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Senegal and Turkey) in August 1993, covering Paris (3 August), London (4 August), Washington (11–16 August), Moscow (17–19 August), and Beijing (20–22 August). Reports from the period describe meetings with French, British, American, Russian, and Chinese officials as part of a coordinated OIC push to press for stronger international action against Serbian aggression. While the group could not eliminate all divisions among the great powers—China and Russia, for instance, frequently abstained on Bosnia-related resolutions—it did succeed in overcoming the split on several occasions. Notably, following the ministerial tour, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 859. More broadly the group managed to internationalize the Bosnian issue, sustain pressure on the Council, and shape the legitimacy environment in which subsequent UN measures—including arms embargo debates, humanitarian interventions, and the establishment of war crimes tribunals—were considered.

In the Bosnian case, the key regional power, Russia, was on the defensive, and some might argue that this explains why Moscow could be persuaded to support a unanimous resolution through targeted visits. While this may be true, it does not diminish the role of such visits in deterring Serbia from escalating ethnic cleansing against the Bosnians. Taken together, the Bosnian and Gaza cases suggest that the tangible outcomes of smaller-power visits in conflict settings are highly context-dependent—shaped by the balance of interests between the warring parties and the great powers, as well as by broader geopolitical alignments. Yet even when such visits fail to secure immediate concessions or to sway great powers into halting aggression, their long-term effects should not be overlooked. They contribute to shaping international legitimacy, amplifying humanitarian concerns, and keeping conflicts high on the global agenda. For this reason, policymakers should not limit their efforts to ministerial-level contact groups but also mobilize presidential and head-of-state initiatives, where the symbolic weight and political leverage are often greater.

Elevating such missions to the highest level of leadership can increase international visibility, strengthen pressure on great powers, and enhance the legitimacy of peace efforts in the eyes of global public opinion. For example, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, U.S. President Donald Trump and Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al

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Thani co-hosted a summit that brought together Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Jordan's King Abdullah II, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan. Speaking with a unified voice, these Arab and Muslim leaders pressed Washington to support an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. By directing their message squarely at the United States—while pledging to coordinate reconstruction through regional institutions—they exemplified how high-level, collective visits can amplify pressure on a decisive actor.

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