

Foundation for the Development of Western Syria

September 16, 2025

The Honorable Tom Barrack
U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and Special Envoy for Syria
U.S. Embassy Ankara
110 Atatürk Blvd. Kavaklıdere
06690 Çankaya, Ankara, Turkey

Re: Urgent Assistance for Protection of Minority Communities in Syria

Dear Ambassador Barrack:

On behalf of the Foundation for the Development of Western Syria (the “Foundation”)¹, I write to raise urgent concerns regarding the targeting of our organization and its leadership by the regime of President Ahmed al-Sharaa, amid a broader campaign of persecution against minority communities in Syria. The Foundation is a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting stabilization, reconstruction, and inclusive governance across western Syria and throughout the country, with a particular focus on protecting vulnerable communities and fostering interethnic and interfaith cooperation.

Atrocities by the al-Sharaa regime’s forces and aligned militias against minority communities abound in Syria. In March, militias linked to Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa carried out atrocities against the Alawite population in Latakia. In July, his government’s forces attacked the Druze in Suwayda, prompting Israeli intervention to defend the Druze. These episodes, widely reported and analyzed – including in *The Economist* on August 20, 2025 (see exhibit A attached) – highlight Mr. al-Sharaa’s “creeping authoritarianism” and his unwillingness or inability to prevent sectarian violence.

Two recent incidents involving religious leaders highlight the regime’s intolerance towards, or unwillingness to protect, minorities. In March, Ahmad Badr Ebben Hassoun, the former Grand Mufti of Syria, was arrested by al-Sharaa’s regime at Damascus International Airport while traveling to Jordan for medical treatment. Nearly six months later, the public remains in the dark about any legal charges against Mr. Hassoun or his status as he remains in detention and without access to medical care. Equally concerning, in early September, Archpriest Michel Namaan of the Syrian Catholic Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Homs was ambushed, beaten, threatened at gunpoint, and robbed, in yet another in a string of attacks against the Syrian Christian community.²

¹ Disseminated by Tiger Hill Partners, a registered foreign agent, on behalf of the Foundation for the Development of Western Syria through Joseph E. Schmitz PLLC. More information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

² Elhabbal, Madalaine, “Security Breakdown in Syria: Syriac Catholic Archpriest Attacked,” *Catholic News Agency*, Sept. 15, 2025, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/266377/security-breakdown-in-syria-syriac-catholic-archpriest-attacked>.

Even this Foundation has faced harassment. We are deeply alarmed by the regime's escalating actions against our CEO, Mr. Mohamed Shabaan, who has been specifically targeted for his advocacy on behalf of minorities. On Friday, September 12th, Mr. Shabaan's headquarters in Damascus – located in the free zone in the Baramkeh area in the heart of the city – was seized by regime forces. This seizure extends to his personal property, which is being targeted and confiscated without due process. Furthermore, the Foundation's Syrian headquarters have been seized by the regime, along with the personal businesses of several Foundation members. These actions represent a direct assault on our organization's ability to operate and fulfill its mission, and they are part of a systematic effort to intimidate and silence those working toward pluralism and stability in Syria.

The Foundation respectfully urges the United States, through your role as Special Envoy for Syria, to provide immediate assistance in protecting minority communities, including Mr. Shabaan and his family in Tartous and Damascus, as well as everything related to Mr. Shabaan's work with the Foundation. This includes advocating for the release of seized properties, ensuring the safety of the Foundation's personnel and their families, and pressing for international monitoring to deter further regime aggression against Alawites, Druze, Kurds, Christians, and other vulnerable groups. Furthermore, we respectfully request the use of your good offices in securing the release of Grand Mufti Hassoun without delay. U.S. leadership is essential to preventing additional atrocities and supporting a framework for inclusive governance.

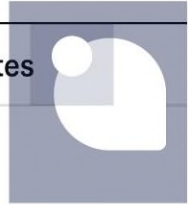
Given the gravity of these developments, the Foundation respectfully requests a meeting with you and your team to discuss concrete measures the United States can take to safeguard our CEO, our organization, and the minorities we serve.

We are grateful for your dedication to advancing U.S. interests in the region and for your commitment to protecting those at risk.

Respectfully,



Milan Dalal, Esq., Government Relations Representative in the United States
Foundation for the Development of Western Syria



Leaders | Syrian politics

A new opposition could be a healthy sign for Syria

Ahmed al-Sharaa, the new president, needs to bring his critics closer

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PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

Aug 20th 2025 | 3 min read

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The Economist

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DURING MUCH of the first half of this year, things were looking up for Ahmed al-Sharaa. Syria's new president was basking in Donald Trump's decision to lift sanctions on his country. After more than a decade of civil war, Damascus and other cities had begun to hum again. Investors from the Gulf and Turkey piled in. Our polling showed that the public mood was buoyant. After ousting Bashar al-Assad's regime, Mr Sharaa, a former jihadist, had not imposed the Taliban-style rule that some had feared. The vast majority of Syrians said they were optimistic for the future.

Unfortunately, as the euphoria fades, Syrians are growing increasingly frustrated. Mr Sharaa has disappointed them by failing to ease the sectarian divisions that have long made their country a tinderbox. He exhibits creeping authoritarianism. Now civil-society activists are building an organised opposition. How Mr Sharaa responds to this political challenge will define both his presidency and his country's future.

The president has often acted pragmatically. But there have been terrible lapses. In March, when Sunni militias linked to Mr Sharaa's forces slaughtered around 1,400 people in coastal Latakia, he was slow to respond. The region is the heartland of Syria's Alawite minority, the sect from which Mr Assad and many of his loyalists came. Four months later clashes in Suwayda, a province dominated by the Druze, a mystical religious minority, ended with massacres, some by troops loyal to the government. Again Mr Sharaa was unable—or unwilling—to stop the violence. The atrocities there gave Israel, which has a Druze minority, an excuse to interfere. It launched strikes on the province and on Damascus.

Signs of authoritarianism are hard to miss. When Mr Sharaa ruled Idlib province during the final years of the Assad regime, he ran a competent government that oversaw a flourishing economy. But he also became increasingly brutal,

The Economist

Sunni tribes (he is Sunni) and sidelining minorities. His supporters sometimes argue that broad representation is a luxury in a country ravaged by war, and that narrow rule is the price of efficiency. Centralisation, however, has not brought good governance, let alone security.

A loose coalition of activists, some of them veterans of the anti-Assad era, has now begun pressing for urgent political reform. They have called for Mr Sharaa's hastily drafted constitutional declaration to be rewritten so as to allow the formation of political parties and to give more scope for civil society to operate. It is the first stirring of co-ordinated opposition to the regime.

Mr Sharaa has yet to lock up any of his new opponents. But he should do more than tolerate critics; he should welcome them and bring them into his government. Syria needs an open constitutional process, a deal with the Kurds, broader leadership in the security forces and an electoral framework to ensure that the committees choosing members of an interim parliament in September do not opt overwhelmingly for hardline Sunnis.

Towards the end of Mr Sharaa's rule in Idlib, protesters chanted for his downfall. His critics have not yet gone that far. He has no replacement, and a power vacuum in a country hollowed out by civil war would be dangerous. Yet, in a functioning polity, the opposition can be a stabilising force rather than a threat. For fragile, divided Syria, that is the best chance of avoiding another descent into civil war. ■

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Security breakdown in Syria: Syriac Catholic archpriest attacked



Father Rony Salim, chancellor of the Syriac Catholic Archdiocese of Mosul, shared with ACI MENA, CNA's Arabic-language news partner, that the bishop has called Qaraqosh the "City of Hosanna" due to its uniquely spirited celebration marked by hymns, prayers, and massive crowds of worshippers. | Credit: Ismael Adnan/ACI MENA

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By **Madalaine Elhabbal**

Washington, D.C. Newsroom, Sep 5, 2025 / 08:00 am

Here is a roundup of Catholic world news from the past week that you might have missed:

Syriac Catholic archpriest attacked in Syria

Tensions in Syria deepened this week after a brutal assault on Archpriest Michel Naaman of the Syriac Catholic Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Homs. Returning home one evening, Naaman was ambushed by two masked men who beat him, threatened him at gunpoint, and stripped him of his gold cross and cash, ACI MENA, CNA's Arabic-language news partner, **reported Thursday**.

The attack is part of a troubling pattern of insecurity hitting Christian communities across Syria. In recent months, robberies, kidnappings, and even attacks on churches have become increasingly common in Homs, Aleppo, and beyond. For many, the assault on Naaman is another chilling reminder of the dangers Christians still face in a country fractured by war and lawlessness.

European Commission to examine EU abortion funding initiative

The European Commission has said it will examine the European Citizens' Initiative's call for EU funding for "safe and accessible" abortion after an initiative reached over 1 million signatures across 19 member states, according to a **European News Room report**.

A Slovenian nonprofit organization, Institute 8th March, led the initiative, alongside several other EU nongovernmental organizations. "We want the European Union to establish a financial mechanism that would allow countries to provide abortion services to those individuals who do not have access to abortion in their own countries," Institute 8th March Director Nika Kovač said. The commission said it will provide a response by March 2026.