


Women Faith-Based Mediators in Syria

Challenges and Opportunities
Within Peace Mediation


Berghof Foundation

The Network
for Religious
& Traditional
Peacemakers



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TASTAKEL



With support from
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1. INTRODUCTION



Photo: A condolence vigil from the Druz community for the earthquake victims in Al Suwyida City, Syria Southern region.

This case study examines the experiences of women faith-based mediators (WFBMs)¹ in Syria, including the opportunities and the challenges they face, as well as support needs to strengthen their engagement in the field. Historically,² Syrian women have been underrepresented in government and political decision-making processes. Yet, women have played a key role in major political and social movements, including in the Syrian Revolution, beginning in 2011³ through participating in uprisings and advocating for national political change.

This case study draws on observations from interviews conducted in 2023 with WFBMs in Syria. It is against this background that this WFBM report explores firsthand the challenges, entry points, risks, strategies and specific support of WFBMs in Syria.

¹ WFBMs are working on various tracks for ceasing violence and finding agreements to prevent and stop violence. They convene stakeholder, liaise and negotiate with armed groups and relevant decision makers for ensuring humanitarian access, safe lives and release hostages. In doing this work, their tools and methods are inspired by faith, and/or they are cooperating within or with faith-based structures and/or with faith-based actors, and/or they are gaining motivation and inspiration for this work through faith.

² IFES. Women's Political Participation in Syria: Challenges and Opportunities. Insert Weblink, 2014.

³ Syrian Women's Political Movement. Syrian Women's Voices: Building Peace From the Ground Up. Insert Weblink, 2016

2. UNDERSTANDING RELIGION, TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS AND CONFLICT IN SYRIA

Six years following the Syrian Uprising, the government forces regained control of much of the country. The conflict remained prevalent in certain regions of the country, particularly in the northwest province of Idlib, and the northeast region, where the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), primarily composed of Kurdish fighters and backed by the United States, control much of region, including the oil-rich region around Deir Ezzor province. The conflict has also given rise to various non-state armed groups, including extremist groups such as ISIS and Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) factions,⁴ which have added to the instability of the country. The rise of ISIS in 2014,⁵ among other extremist groups, have exploited sectarian divisions and have further escalated the violence.

Syria is home to diverse religious and ethnic groups, including: Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians, Druze, Shia, Ismaili, and Alawites, as well as Kurds, Assyrians, among others. The armed conflict exacerbated the divide between various sectarian and ethnic groups, leading to heightened tensions and eventually becoming a key mechanism for the mobilization of different political agendas.⁶

Since the beginning of the conflict, the United Nations and other international organizations have been actively involved in mediation efforts across the country, including multiple rounds of peace talks among the Syrian government and the opposition groups.⁷ Similarly, community leaders and civil society groups have contributed to local mediation initiatives, primarily focused on dialogue between different religious and ethnic groups at the grassroots level.

Civil society actors play a major role within Syrian communities. Religious and faith-based leaders have influential power local communities, with religious teachings and practices shaping societal norms. Due to their influential position in the community, many people view these actors as powerful tools for conflict resolution. In this regard, religious leaders have undertaken attempts to mediate the complex conflict. For instance, Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II,⁸ leader of the Syriac Orthodox Church participated in the Geneva Peace Talks and call for interfaith dialogue as a mechanism to support mutual understanding and community cohesion. Sheikh Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, former Grand Mufti of Syria launched a National Dialogue Initiative.⁹ However, he was widely criticized for his pro-regime stance on the conflict. These, along with other attempts have failed due to the complex nature of the conflict and multiple layers of involved actors.

⁴ Lund, A. The Islamist Insurgency in Syria and Its Global Jihadi Rivals. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019.

⁵ Gerges, F. A. ISIS: A History. Princeton University Press, 2016.

⁶ Balanche, F. Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria. Mediterranean Politics, 21(3), 459-477, 2016.

⁷ Droubi, N. The Syrian conflict: The Role of International and Regional Actors. Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security, 6(1), 6-29, 2018.

⁸ Giuffrida, A. The Syrian Conflict and the Role of Religious Leaders in Peacebuilding. Journal of Eastern Christian Studies, 68(3-4), 269-286, 2016.

⁹ Khoury, A. The Role of Religious Leaders in Conflict Resolution: The Case of Sheikh Ahmad Badr Al-Din Hassoun in the Syrian Conflict. Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, 35(4), 460-473, 2015.

3. WOMEN, RELIGION AND MEDIATION

The Syrian regime responded brutally to the peaceful uprisings in 2011. Soon, it became an armed conflict between government armed forces and civilian rebels. As a result, violence and insecurity increased throughout the country, with a disproportionate impact on women, including violence, forced marriage and exploitation by armed groups. Despite these challenges, women have continued to play an important role in Syrian society, providing critical support to communities through the provision of humanitarian aid and support to victims of violence.

The approach of WFBMs goes further than the approach by secular actors. The approach of WFBMs supports the intersection of religion and mediation and can be used as a mechanism to further bolster their participation in mediation processes, especially in contexts where religion is deeply embedded into societal norms. Mediation efforts led by WFBMs throughout Syria demonstrate the resilience, determination, and commitment to supporting inclusion and peacebuilding efforts. However, many challenges remain to the capacity and legitimacy of WFBM across all tracks of mediation.

Within the Syrian society, faith serves as an inspiration and motivation for many women to engage in mediation efforts, especially as they acknowledge faith is an integral aspect of the Syrian's society's identity. Haifa Haqqo is a WFBM who descends from a notable family with an inherited religious status. She perceives herself as natural trustworthy mediator due to the combination of her religious background and family stature. 'Faith is a core identity in Syria, people trust religious leaders, women in particularly,'¹⁰ Haifa notes.

For many WFBMs, faith is also a source of courage and resilience. Salam Alghadir together with other WFBMs, regularly partake in risky and tiring situations to negotiate with armed terrorist organizations, including with ISIS troops to ensure education rights for young girls in Deir ez-Zor City. In recounting her experiences, she emphasizes that her religion was her main motivator to engage and persevere with the efforts.

Including a religious lens to mediation efforts is particularly necessary in countries where religion guides a hierarchical and patriarchal structure. This is also true when working alongside extremist groups who base their legitimacy upon religious teachings and often denote males with religious backgrounds as credible leaders.¹¹ WFBMs in Syria exemplify the transformative power of faith, as they draw upon their spiritual convictions to bring about positive change in their communities. The spouse to a former high-ranking fighter of the Al Nusra front in Syria, who was able to negotiate through him the release of civilian hostages, strongly believes that religious references are key, 'to bridge gaps and build trust with extremist groups who value religious influence and credibility within mediation processes.' Asmaa Kuftaro, former member of the Syrian Womens Advisory Board for UN Envoy Staffan de Mistura and the granddaughter of the former Grand Mufti of Syria – Sheikh Ahmad Keftarou, excels her mediation efforts purely from religious teachings and Prophet Mohammed, regarding her guiding principal, 'all of creation are the children of God, and the most beloved creation to Allah are those who are most beneficial to their family.' WFBMs in Syria exemplify the transformative power of faith, as they draw upon their spiritual convictions to bring about positive change in their communities.¹²

¹⁰ Haifa Haqqo, a religious leader in the city of Al-Qamishli following the Khaznawi method (A Muslim denomination).

¹¹ A spouse of former armed individual (38 years, Muslim, Northwest).

¹² Asmaa Keftaro, Former member of the Syrian Women's Advisory Board for UN envoy Staffan de Mistura.

Religious identity always inspires me, as I am a religious person... I do not like to use the term WFBM as it may widen the gap in society, especially during sensitive times of conflict.

Hind Kabawat

However, several women interviewed for this study declined to introduce themselves as WFBMs due to the negative association with religion within the context of the Syrian armed conflict. Hind Kabawat, Director of Interfaith Peacebuilding at George Mason University's Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution, has been involved for decades in supporting faith-based mediation and dialogue efforts in different tracks. 'Religious identity always inspires me, as I am a religious person and Jesus is my role model..., and everything I do is because I am religious,' she states. However, Hind continued to express, 'I do not like to use the term WFBM as it may widen the gap in society, especially during sensitive times of conflict.' Nour Burhan held a similar opinion when opting to not introduce herself as a WFBM, 'I do not support the term WFBM, rather I support aligning with the diverse landscape of the Syrian society in terms of sects and political affiliations.' The understanding of one's own role within a community and as a mediator is personal and can be based on a variety of influential actors and contexts, including the influence of faith and faith-based figures.

Faith is a core identity in Syria, people trust religious leaders, women in particularly.

Haiifa Haqqo

In many cases, WFBMs have engaged in efforts beyond the scope of traditional mediation efforts and have sought to collaborate with key community stakeholders through joint advocacy initiatives. For example, WFBM Alice Mufarej, in cooperation with civil society actors and religious figures in the Jaramana area, a suburb of Damascus, effectively organized protests and relief efforts against the Syrian Civil War. The combination of women and religious leaders' participation illustrated a multi-stakeholder approach for ending the conflict, while advocating to ensure political decisions address the needs of local communities. In reflecting on her work, Alice notes, 'Our efforts contributed to establishing the civil peace committee connecting politics to people's voices and make them heard.' In similar efforts, Arya Joumaa was able to successfully negotiate the freeing of prisoners from the Syrian Democratic forces as well as kidnapped individuals from fighting factions in the northeastern region. Her efforts were successful due in part to her collaboration with religious leaders. A WFBM who asked to remain anonymous, successfully negotiated with the Prince of ISIS in 2016. She was able to negotiate the release of 84 severely ill women in exchange of ISIS fighters imprisoned in the regime-controlled areas with the Prince of ISIS in 2016. Her tools and practices were strongly informed by Islam faith and reference, and she made sure to show her profound ability to navigate in the Muslim belief system as well as the acknowledgment of religiously inspired codex, through wearing a Hijab and the abaya.

4. NAVIGATING RISKS AND CHALLENGES

WFBMs face several risks in their work within the Syrian context, including, but not limited to security, social stigma, adverse implications to using religious discourse and association with an external political agenda. Addressing these risks and challenges requires concerted efforts to ensure their safety, challenge social norms, create inclusive and equitable mediation processes, navigate the role of religion responsibly, and provide support that respects their agency and independence.

Patriarchal structures

WFBMs often face complex challenges due to societal and cultural norms that hinder women's participation to meaningfully engage in mediation efforts within highly male-dominated spaces, including traditional gender biases and norms of roles in public life in general. As Ayra Joumaa, a lawyer in profession, recalls from her experiences with negotiating with the Syrian Democratic Forces for the release of hostages, 'We face many challenges, perhaps the biggest of which is the non-acceptance of settlements proposed by women.' A WFBM¹³ based in the northwest region confirms a similar perception through the lens of extremist factions' in their weak acceptance to allow women to be involved in mediation efforts.

We face many challenges, perhaps the biggest of which is the non-acceptance of settlements proposed by women.

Ayra Joumaa

Not being accepted by male counterparts is only a fraction of the challenges faced by women. WFBMs often encounter accusations of sexual impropriety, exploitation, bullying, and other forms of harassment. Khadija Shaqrooq experienced such challenges, highlighting, 'In many cases, I was subject to direct harassments during mediation sessions.' Nour Burhan shared her story of manipulation by the regime's security forces, resulting in a group of WFBMs being exploited by multiple parties affiliated to the regime. 'We realized that security forces were manipulating and lying to us because we were women,' she noted.

Social stigma is a real concern for women working in this field. They frequently encounter disapproval and criticism from their communities. Khadija Shaqrooq, a WFBM operating in a culturally conservative environment, shared her experience stating, 'I encountered bullying and stigmatization when I first engaged in mediation. I was expected to stay in my tent and only raise my children according to the people residing in Armanaz camp.'

Physical and psychological risks

Women face high risks of violence and threats to their daily safety. Notably, one WFBM navigated the complexities of mediation between members of an armed group, using her husband as an intermediary. While doing so, she says she 'was acutely aware of the dangers posed by armed groups and the fragile dynamics that surrounded us in case my role became known to negotiating parties.' Multiple accounts from WFBMs describe experiencing physical assault, arrests, threats and the spread of damaging rumors as direct consequences stemming from their role as mediators.

¹³ A spouse of former armed individual (38 years, Muslim, Northwest).

Marginalization through social media

Social media produces a significant obstacle for WFBMs in Syria. It exposes them to online hate speech, abuse and different forms of harassment. An Ismaili WFBM reflects on her experience of marginalization by her surrounding community perpetuated through social media. ‘Social media exposed me to harassment, accusations of affiliations to external agendas, and even isolation, making my work in mediation more difficult,’ she expressed. Such challenges in turn, have reduced the trust and credibility of many WFBMs leading their reputation to be tarnished and creating more significant challenges to effectively carry out their work.

Difficulty incorporating religious practices

Incorporating religious references in mediation can have detrimental consequences. Salam Al-Ghadir, a negotiator with extremist groups, abstains from using religious discourse as it entails high risks of association to radical political agendas and extremist violence. ‘I am cautious when using religious references in mediations. In the Arab region, we’ve witnessed how religion has exploited to control people and promote dictatorships,’ she explains. Salam further draws connections to the rise of ISIS and concerns that she may be unfairly associated with stereotypes of radicalism and the potential involvement in acts of terrorism.

I am cautious when using religious references in mediations. In the Arab region, we’ve witnessed how religion has exploited to control people and promote dictatorships.

Salam Al-Ghadir

Social media exposed me to harassment, accusations of affiliations to external agendas, and even isolation, making my work in mediation more difficult.

Ismaili WFBM

In other cases, being a religious or ethnic minority also creates an obstacle to a WFBM, as it is harder to gain acceptance and trust from their residing community. In a Muslim/Sunnah dominated society, a minority WFBM often will not reveal her identity and swap it with a secular one to gain a feeling of safety and credibility. Residing in Southern Turkey, a WFBM expressed, ‘I don’t feel safe to introduce my faith identity explicitly. I would rather take a secular line reflecting a human-based approach.’ Furthermore, WFBMs must be cautious with their language and messaging to avoid accusations of spreading false information or being labeled as supporters of terrorists. Iman Ballan¹⁴ stresses on the sensitivity of used language and tone, ‘It’s crucial to choose my words, ensuring that I may not be accused or labeled as a threat of any sort.’ Such challenges significantly hinder WFBMs’ ability to build trust, further affecting their participation in mediation efforts. The challenges extend far beyond mediating through a faith-based lens. As a member of the Shammar tribe¹⁵ noted, ‘Women are often excluded from tribe headcounts, we are often not seen’, as stated by Salam Al-Ghadir.

¹⁴ Iman Ballan, a social activist based in the city of Al-Swuayda, also spelled as “Swaida,” which is a mainly Druze city located in southwestern Syria.

¹⁵ Al-Hamad, Manaf. Impact of the Rule of the Autonomous Administration on Tribal Society: Deir ez-Zor Countryside Case Study. Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies. <https://www.harmoon.org/en/researches/impact-of-the-rule-of-the-autonomous-administration-on-tribal-society-deir-ez-zor-countryside-a-case-study/>. December, 26, 2022.

I encountered bullying and stigmatization when I first engaged in mediation.

Khadija Shaqrooq

Lack of financial resources

There is a lack of financial resources available to support the work of WFBMs, which hinders their overall participation and leadership within mediation processes. Financial support empowers WFBMs to have a greater impact in settling conflicts and stopping violence within the country. In contexts where there are social and cultural norms that restrict women's mobility and involvement in public activities, financial support can assist women in overcoming barriers through resources for transportation, logistical needs, and even childcare. Financial resources also ensure women have access to increasing their capacity, knowledge and skills as it relates to the mediation space.

WFBMs agree that financial independence allows for stronger positioning in mediation operations and is key for effective mediation work.¹⁶ WFBMs who have been involved in lengthy and complex processes on the ground, as Nour Burhan, who was among many other women who contributed to the negotiating the uplifting of Al-Zabadani city siege in 2015, highlights financial independence as crucial for sustainable processes. "There must be sufficient funds for at least one year in order to [...] run mediation operations on the ground."¹⁷

5. OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH WFBMS

WFBMs have significant opportunities and diverse entry points to engage in successful mediation efforts through their networks, which often include religious and official institutions. This, in combination with leveraging their faith, expertise, and relationships helps to strengthen conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes.

Being perceived as a neutral actor

WFBMs and women in general are perceived by many to pursue less personal or political goals and interest than their male counterparts. In turn, women have been called by authorities to mediate conflicts throughout Syria. Nour Burhan, together with a group of explicitly faith-based and elderly women contributed to negotiations to temporarily uplift the siege of the city of Al-Zabadani, Syria in 2015. Women were able to participate in the negotiations because they were seen 'as a third party and not part of the problem.' Meaning, they were not a part of the power struggle and were viewed as neutral parties, thus they were able to advance negotiations more so than their male counterparts.

It's crucial to choose my words, ensuring that I may not be accused or labeled as a threat of any sort.

Iman Ballan

¹⁶ Samar Al-Hussien, a former judge from Damascus, Syria.

¹⁷ Nour Burhan, Founder of "I am She" Women Mediators network in Syria.

As WFBMs are perceived neutral and nonthreatening, they have unique opportunities to publicly pressure and advocate for various resolution mechanisms amidst regions with strong violence and extremist groups, including for the release of hostages. For example, Iman Ballan, a social activist in the city of Al-Swuayda,¹⁸ shares her experience of using innovative methods of advocacy in mediation processes. In 2013, ISIS kidnapped Druze women from the eastern countryside of Al-Suwaida. In response to this and the large need to contribute to freeing other kidnapped women, Iman together with a group of Druze women organized a sit-in protest called the ‘Sit-In for the Soul’s Return.’ Iman notes, ‘We chose to hold the protest in front of the governorate building to pressure freeing kidnapped women. This was our only way to intervene.’

Leveraging local networks

WFBMs in Syria frequently leverage their networks to support their mediation efforts. For instance, Hind Kabawat relied on her broader community networks to find appropriate actors who could help secure the release of Father Farah, a priest who was kidnapped by Jabhat Al-Nusra. ‘Through the assistance of the people of Idlib, we were able to free Father Farah, as we established contact with Jabhat al-Nusra and aided in his release,’¹⁹ she explained. Networking with local communities also serves as protective measures for WFBMs and can act as a crucial safety net.

This strategy is further emphasized by Hind Kabawat, who sheds light on its importance based on her own experience in the field. Hind asserts, ‘I believe WFBMs should establish networks with local communities for support and reduction of accusations of affiliations to external agendas.’ By fostering relationships and engaging with the local community through a multi-stakeholder approach, WFBMs can collaboratively build trust, legitimacy, and security to support their commitment to mediation and broader social cohesion.

WFBMs have specific opportunities when operating through women-led networks. For instance, a wife of a high-ranking fighter stationed on the Al Nusra front was approached by a woman who stated her relatives were hostages of Al Nusra. Through her husband, the wife was able to share information and support in negotiation efforts, which was relevant for the release of their sons in 2021.

Partnering with religious leaders and male community-based actors

WFBMs often turn to their faith-based networks and seek the engagement of religious leaders, as their presence increases trust and acceptance to the mediating parties. According to WFBM Arya Joumaa, ‘We rely heavily on religious leaders as their presence possess higher credibility to settlements proposed by WFBM.’ A Muslim Sheikh²⁰ from Northwest Syria held a similar view in that women preachers are more welcomed in resolving local disputes, ‘since religion is a dominant component of the identity of communities, women preachers have more credibility and access.’

¹⁸ Iman Ballan, a social activist based in the city of Al-Swuayda, also spelled as “Swaida”, which is a mainly Druze city located in southern region.

¹⁹ Hind Kabawat, Director of Interfaith Peacebuilding at George Mason University’s Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution.

²⁰ Muslim Sheikh (Imam), based in Northwest region, 38 years old, Muslim-Sunni.

There must be sufficient funds for at least one year in order to [...] run mediation operations on the ground.

Nour Burhan

Collaborating with religious authorities can be an effective mechanism when dealing with religiously motivated extremist groups and among local communities. Arya Joumaa utilizes this strategy particularly when negotiating the release of hostages and mediating tribal conflicts. ‘We turn to religious leaders in such situations, as people tend to feel rather secure in the presence of religious leaders,’ she explains. Bishop Charbak sees the cooperation between WFBMs and religious leaders in a similar way, ‘Partnering with religious leaders helps WFBMs to gain more people’s trust. It is indeed a key success strategy.’

WFBMs also collaborate with men in their community or household as part of mixed-gender delegations, even in areas where women’s participation is traditionally not accepted. Layla Malek credits some success of negotiation efforts by involving her husband in sessions to ensure her proposals are taken seriously and to legitimize her role as a mediator.

Utilizing other peacebuilding tools

While formal track negotiations are important, releasing statements, organizing peaceful demonstrations, supporting mediation preparations, and other indirect approaches are relevant tools for WFBMs to advocate for their role, and shape negotiation and mediation processes. Salam Al-Ghadir, for example, did not have the opportunity to engage in direct negotiations for the release of a group of young men arrested by ISIS in Deir ez-Zor city, as women in her area were not allowed to take the front lines in the negotiation process. However, she was able to contribute through an indirect method by preparing arguments and negotiating terms as part of the mediating committee.²¹



Photo: *Kahdija Shaqroug mediating a conflict among camp residences and the owner of the camp land at the Armanaz Camp in Idlib city in October, 2022.*

²¹ Salam Al-Ghadir, Northwestern Syria, peace advocate and WFBM from Deir ez-Zor city in Syria.

6. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In recognizing some of the significant challenges to conducting their work, WFBMs require support in multiple forms, including educational and financial, recognition from ruling powers in their working areas, and many others.

Recommendations provided by WFBMs

- 1 Local authorities and international actors should recognize the role of WFBMs within mediation spaces.** By gaining the acceptance of the ruling authorities, WFBMs will have enhanced legitimacy to mediate in diverse contexts throughout the country and make a tangible impact.
- 2 International actors must support stronger advocacy efforts for the inclusion of WFBMs** in diplomatic conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts as well as high-level negotiations.
- 3 Offer capacity-building opportunities for WFBM.** These programs should provide comprehensive training in conflict analysis, negotiation skills, interfaith dialogue, effective communication skills, religious teachings, as well as the influence of identities. By equipping women with these skills and knowledge, WFBMs can enhance their effectiveness in mediating complex conflicts and fostering inclusive and constructive dialogue.
- 4 Promote and incentivize institutions to provide financial resources targeted towards supporting WFBM mediation efforts.** This will help ensure that WFBM initiatives have the necessary resources to carry out their important work effectively.
- 5 Offer protection systems and legal support systems to help protect the safety of WFBMs.** This includes providing trainings on personal safety and protection from violence.
- 6 Ensure male supported mediators and authorities are provided trainings** on addressing harassment within mediation spaces.
- 7 Include teaching basic concepts of negotiation and conflict resolution within the curricula of schools** to encourage children to think critically about promoting mutual cooperation, understanding and respect to support broader social cohesion.

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ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Deema Aasy, MSc. is a Programme Management Specialist and a researcher. Deema has led and contributed to multiple dialogue and interfaith projects across the Arab Region, including the Youth 4Dialogue initiative and leading the Arab Region Dialogue Fellowship training Programme to enhance capacity among dialogue practitioners. Additionally, she has undertaken consultancy assignments for bilateral and multilateral donors, specializing in mediation and peace-building support, in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and others. Deema holds a master's degree in international management from Modul University, Vienna, and a bachelor's degree in business administration from Multimedia University, Malaysia. Deema's career spans over multiple international roles at UNDP, the Arab League Mission to the United Nations, KAICIID International Dialogue, the National Democratic Institute, and the Berghof Foundation.



About Berghof Foundation

The Berghof Foundation is an independent, non-governmental and non-profit organization supporting people in conflict in their efforts to achieve sustainable peace through conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Their work spans many regions and societies, encompassing conflicts between and within states, whether new or entrenched. We also work to address underlying social grievances which, if ignored, only deepen divisions and inflame tensions.




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