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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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• (0855)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): I would like to welcome everybody. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the orders of the day are a briefing on the situation in Syria.

I would like to welcome Ambassador Akoguz here today. We want to thank you very much for taking time to come and talk to us.

We are missing a couple of colleagues. As I think most of you are aware, there was a security issue down around Confederation, so those members will come in as things go on.

We want to get started.

Ambassador, welcome. We're looking forward to hearing from you. Why don't we start with your opening statement, and then we will go to questions.

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz (Chargé d'affaires ad interim, Embassy of the Republic of Turkey): Thank you very much for inviting me and giving us a chance to explain our views regarding the events in Syria.

I am sorry for being late; I miscalculated the traffic. There was a holdup.

Maybe I will begin right now with a statement.

The main aim of Turkish foreign policy is the achievement of peace and stability in our region, but the developments with the Arab Spring have changed this situation in the last two years. Particularly in Syria, the crisis is deteriorating further and fast: each day hundreds of innocent people are killed by indiscriminate shelling from regime forces. The political and social backbone of the regime is constantly disintegrating. Defections at various levels, including the military, continue progressively. The situation of more than 2.5 million international displaced persons and the devastated economy only add to the gravity of this tragedy.

Prolongation of the conflict is detrimental for Syria, the Syrian people, and for the region. We need to accelerate this process to the extent possible in order to avoid the further escalation of violence and its spillover to neighbouring regions.

As the violence in Syria escalates, the regime has become a clear and imminent threat in terms of conventional forces and weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems, not only for its people but also for the region and for the southeastern border for NATO.

In view of the visible threat posed by the Syrian regime, we have requested that NATO military authorities review an updated relevant contingency plan. The process is under way.

We consider Syria's ballistic missile capabilities and chemical weapons stockpiles as a serious national security issue. We are also deeply concerned by the growing tensions within Syrian society, which could lead to unbridgeable divides on ethnic and religious fault lines. The longer a solution for the crisis takes, the greater the risk of ethnic strife and civil war.

Extremist or terrorist groups must never be allowed to hijack the popular struggle of Syria and exploit the current turmoil to their benefit. Some terrorists groups, like Al Qaeda or the PKK, are trying to take advantage of the current situation in Syria. We cannot tolerate any attempts by terrorist groups, particularly the PKK, to set up bases in Syria.

A potential mass refugee movement is another grave concern, which may lead to a humanitarian tragedy on our borders. Minister Davutoglu already expressed our views in great detail at the UN Security Council meeting of August 30.

Currently the number of Syrians in the camps in Turkey has passed the threshold of 100,000. We stand in full solidarity with the Syrian people, and we will continue our efforts in addressing their needs. However, we feel that Turkey's open door policy is actually absorbing the potential international reaction, since the tragic consequences of the brutality by the Syrian regime are all tackled by the neighbouring countries. What we expect from our partners is a serious engagement and meaningful contribution in sharing this burden.

In this respect, we should also seek ways to address this humanitarian crisis within the borders of Syria. The threat presented by the regime in Syria is now gaining new dimensions as the regime carries its violent and aggressive policies, which it has been waging against the people, beyond the borders of Syria.

We are determined to take all the necessary measures, in compliance with international law, to protect the borders of Turkey and the fundamental rights and interests of Turkish citizens. The aggressive and hostile acts of the regime in Syria towards Turkey cannot go unanswered.

The town just at the border between Turkey and Syria, Akçakale, has become a target of Syrian artillery since the 20th of September. Our minister was paying a visit to Canada on that same day when they first began, after opposition groups took control of a Syrian border town, Tal Abyad, on the 19th of September.

•(0900)

Since the first artillery shell hit Turkish soil, Turkey has shown utmost care in acting in full compliance with international law as well as established norms and regulations.

Two separate diplomatic notes, underlining the fact that hitting Turkish territory with artillery shells is totally unacceptable and in gross violation of international law, and requesting that the Syrian regime put an immediate end to such aggressive acts, were submitted to the Syrian consulate in Istanbul on September 21 and 27.

The notes also put on record that Turkey upholds its rights emanating from international law and reaffirmed that there won't be any hesitation, on our side, in continuing our retaliation if they persist in their aggressive acts.

As the Syrian forces continued shelling Turkish territory, despite the warnings, Turkish armed forces engaged, in full compliance with international law and the principle of proportionality, the specific area where the Syrian artillery responsible for the shelling was located. We have also been meticulous in keeping the international community informed of the developments.

On October 3, Akçakale was targeted by six artillery shells, killing five innocent Turkish citizens, all women and children. Although the regime authorities have been denying any responsibility since September 20, when they faced Turkey's determined reaction, they acknowledged the responsibility publicly and stopped shelling. This shows that they have the option not to target Turkish territory in the first place, and even if there was a mistake, they had the ability to stop and rectify it. Therefore, it is crystal clear that the regime's position on this matter has been built upon deceit and miscalculation.

At most, attention has been paid to the principle of proportionality while retaliating against this latest violation by the Syrian regime.

NATO, the EU, the UN Security Council, and the Secretary General, as well as many members of the international community, condemn the aggressive acts of the Syrian regime. We thank all of them for their solidarity.

Taking this opportunity, I would like to express our gratitude for the prompt statement of condemnation by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Baird, regarding the shelling by the Syrian regime forces that targeted our territories and killed five innocent citizens.

The security threat Syria projects to its region is now increasingly dangerous. We have seen similar attacks by the regime against Jordan and Lebanon too.

In view of the developments in Syria, the Turkish Parliament adopted on October 4 a decree authorizing the government to dispatch the Turkish armed forces to foreign countries. It's not a declaration of war. However, Turkey is capable of protecting its citizens and borders and will take every necessary measure to make sure that such acts of aggression are not repeated.

During the transition period, the territorial integrity and the national unity of Syria must be preserved. We need to work together to frame a workable transition plan that will preserve the current infrastructure and public institutions. At this stage, we need to focus on expediting the transition process and the exit of the current

regime. We cannot tolerate the establishment of any de facto administration in Syria by any single ethnic or religious group.

Those are mainly my points. I am ready to answer your questions.

•(0905)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We are going to start with Mr. Dewar. Sir, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, and thank you so much for being here. We didn't give you a lot of notice, so I thank you for your ability to be nimble and able to present before our committee today.

I just want to start off by reinforcing the message, not only from the government, Minister Baird, but also from the official opposition. We did put out a statement. Just to put it on the record here, our thoughts are obviously with the families and victims of this terrible attack. We also support your government's effort to maintain regional peace and stability, which is what we all want. The last thing any of us wants to see is the spread of this conflict outside of Syria. But that's already happened. So I just want to reinforce that message on behalf of our party as well.

With that in mind, I have just a couple of questions. In your presentation you talked about the importance of having serious engagement and meaningful contributions for resolving the conflict. You touched on a couple of things: humanitarian support and support for transition. We talked a bit about that on Tuesday at committee and how that could be done.

Is there something you can touch on that you would want Canada to participate in or continue to participate in?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: The international community has held a few conferences for the opposition. The last one was the Arab League conference of the opposition. They accepted a statement at the end of that.

We could support the opposition, and we also shouldn't let the extremist forces take.... The opposition is a bit scattered now, but they seem more self-confident. They are gradually enlarging the areas under their control. The Syrian National Council is in the process of improvement as well. They are undergoing a restructuring process to increase the inclusiveness and transparency of the council. I believe that is a step in the right direction.

The opposition should be well represented for them to protect their own rights, their own people. So the conferences may continue, and they are gaining more self-confidence right now.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Just to build on that, your government has been engaged in the regional contact group with other countries—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, as a matter of fact. Can you update us on that? Is there anything coming out of that?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: Our ministers met on the 20th of September, right before our minister's visit to Canada. The Saudi Arabian foreign minister was not present because of his ill health, but he sent a representative. The main idea that came out was also to help the opposition to be better represented and to be more organized in their work.

Mr. Paul Dewar: As recently as yesterday, Mr. Brahimi, the special envoy, put forward the idea of a ceasefire. I'm just wondering if your government, your president, has commented on that.

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: Yes. We have this religious holiday coming up next week, and Mr. Brahimi's suggestion was to stop all the fighting at least for the period. It's Eid al-Adha, during these Muslim holy days. Our minister said he's fully supportive of that, provided that the Syrian regime would also keep its promise to stop the attacks on civilian people and the opposition.

Both the opposition and the Syrian regime were looking favourably at that, and our minister stated his support, provided that both sides stop.

• (0910)

Mr. Paul Dewar: That comes back to your point about the opposition and supporting them to be able to be more cohesive. Obviously if they were to at least try to engage in a ceasefire, that would help.

I just want to turn to the relationship with Russia. This has been something that many people have voiced. We as a party have certainly voiced it, and I know the government has as well. I'm talking about the importance of trying to influence Russia. Can you tell us what actions your government has taken to try to persuade Russia to allow a strong resolution to go through the Security Council with regard to Syria?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: Since the beginning of the crisis, most members of the international community have voiced support. The U.S., France, Canada, and Turkey have been more or less the same. The position of the Russian Federation and China on this issue are not the same as those of the rest of the international committee or the same as those of Iran, on a regional level. They have stopped the passage of three UN Security Council resolutions regarding Syria. One of them was related to the humanitarian issue, and even that couldn't pass because of their vetoes. Our minister is constantly communicating with their foreign ministers. We have full communication, but their position has not changed.

Mr. Putin will visit Turkey shortly, so they may have talks about that as well.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Dechert, sir, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Akoguz, for being here this morning. All Canadians are very grateful for what Turkey has done so far in taking in refugees from Syria and maintaining, as best as possible, peace along the border there. We commend the actions of the Turkish government for that response.

We also commend the Turkish government for the swift action to intercept shipments of military equipment, and I believe Minister Baird made a statement last week to that effect.

I wanted to ask you about that a little bit. Have other military shipments flowing into Syria crossed Turkish airspace? What do you think the volume of that is? And can you tell us what Russia's reaction was to the interception of that equipment, which I understand was coming from Russia?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: Yes, we had information that a civilian airplane was carrying ammunition, so we intercepted the plane. It's a right of every country under ICAO rules and also of Turkish aviation.

I believe it was radar parts, and all civilian airplanes have to report what they are carrying. They should be civilian. It's just a regular thing in civil aviation; they are not allowed to carry military equipment. Military planes are for that.

There was no doubt that the parts could be for military use as well. We informed the Russians, after intercepting the plane, that it was carrying these parts. It was from Moscow to Damascus. The country intercepting the plane has the right to collect the items, and we collected the items, and we also closed our air space to Syrian airplanes after that.

The Russian federation was informed about it, and Minister Lavrov later made a statement that it was only radar parts, but even radar parts are not allowed to be carried by a civilian airplane.

There was another plane that we were suspicious of that was flying through airspace from another country. All countries ask for permission beforehand if they are carrying humanitarian assistance. There was another Armenian plane that was carrying humanitarian supplies. They asked for permission, and in our case our authorities allowed them to fly through Turkish airspace if they let the plane be inspected beforehand. It was inspected, and it was just mainly humanitarian supplies, so it was allowed to go to Syria afterwards.

• (0915)

Mr. Bob Dechert: Good. I have no doubt that Turkey's action in intercepting that radar equipment did save lives and will save lives in Syria, so on behalf of Canada, thank you for doing that.

We also want to express our sympathies for the loss of the five Turkish citizens. Our sympathies go to you and to their families.

I understand that there has been some recent use of air power by the Assad regime along the Turkish border. Has there been any intervention into Turkish airspace yet by any Syrian aircraft?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: No, there was only this. The Syrian regime has now lost control of the passages to Turkey at the zero point border. The opposition is taking control, so there are conflicts. They are going along the border, and we have problems at that zero point with Syria. Akçakale was one of them; it was attacked. The regime forces' artillery shells can hit Turkey because of the spillover effect. After the Akçakale incident...before that there were four or five artillery shells that fell on Turkish soil from that part. The Turkish army intercepted on their soil, and it was done in proportionality. International law was respected when the Turkish army attacked. It's just one point where the artillery shell was coming from Syria. After that it stopped. As far as I know, we haven't had any intervention in the air space from Syrian forces.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Does Turkey require any assistance from the international community, from NATO, in terms of intercepting aircraft flying over its airspace?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: No. We are capable of protecting it, as far as I know. The reaction of the Turkish military was to show that no aggressive attack coming from Syria would go unanswered, because we have lost our citizens. More and more, as the regime became more desperate....

Mr. Bob Dechert: Given the fact that Assad is using air power, air and military technology, against his own citizens, what is your view of the feasibility of enforcing a no-fly zone over Syrian airspace?

The Chair: That's all the time you've got.

I'm going ask you to finish the question, and then we will move on to the next set of questions.

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: It could be done, but it would be up to the Syrian regime. The no-fly zone, meaning Syrian planes as well, but on their—

Mr. Bob Dechert: Can I just clarify my question?

The Chair: Do so very quickly.

Mr. Bob Dechert: What is your view of the feasibility of the international community enforcing a no-fly zone over Syria to force the Syrian air force to stay on the ground and not attack its citizens?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: I think it was on the table, but it couldn't pass. The regime might also continue using it as well. The Syrians have their own rights within their borders.

● (0920)

Mr. Bob Dechert: I understand; what I'm suggesting is—

The Chair: We don't have time. We'll have to pick up that line of questioning afterwards.

Mr. Eyking, sir, you have seven minutes.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

And thank you for coming.

Turkey's position in the world geographically seems to always get in the middle of things. It's not their fault; it's just the way it is. So we commend your government on how they're dealing with another conflict.

You alluded to refugees—how many are there now? What are your estimates of how many refugees are going to be in your country by the end of the year?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: Two days ago the number of Syrians taking refuge in Turkey passed 100,000. Yesterday's number was 101,000 refugees taking shelter in Turkey. Since the beginning of the conflict we have housed 144,000 refugees; 40,000 of them returned to Syrian. They can't come and go.

We have built 14 camps to shelter the refugees and we have spent around \$40 million U.S. for the camps. It's a huge burden on our part. We keep our borders open for Syrians, and we also follow the principle of no rejection at the border, so we are trying to help whoever is willing to come. But building the camps takes time, and the people who want to come to Turkish territory to take shelter is increasing very quickly.

The UNHCR is also trying to provide people with shelter and food on the other side, in Syria.

There has to be a way to try to help the Syrians within their own territory, but they continue to come to Turkey. Now we have 14 camps and we are building two more.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Is Canada helping you with any of this?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: Not yet. I think Canada is providing help through Jordan, or the Red Cross, or maybe through Lebanon as well.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Could you use some help from Canada?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: Yes, of course. Our minister also had a meeting under the auspices of the UN and asked for international help. It's way beyond—we need to spend a lot of—

Hon. Mark Eyking: Is that what you mean by the corridor where the refugees are going back and forth? Is that what they mean by a safe zone or a corridor? Is that what's there now, or is that what you were thinking of having?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: No. The UN or international community should find a way to help the Syrian people within their own territory, so that they do not become international displaced persons. They shouldn't need to find refuge in neighbouring countries. A solution should be found within their own territory. At the moment, they do not have that, so they try to cross the border to find shelter.

Hon. Mark Eyking: On the conflict that happened at the border—the shelling—some would say maybe it was a mistake and some would say there were enemies of Syria in Turkey. There are all kinds of stories around. At the end of the day, somebody attacked Turkey, and you have a right to defend yourselves. You are part of the NATO group, so that makes it all bigger. I am encouraged that the leader of Russia is coming to your country. I think that's very important to simmer everybody down here a bit.

Do you have any concerns? What is your concern of this becoming a bigger conflict? What is your feeling about the NATO negotiations right now? Do you feel everything has kind of simmered down at the moment, and with Putin coming there could be better things on the horizon? Or do you sense that this is still going to be a slippery slope?

•(0925)

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: It's a slippery slope, as you said, but Turkey has no intention of going to war, as well as NATO. As you said, those shellings—they began on the 20th, actually. They continued on the 21st and the 23rd. We doubt that all of them were mistakes. In the end, it killed five of our citizens. We inspected the artillery shells that fell on Turkish soil. There's no way they can belong to the opposition. We are certain they belong to the Syrian regime.

In line with international law and our responsibility to protect our own citizens, the Turkish military attacked the point that the artillery shells were coming from. After that, it was stopped. We think it clearly shows that it was the Syrian regime forces. We informed NATO before and after the Turkish intervention into Syria. All NATO members voiced support. They expressed their condolences for the families.

We will see what will come up, but Turkey has no intention of going to war.

Hon. Mark Eyking: What do the people of Turkey feel? I'm guessing there are relatives in Syria—I assume. These lines were just done 100 years ago, so there must be religious connections. What is their sense? I guess they are sensing anger a bit with the shelling. Are they very uneasy? What is the sense from your people?

The Chair: Mr. Eyking, that's all the time.

Once again, I will ask you to finish the question, though.

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: Before 1998, Turkey had problems with Syria. Our relations were problematic because of their support of the terrorist group, the PKK. After 2000, when Bashar al-Assad came to power, the relations began to develop rapidly. In 2000, we had bilateral trade reaching near \$2.5 billion. We had investments in Syria. We have relatives. People went back and forth. We had a visa exemption with Syria. In 2009, we held a meeting just at the border with two prime ministers and 10 ministers.

After the Arab Spring began, the Assad regime stopped responding to the needs of its own people. It became a human tragedy, which also became a humanitarian tragedy.

The Chair: That's all the time we have.

This next round will be five minutes, and we'll start with Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Ms. Akoguz, for being here this morning.

I want to follow up on the humanitarian situation particularly. I think it's important that I follow up on something Mr. Eyking talked about in his questions, when he was asking whether or not Turkey could use the assistance of Canada. I don't believe Turkey has ever asked for assistance from Canada, as far as humanitarian assistance is concerned.

I do want to commend Turkey for the things they've undertaken on behalf of the displaced people who are finding their way into Turkey. You have been absolutely stellar in the work you've done as

a country to take people in, to assist, and to ensure that they have a place to live. So thank you, and our compliments to your country.

I do want to talk about the humanitarian assistance. Canada has given about \$12 million so far in assistance to Syria. That money has gone to the International Committee of the Red Cross or to the World Food Programme, to ensure that people are getting the assistance they need in food reserves.

Does Turkey have anybody involved in the Red Crescent committee, and are they working within Syria to assist the Red Cross there to get food in? Can you tell us what that looks like?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: We are working very closely with UNHCR, and the Turkish Red Crescent is also very much involved. There is also another organization in Turkey that is involved, a government organization, in the distribution of aid that we receive or using our own means. Red Crescent is also involved.

The UN has set up a program for the neighbouring countries receiving Syrian refugees, but it is far less than Turkey has been spending so far.

We didn't specifically ask Canada to help, but we did call on the international community. At first, when the refugees began to take refuge in Turkey, Turkey didn't ask for international help. For the first few weeks, we thought we could handle them within Turkey, but as more and more began to come and the conflict became more serious in Syria, we asked for international help. Our minister also, in international meetings, always gives the number of camps that we need to build and he explains the humanitarian situation within Turkey as well.

So we have asked...and we are sharing information. UNHCR is on the ground as well in Turkey, in the camps, and they are controlling everything there as well.

•(0930)

Ms. Lois Brown: Can you tell us, if anything, what you've heard from the people on the ground who are looking to get into Syria with the Red Crescent? Have they commented on whether or not there has been access to assist the people in Syria?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: They are providing food and other necessary materials to people inside Syria as well, at zero point. We cannot go inside Syria, but we are continuously building.... We now have the 14th camp and 101,000 Syrians seeking refuge in Turkey. Actually, they do not have refugee status, but they have temporary protection in Turkey. We cannot host everyone who is coming to Turkey, but they are coming in large numbers, so we are trying to provide food and other materials at zero point to the people in Syria who do not enter into Turkey.

Ms. Lois Brown: You talked very briefly—

The Chair: I'm sorry, that's all the time we have in this round. We'll have to pick it up during the next one.

I'm going to turn it over to the NDP, to Madame Laverdière.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for being here this morning.

I would like to expand a little bit on the humanitarian situation. First, I think you said that Turkey had officially asked the international community to help with welcoming...

Well, “welcoming”; I’m sorry, my English is failing me now.

[Translation]

So I was talking about welcoming the people from Syria.

[English]

I’ll go back to English now, don’t worry; it was just that one word.

Through which channel was your appeal made?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: Our minister made a statement, a call to the international community, actually, I believe in April. In all his international conferences and his meetings with his counterparts, he voices and explains the situation in Turkey and asks for help as well.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you.

We understand that you would really appreciate it if Canada were able to provide some—

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: Yes, of course.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I know it’s difficult to give a figure like this, but given what you receive from other countries and so on, what would be an ideal contribution from Canada?

● (0935)

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: I can give you some examples of what we have received. We have spent nearly \$400 million since the beginning of the conflict. On the assistance we have received, I can give you some countries. We had a list of needs, such as tents or blankets, or some relevant material for them; or it could be monetary.

We received: from Norway, 10 million kroner; Croatia, \$50,000; Slovakia, 45,000 euros; Italy, some equipment; France, equipment; Saudi Arabia helped us build one of the camps housing 10,000 people; Belgium, 500,000 euros; UNHCR, UNICEF, and IOM have all provided something. These are just some examples of support for us from communities.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much.

If you have anything formal or in writing, I think it would be very interesting for us to see. If possible, perhaps that could be provided to the committee.

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: I can send it by e-mail to Ms. Burke. We actually have a document asking for international help, listing the things we can use.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I think it would be very helpful for the committee to have that.

Very briefly—I think I have very little time left—what will be the impact of the winter that is now coming? It will probably have a very negative impact on the refugees in neighbouring countries, in particular Turkey, and also the internally displaced people.

How do you see the situation?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: Within Turkey, I know that the camps are equipped for winter, but they may end up having more people trying to find refuge in Turkey as winter comes.

The camps are very well equipped. They are open to visits from foreigners, from media. A lot of people have been there. Within Turkey, there won’t be a problem. It’s 101,000 now, and two more camps will be built. The number of people who could seek refuge in Turkey will increase.

But yes, you are right; it may affect internally displaced persons within Syria that winter is coming.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That’s all the time we have.

Mr. Van Kesteren, you’ll have the last question in this five-minute round. We’ll probably wrap it up right after that.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for coming this morning.

I’m privileged to be the chairperson of the Canada-Turkey Friendship Group.

This is something that we all are very concerned about. We are going to have a reception with the Turkish diaspora next Monday night, I think. I know that will be the topic of discussion.

One of the reasons I took this job—and I know that those who have come into the parliamentary association will agree—is that we recognize the importance of Turkey. Turkey has a leadership that I don’t think can be matched by any other of the Islamic nations in the area. It has demonstrated good leadership for the most part.

I’m curious. You mentioned that Armenia had sent over a shipload...and we’re all encouraged to hear that. What leadership role is Turkey taking with the Arab League? There must be, within that league, frustration at seeing this turmoil and strife in Syria. What position of leadership have they taken, and are the other Arab League nations looking to Turkey to broker some type of peace or reconciliation in that area?

● (0940)

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: We are participating very actively within the Arab League to find a solution in Syria. But the Arab League itself was quite active also. They held this conference for the opposition, which helped the opposition to be more organized and gain more self-confidence. There are a lot of factions within the opposition. The conference was also helpful in alleviating extremist points that might weaken the opposition, and Turkey was active in that effort.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: I'm thinking of the Arab Spring. We all recognize that what's happening in Syria is a continuation of that. Turkey was the first to adopt democracy and has done a marvellous job in the past and the present of demonstrating that it's attainable, and it's something that other countries in the area want as well.

Those other countries that have gone through this strife in the last few years, have they come together with Turkey and sought Turkey's leadership in brokering peace, or is Turkey doing it on its own?

Mrs. Gulcan Akoguz: We will be celebrating the 89th year of our republic next week. We were the only democracy in the region, together with Israel. When the Arab Spring began, Turkey sent messages...and we had very close relations with Syria. Turkey sent messages that Syria should make reforms and listen to the will of the people. We offered help to all the countries in the region, including Syria. We had presidential, prime ministerial, and ministerial meetings with Syria. When the Arab Spring began and the opposition demonstrations began in Syria, we continued our talks with Syria. Turkey sent the message that there was a need for reform in the country, and that they should listen to what their own people wanted. There was communication up to a point. But as the violence of the Assad regime towards its own people continued, it was cut.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: You're right in pointing out that Turkey and Israel were the sole democratic parties in the region. You have a tremendous role to play, and we encourage you to continue in it.

Mr. Chair, I don't know if I still have time.

The Chair: No, you don't as a matter of fact. That was very good, right on time. I was just getting ready to cut you off, but you did it yourself. Thank you.

Madam Akoguz, thank you very much for being here today. We appreciate your time.

With that, I'm going to suspend the meeting so that we can switch our witnesses and bring out our next group.

Once again, thank you very much for taking the time to be here this morning.

• (0940) _____ (Pause) _____

• (0945)

The Chair: We'll have the members come back to the table, and then we'll get started on our second half.

I'd like to welcome Mariam Hamou, who is here today, as well as Faisal Alazem. We want to thank both of you for taking the time to talk to us about the situation in Syria. We realize you're from the diaspora here in Canada, so we're looking forward to hearing your perspective on what is happening.

I believe you both have opening statements.

Why don't we start with you, Mariam, if that's all right. Then we'll do questions after both of your opening statements. We'll turn it over to you, Mariam.

Ms. Mariam Hamou (As an Individual): Thanks for having me today.

I just want to give you a little bit of background on what's happening in Syria.

I'm going to start off with some statistics, and the statistics I'm going to read out to you are of documented people. These are people who have been identified, not people who are missing or who have not been identified. The statistics are a little bit skewed in that way.

As of yesterday morning, recorded by the Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria, there were 30,273 deaths. Deaths of children: there were 2,020 males and 848 females; and there were 26,383 civilian deaths.

I also want to talk a little bit about the detainees. The number of revolutionary detainees is 31,763 thus far. This might come as a surprise to you, but there are children who are also being detained by Syrian officials. The number of males is 768; females, 24.

The latest reports, according to Human Rights Watch, claim that Assad is using cluster bombs on his people. Furthermore, since this report has surfaced, Human Rights Watch in Syria claims that regime forces have revved up their use of cluster bombs and are using them in civilian areas only. On Monday, in six areas in four separate provinces, cluster bombs were used. The bombs, again, targeted only civilian areas, where none are controlled by the Free Syrian Army. Furthermore, the Syrian regime is fully accountable for the use of these internationally prohibited weapons, which seem to be systematically used in Syria. The regime is violating basic United Nations principles and laws.

Assad's offensives on his citizens are claiming on average 150 people a day. On October 17—that's yesterday—155 people were killed. On October 16, 133 people were killed. On October 15, 100 people were killed. You get the idea here, and this is just in the past few days. The latest report is that regime forces are using barrel bombs in civilian areas, specifically on schools, killing most of the children inside. The barrel bombs are, again, not in Free Syrian Army stronghold areas, but are targeting children specifically.

Torture has been reported in every city and town, and down to every family. I don't want to get into the chilling details of what goes on, but I'll share with you one story that just sends chills down my spine. Women are being systematically raped in Syria, not by one, two, or three of the militia men, but by many people. After the militia men are finished raping the victim, they insert a live mouse or rat in her vagina to destroy any sense of dignity that might have been left for this woman.

Children are not only dying by the hands of the regime's brutality, but by malnourishment, as food and water are becoming increasingly scarce. Food costs in Syria have gone up six times the price of what they were before the revolution. A loaf of bread is becoming increasingly unaffordable, and families are going without food at times. Babies are dying as mothers are not able to breastfeed them because of the lack of nutrition for the mothers, and the mothers have gone dry. There's no formula or clean water to prepare formula in some areas, mainly Homs. In many cases, it is a state of total disaster.

People's homes have been completely destroyed and entire streets, and in some cases cities are empty now because of the fighting—cities like Homs, Idlib, Zabadani, and Aleppo. Nothing at all is sacred. The regime destroys anything. UNESCO heritage sites, as some of you might know, have been destroyed in Assad's quest to remain the president of this country.

The images and stories are chilling and hard to forget, but they have become common for us who are involved in the revolution. My grandfather just got back from Syria two weeks ago. He's 90 years old. He and I sat and talked about some of the things that were going on in Syria, and both of us were crying like babies by the end of it. He's broken. It's actually difficult to see your grandfather like that, and to see him at the end of his days seeing a country that he loved so much being completely ruined. That's what's going on inside Syria.

● (0950)

I'll talk a little bit about what's happening on the ground in the refugee camps. According to the UNHCR, there are about 261,114 recognized refugees. The numbers within the refugee camps are fluid. Turkey has 96,000, Jordan has 58,000, Lebanon has 65,000, Iraq has 40,000 people. There are over 50,000 Syrians waiting at the borders to be admitted into other countries, but they cannot leave because they are undocumented.

Jordan's figures are not accurate because people are drifting in and out of the camps. In Lebanon the numbers aren't accurate because a lot of the bordering towns in Lebanon are absorbing a lot of refugees, so they're not accounted for. The number in Lebanon is closer to 100,000.

There are also makeshift refugee sites at the border of Jordan and Syria where 10,000 people live in absolute squalor. I saw a picture the other day of three little babies covered in flies, no diapers, shirts dirty, drinking God knows what, eating God knows what. It's hard to imagine. These people are not allowed to get through to Jordan as they're undocumented and don't have the proper papers to cross.

The most important objective at this point, and what the Turkish representative was speaking about before, is that the winter is coming. We're trying to get enough clothes and warm blankets for the people to survive the winter in the refugee camps. A lot of the American and Canadian groups who support the Syrian refugees are focusing on getting the blankets and warm clothing to the camps, but food is also very limited; it's scarce.

One very disappointing and horrible story that's coming out of the Zaatari camps in Jordan is that there are reports of young women being sold, young girls actually, for the equivalent of \$20 Canadian, to be wives for older men. This was happening online. It's incredible. It wasn't stopped early on, so a lot of girls were sold off. A lot of these girls don't have fathers, as they've died in the civil war and this war, or they were fighting.

Other refugees are going into Egypt. They're not, of course, recognized by the United Nations. There are no official refugee camps in Egypt, but there are people who are trying to absorb them as well.

I was speaking to a representative a couple of days ago and she says things are looking grim. People have come with very little

money, very little food, nothing, and are trying to get jobs in Egypt. In Egypt, a job is actually hard to come by to begin with. Supplies are short and winter is coming.

On the ground, between the militarization and peacefulness, the grassroots movements are still fighting for freedom, which started in the streets of Syria. This Syrian fight for freedom adds a new chapter to enrich the history of humanity, a unique chapter like no other, so colourful with slogans of freedom and dignity, and these are the people who are protesting on the ground. With all of this, you still have people going out and protesting for their freedom.

For the past 19 months, Syrians continue to take to the streets, despite the desperate attempts of the regime to crush and repress these peaceful demonstrations by shelling civilians with its warplanes. But Syrians insist on continuing their eternal fight for freedom and survival, to build a future full of hope and victory, to say tomorrow is ours, through 405 demonstrations that the local coordinating committee documented last Friday, on October 12.

With all of what we've heard, the people of Syria are still fighting for their freedom, and we need to help them get there.

I'm going to stop now and defer to Faisal at this point. If there is any more time, I can finish what I want to say.

● (0955)

The Chair: Thank you very much for your testimony.

We're going to turn it over now to Mr. Alazem.

Mr. Faisal Alazem (Spokesperson, Syrian Canadian Council): Thank you, everyone.

I think Mariam really gave a description of what's happening in Syria and the horror. I'm going to concentrate more on what we can do. I think everyone has been touched by what they heard, and there's a lot we can do in Canada.

First, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in front of your committee about the situation in my country of origin, Syria. The Syrian revolution was started by young people like myself, young people who dream of freedom and democracy, of universal rights for all Syrians regardless of ethnicity, religion, or gender, where Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Jews, Kurds, and all others live in freedom and dignity.

Syrians are protesting for freedom—freedom of expression, free press, freedom to dissent. They are dreaming of an end to corruption and nepotism; they are dreaming of equal opportunities and a better standard of living for all, and, above all, dignity and justice. They simply dream of the things that we take for granted here in Canada.

Since the first Deraa protest in March of last year, Syria has been living through one of the worst government-sponsored terror campaigns the world has ever seen, supported by its regional and international allies—primarily Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah. Systematic crimes against humanity, war crimes, and, in some instances, sectarian cleansing have been committed in Syria. One example is the famous Houleh massacre that Foreign Affairs had written a press release about, where more than 100 people were killed and burned, 49 of them under the age of 10.

The Assad regime has unleashed all weapons of the state to crush the uprising, from secret prisons to the use of propaganda to the use of artillery, and, for the last couple of months, the use of jet fighters. In Homs, Aleppo, Deraa, Deir Ezzor, Idlib, and Damascus, jet fighters are bombing civilian neighbourhoods, using barrels of TNT and internationally prohibited cluster bombs.

Syrian hospitals have become detention and torture centres, which has been documented by Amnesty International, and injured protesters or even civilians caught in the crossfire have reportedly been kidnapped to security headquarters for interrogation and torture, and are often killed.

The inability of the international community to protect the Syrian people through a Security Council resolution should not be an excuse for inaction. More than ever, the international community needs to use the responsibility to protect norm, which we in Canada greatly contributed to, in order to protect Syrians. The responsibility to protect, driven by Canada, was specifically created for situations like this, when the Security Council is unable or unwilling to act.

The continuous barbaric campaign of the regime has pushed tens of thousands of soldiers to defect from the Syrian army and to resist the regime, and it has forced thousands of civilians to resort to arms to protect themselves and their families. While the freedom fighters have exhibited great courage and heroism, the lack of international support has opened the door for more radical elements. Out of the over 80,000 rebels fighting the regime, 2,000 to 3,000 have been identified as radicals today. While the number is marginal, it will, without a doubt, increase if the conflict drags on, given that the radical elements are the only ones actively willing to help the rebels and able to get the financial support to arm the resistance.

How can Canada help? Canada has a long tradition of responding to humanitarian catastrophes and has an important role to play in supporting the Syrian people, both domestically and regionally.

The international community cannot be neutralized by the Russian and Chinese veto at the United Nations Security Council while systematic, gross human rights abuses and crimes against humanity are being committed. It's time to bypass the UN Security Council in order to protect Syrian civilians, as was the case in Kosovo. In Kosovo's case, despite the fact that the UN Security Council was bypassed, Kofi Annan, the UN secretary-general at the time, said, "... there are times when the use of force may be legitimate in the pursuit of peace".

• (1000)

The establishment of a no-fly zone, given that daily MiG fighters are bombing civilians in Syria, and safe havens and humanitarian corridors to protect the displaced civilians, but also the army

defectors, is inevitable.... I stress army defectors because people don't have any idea of the price a defector pays in order to defect from the Syrian army. It is a death sentence to himself and to his family. If we, as an international community, do not protect or do not facilitate this process, this is going to drag on.

As long as the Assad regime feels it has the upper hand militarily in Syria, no concessions or transitions will be made. Thus, support of the freedom fighters and the local military councils of the Free Syrian Army are necessary to shift the balance of power and accelerate the end of a 42-year tyranny.

It is estimated that \$150 million is required per month to sustain a minimum standard of life for the 2.5 million displaced persons and refugees. Different organizations and agencies, such as the UNHCR, UNICEF, and the Red Cross, are providing humanitarian assistance and relief; however, they are still unable to meet the basic needs of Syrians.

The situation is especially bad in Jordan. At the Zaatari camp in Jordan, which Foreign Minister Baird visited, the Syrian refugees have described the camp, blasted by sandstorms daily, as a slow death. We encourage Canada to increase its humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees, and to those inside Syria. Canada has been hesitant to provide humanitarian aid inside Syria, where it is most needed. As an example, it withdrew \$2 million that was intended to finance field hospitals inside Syria and has provided aid to the Red Cross and the Red Crescent instead. Unfortunately, it has been widely documented, and it has been signalled to the Canadian government, that the Red Crescent inside Syria works closely with the regime. In fact, Abdul Rahman Attar, the head of the Red Crescent in Syria, has volunteered parts of his personal buildings as detention centres in Syria.

Domestically, many members of the Syrian Canadian community are worried about the fate of their families in Syria or those exiled out of Syria, and they therefore request that in keeping with Canada's long-standing tradition of concern for the displaced and persecuted, our Canadian government facilitate bringing their family members to join them in Canada. Many members of the Syrian Canadian community are concerned that no priority processing or family reunification program is in place to assist their families affected by the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Such measures were taken in 2007 for Iraq; they were taken for Algeria; and they were taken in 2010 for Haiti, after the earthquake. But until now it's quite surprising to us that no such program, no priority processing, has been done for Syrians, despite the humanitarian catastrophe.

The Syrian Canadian community is also hoping that Canada will admit a limited number of political refugees who face grave danger in Syria and in the surrounding countries, especially those with family members in Canada.

The Syrian regime has also been targeting university students for their participation and their demonstrations, and for simply having different political views. The regime has expelled activists from universities and prevented them from pursuing their education, and it has repeatedly attacked campuses or dormitories, firing tear gas and bullets, resulting in the killing of students and forcing them to drop out of university for fear of arrest.

The struggle in Syria might be prolonged, and these students deserve to resume their education. We therefore ask the Government of Canada to create scholarships directed toward Syrian students who were forced to leave their universities as a result of the conflict. The scholarships can support students in pursuing their education in Canada or in neighbouring countries like Lebanon or Jordan. I want to let you know that the U.S. and the European Union have created similar programs.

For the first time in the last 50 years, the interests of the Syrian people and those of the free world coincide. Please don't let this opportunity pass, for the sake of our values as Canadians, for the sake of the children of Syria, and for the sake of humanity.

Thank you.

● (1005)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to start our first round with Mr. Dewar, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, Chair.

It goes without saying that we offer enormous thanks to our witnesses. No one of us around this table knows what it's like. We can only try to understand, and it's very difficult. What you're going through is difficult personally, but the fact that you are so composed and focused on what we can do is an enormous help for us.

I think one of the things we had wanted to do is hear from you directly. There had been some talk about having a debate in the House of Commons. Frankly, I felt it was better to hear from you at committee. We need information that's lacking. We can read from the media, but what you've done today is inform us as parliamentarians on all sides, so thank you.

I think what you've noted is the personal as well as the political piece. On the personal side, it's very hard to comprehend what you're saying, Mariam. You talk about destruction of historic sites, but it seems to be a destruction of humanity that's going on in slow motion. To have places of care being used as places of torture, as you've mentioned, Faisal, is really difficult to understand.

You have pointed to the things that can be done, and that's where I certainly want to focus. I'm just saying this right now; I haven't talked to anyone around this table about it. I hope that as a committee we can perhaps put forward a motion as a group to talk about what can be done, and maybe put that forward to the government. Wouldn't that be something? I'll leave that to others to consider.

The things you've mentioned I think are doable. We've heard from our first witnesses that we can help support further what's going on in Turkey, for instance, to help the refugees. Clearly, they need help.

We can help with fast-tracking those who have family here. That has been done in the past. We can support students.

I think everyone has been taken with the Arab Spring, but it's one thing to say and another thing to do. If others are doing it, why not Canada? Those are things that maybe this committee can consider as a motion to put forward.

I'm not going to table that now. I'm not trying to play games here. I really want to see if this committee can give voice to what the witnesses have given voice to.

Mariam, what sources are you using for the horrific witness statements you've provided us? We've been focused here at this committee in the past particularly on rape as a weapon of war. Where are you hearing these stories, and how have they been documented?

● (1010)

Ms. Mariam Hamou: I've been speaking to the local coordination committees. These are cases they documented. They are a council inside Syria that organizes the protests but also identifies bodies. They document that, and they also document all the atrocities that are happening.

Mr. Paul Dewar: So obviously this is on the record, in terms of what they're doing and sharing with you.

Ms. Mariam Hamou: Yes, absolutely, this is all on the record.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I think it would be important to share this with government in any way we can. They'd want to have that as well, if you haven't done so already.

Ms. Mariam Hamou: Yes, absolutely, I will give you all the sources.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

Faisal, I think your comments about Canada's role in the past and the things we can do.... I'm curious as to what you've seen other countries do. What's the most important thing for Canada to do right now?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: We can start with the easy stuff, which is what we can do domestically. As I told you, the family reunification program is extremely important. I can't tell you the amount of anxiety and stress that Syrians are going through.

As you probably know, and I have said in my testimony, when a Syrian plane is bombarding a neighbourhood, it is not distinguishing between whether you are pro-regime or you're in opposition or you're just crossing the street randomly. Living in Syria right now is almost a death sentence in specific areas, like Idlib and Aleppo, at least, and even in the suburbs of Damascus.

This is really something that Canada has done in the past, it's easy, it's not a big deal, and we would be proud, actually, as Canadians, to do that.

Something else that Canada would be proud of is humanitarian. We have 2.5 million displaced Syrians, approximately 500,000 refugees. The numbers are 350,000, but it's much higher than that. If you look at the conditions at the Zaatari camp in Jordan, when they are interviewing the refugees...they are asking them, "Please, let us return to our country. We'd rather die in dignity." This is how bad it is.

There is definitely a need. Let's say Canada is involved in contributing \$2 million. This is one day. This is one day to sustain 2.5 million of the displaced and refugees.

We really need to focus as well, outside of just giving money, on programs. For example, I was speaking to activists on the Turkish-Syrian border, and they working on a machine to create bread, to actually make people work and at the same time provide bread. We can help so many different projects, and we can bring them to you to finance. So it's not just related to money; it's actually to sustain these people.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I'd reiterate what I said before, and look to this committee to pass a motion to at least call on government to increase its support through the two areas that were noted, and that's immigration fast-tracking and humanitarian support for those people in the camps on the borders.

Maybe we'll talk about that later.

Thank you.

•(1015)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dewar.

We're going to move over to Mr. Dechert, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Hamou and Mr. Alazem, for being here.

I think all Canadians are very concerned about what's been happening in Syria over the last year and a half and are wondering what can be done.

I just want to clarify. Have either of you been in Syria recently?

Ms. Mariam Hamou: No.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Okay.

I think, Ms. Hamou, you mentioned your grandfather was there recently. He has come out.

Ms. Mariam Hamou: He's just come out.

Mr. Bob Dechert: How did he come out? Through a refugee camp?

Ms. Mariam Hamou: No, he's a Canadian citizen.

Mr. Bob Dechert: I see.

Ms. Mariam Hamou: But he's 90, so he wanted to die in Syria. We convinced him to come home. If he stayed there, he'd probably

Mr. Bob Dechert: He was there and he came back.

Ms. Mariam Hamou: Yes. He came back.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Okay. I'm just wondering what you've seen first-hand.

The question I want to explore with Mr. Alazem is what the condition is with respect to the Syrian opposition. Is it one cohesive force? Is it a number of different groups? Who should the international community be dealing with in terms of the opposition to Assad? Who's the group that represents the largest of the freedom fighters in Syria?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: First, it's important to distinguish between political opposition and what's happening on the ground from non-violent activists, local coordination committees, and the rebels, who have been dubbed the Free Syrian Army. For sure, the rebels who are fighting have been fighting in a quite decentralized way for a very long time. But the good news is that we are seeing that they are more and more cohesive. Actually, right now there is a project, and Burhan Ghalioun and others in the Syrian National Council and other political and Syrian opposition figures have been working on this project to unify. This project has been dubbed the Syrian National Army, to try to unify all these forces on the ground and try to get the financing and the support to fighters who we can trust.

As I said, the fear we have is that when we don't support these fighters, we open the door for radicals. The fear is that with time the fighters, by convenience, might get to a point where they would want to ally themselves with these radicals because no one else is helping, especially if they are able to bring money as well.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Is there, in your view, a credible alternative government? Is there a group that could form a government in Syria today if Assad were to go?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: It's been highly documented that the Syrian opposition have difficulties unifying. At the same time, we are in a democratic, free country, and I don't think everyone here is unified. We have an opposition and we have—

Mr. Bob Dechert: Fair enough. I'm just trying to get a handle on who speaks for the Syrian people who are opposing Assad.

Mr. Faisal Alazem: I think the big problem we have is that inside Syria we have so many groups, and we have a strong opposition, but they are not in the media. They haven't been heard about.

As you know, opposing the regime inside Syria is either a death sentence or you're thrown in jail. Outside Syria, I can tell you that the Syrian National Council right now, which is actually going through restructuring, has a meeting in Doha at the beginning of November. It has been one of the biggest umbrella opposition groups in Syria. You have others as well. Michel Kilo and Haytham Manna are opposition figures as well.

Mr. Bob Dechert: In your comments, you talked about non-Syrian actors who are involved in the fight in Syria. You mentioned Iran. You mentioned Hezbollah. Are there non-Syrian fighters in Syria fighting for Assad against the Syrian people? Second, does that, in your view, change the nature of the conflict?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: I think for us in Syria it's no surprise. We know that it's not the people who are dealing with the dictatorship. We know that there are multiple layers in this geopolitical game. We know that we're fighting Iran. We're fighting Russia and whatever other players there are in this region. Last week, fighters from Hezbollah were killed in al-Qusayr.

•(1020)

Mr. Bob Dechert: They were from Lebanon, right?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: They were from Lebanon, exactly. Hezbollah fighters have been killed in Syria.

Interestingly, Iranian Revolutionary Guards were caught in Damascus. When they were asked what they were doing there, they said that yes, they were Revolutionary Guards. But when Iranian foreign affairs spoke about it, they said they were tourists in Damascus. This is quite interesting, people who are tourists right now in Syria.

Definitely, Iran is playing a huge role. I can tell you that my e-mail account was hacked from Iran.

Mr. Bob Dechert: We know that Iran is funding fighters there. What, in your view, would happen if the international community tried to enforce a no-fly zone in Syria? What, in your opinion, would Iran do if the international community tried to suppress Assad's air force?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: We are giving Iran and even Russia, in my opinion, a bigger role than what they actually have. I'm absolutely certain that if a no-fly zone were imposed in Syria, and if safe havens.... And by the way, there are liberated areas in Syria.

Mr. Bob Dechert: They are along the border.

Mr. Faisal Alazem: Abdulbaset Sieda, the head of the SNC, and Burhan Ghalioun have entered Syria, and there are liberated areas. Hillary Clinton has even said, give us a liberated area and we'll protect it.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Where are those? Can you just tell us quickly?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: For example, they are on the border of Turkey and Syria, near Kilis and Idlib. As well, 60% of Aleppo is under the control of rebels. The problem is that whenever you liberate an area, and then you have jet fighters bombing you from the sky, it's hard to maintain.

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have.

We're going to move to the last question of this first round.

Mr. Eyking, you have seven minutes, please.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for coming.

Mariam, that was a very good, but shocking, presentation. It's terrible to hear. I just hope that all foreign affairs committees around the world hear that, because a lot of times we don't really know what's going on, on the ground. I commend you for that.

Faisal, has your Syrian Canadian Council ever asked for a meeting with the foreign affairs minister?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: I've met him myself, and we met him with Father Paolo, if you've heard of him. He's an Italian priest who was in Syria and was kicked out for criticizing the regime. We met with the foreign affairs minister, John Baird, approximately two months ago.

Hon. Mark Eyking: It's interesting how you alluded to the fact that many of these other countries are in a position similar to our own, in terms of our economy or our situation, and it's probably

European countries and other countries like them that are stepping up to the plate quite a bit better than we are and doing more than we are. There were already allusions made to different things, whether it's scholarships or dealing with political refugees or family reunification.

Is Mr. Baird moving towards moving on some of these things, or do we have to do them through a motion? What's the sense on this?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: To be honest with you, we gave the foreign minister a study on how Canada can support Syria. There were different ideas, different projects; even telecommunications were involved, actually. For example, one idea was to buy...activists could film what's happening. There was help to better coordinate scholarships, and even family reunification. These have already been mentioned to the Government of Canada.

We've warned as well about the Red Crescent. We put forward a project to the foreign minister. It's to finance field hospitals inside Syria, and it was extremely close to our heart because we know what happens in Syrian hospitals. We know that when you are detained there and you come in with a bullet wound or you have blood on you, almost certainly you will be detained or killed. So the field hospital project was very important. Initially the government gave \$2 million to finance this project, but to our surprise—and we heard it in the media—the \$2 million was withdrawn and was given to the Red Cross and Red Crescent. As I said in my testimony, the Red Crescent in Syria does not make a move without a green light from the regime.

•(1025)

Hon. Mark Eyking: That's shocking. We heard how CIDA cut that money, and it wasn't a lot of money. It's not only shocking that they've stopped making these field hospitals, but that the money's going to the wrong area. It's almost counterproductive to what we're doing. Can you tell us a little bit more about these field hospitals and who is putting them together, and about the project and the impact, as well as about the impact the Conservative government is having on these field hospitals not being there by not giving the money?

Ms. Lois Brown: A point of order. It's not that CIDA withdrew the money; the money was given—

Hon. Mark Eyking: It's my time—

The Chair: That's not a point of order. We can have clarification afterwards.

Mr. Eyking.

Mr. Faisal Alazem: That project is being driven by an organization called the Union of Syrian Medical Relief Organizations. It's based in Paris. It's registered in Paris, and the French Government has even given it funding. So far they have created 25 field hospitals inside Syria.

One of the main drivers from Canada is a doctor called Dr. Anas Al-Kassem, who lives in Oakville. He has been inside Syria. I think he still is. I saw a communication from him. He was the first doctor from Canada to let Doctors Without Borders into Syria. Doctors Without Borders didn't want to say officially that they were operating inside Syria, and he got them inside these field hospitals. We're still hoping actually that we will get financing for this project, because it's very dear to our hearts and it is making a difference.

Hon. Mark Eyking: It's not too late for the Canadian government to say, "Look, that money could still be used to build these hospitals. It could be a really good win-win for Canadians and the Syrian people to help build these hospitals."

You were talking about that doctor in Oakville. He could help facilitate this.

Mr. Faisal Alazem: Absolutely. He's been in communication with the government, and our communication was that it's sad that Syrians would have to pay a price for maybe political conflicts inside Canada. I don't know why this money was shifted to another area, but the price is that people are getting killed.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Do I have any more time?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Hon. Mark Eyking: I'd like to ask a bit about the Syrian population in Canada, the diaspora. They must be watching this really closely. As you mentioned, you and your grandfather are here. What are they expecting from us as Canadians, besides funding for the hospitals? What more are they expecting us as the Canadian government to do? Is it intervening internationally or...? What would their number one or two priorities for us really be for the next few months?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: As I said, domestically, what we can work on is the family reunification, the scholarships, the humanitarian side. If we are able to make, in the short term, the rebel fighters or the freedom fighters in Syria more coherent and support them...by the way, it shouldn't only be arms; it could be telecom equipment, intelligence information, There are different ways.

I don't think it's news to you that Iran and Russia are running the show in Syria. You had the Turkish speaker. The Turkish plane that fell on the coast of Syria...it's no surprise to anyone in Syria that the Russians were involved in that operation.

Hon. Mark Eyking: I spent some time in Damascus; I was in Syria a few years ago. It seemed to me very similar to being in Cuba. Everything is kind of held back—the vehicles are older.

For Syrian Canadian citizens, how is the communication? Can they communicate? Can they phone? Is the Internet available? How are they communicating with their loved ones and their relatives back and forth?

The Chair: That's all the time, but I'll let you answer the question.

Mr. Faisal Alazem: Facebook is incredible. For many of us it seems to be an entertainment application or platform. In Syria it's a coordination platform and a revolution tool. It was banned in Syria, but they opened it after the Deraa protest, because they thought to themselves, we can do surveillance better and we can know who's with us and who's against us. Facebook, although being watched by the government, is being widely used. Depending on how things are

happening in a city, they cut communication. For example, in Aleppo for a while the Internet was cut, and telephone lines as well, and in Deraa in the beginning.

We can use Skype or the phone. I have an interesting story. I was speaking to my parents once in Damascus and I could tell there was someone listening on the other line. I told him I knew he was listening, and he identified himself. It's incredible.

● (1030)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to start our last round with Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown: I'm going to make that point of clarification, Mr. Chair, if I may. The \$2.5 million that was given was to ensure that medical supplies and clean water and sanitation were provided. Unfortunately, after further investigation it appeared that the dollars were going to be spent on infrastructure. That's why the dollars were redirected to the International Committee of the Red Cross to be used for medical supplies. It's not that the money was withdrawn.

Now, Mr. Van Kesteren.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for coming. It is very troubling what we're hearing. As Mr. Dewar said, I don't think there's anybody here that isn't touched by your testimony.

I want you to recognize that Canada has sent more money per capita than the U.S. I think we're a little bit frustrated to some degree. I also want to mention something about the Red Cross/Red Crescent. They were here at our last meeting, and they tell us that they're apolitical. We sent them \$12 million. Are you suggesting that we should withhold funding from the Red Cross/Red Crescent? Do you think we should do that?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: I think the Red Cross is good to finance and support in the refugee camps, specifically in Turkey. The Red Cross does not operate inside Syria; the Red Crescent is operating inside Syria.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: That's going to be very difficult, of course, if we say, listen, we want you to spend your money here, but don't spend your money there. The question is, should we stop that aid? That \$12 million we sent, should we put a stop to that and say we're not going to support this any more?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: I think we can target what we want to fund and what we want to finance, ideally, as Canadians and as Syrians living in Canada. I'm sure everyone in this room—many of us are of Syrian origin—is touched. It affects all of us. We would have loved to finance the field hospitals inside Syria and whatever efforts there are to support the refugees in Jordan and Turkey.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: It's very difficult; I think we can agree with that. It's a touchy situation.

I want to ask you about the diaspora. What are they doing? Is it organized? Are they fundraising? Can you tell the committee about that?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: Do you want to take it, Mariam?

Ms. Mariam Hamou: Sure. The diaspora is organized under the Syrian Canadian Council. Their main goal I think is to collect money for blankets, for food, for clothing to go into the camps outside of Syria. Inside of Syria—again, it's very hard to get anything inside without having connections with the Assad government, so it's very hard to get anything in there, whether it's money.... You know, we try to get money in there, but there are just no guarantees that it's not going to be pilfered at the top.

It is organized. In terms of politically and media-based, it isn't organized, but it is for collecting money.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: Do you have any idea how much money they've raised?

Ms. Mariam Hamou: I can't tell you that amount for a couple of reasons. A lot of times they're collecting blankets and clothing, and they send containers over.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: So they're doing it more on their own, and it's not organized. I can understand that.

Ms. Mariam Hamou: Exactly, yes. Money-wise, it's very difficult.

If you go through different cities, I think they've raised probably around \$200,000 or \$300,000 in the last year.

Mr. Faisal Alazem: From my information, at least from the different cities, I think the number is close to \$2 million, actually.

• (1035)

Ms. Mariam Hamou: Oh, \$2 million in cash.

Mr. Faisal Alazem: Yes, \$2 million was raised and I think transferred via Jordan. This is not just Montreal. I'm speaking coast to coast, from Vancouver to Montreal.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: Just very quickly, here's the situation. I just want you to think about these things. We had the representatives from the Republic of Turkey in here. The fact remains, and I think we all agree with this, that democracy is the key—true democracy, where rights of property, rights of religion, and rights of expression are things that are fundamental. The problem is that when you suggest we support rebels, I think most Canadians are thinking, "Gee, I don't know if I want to do that, because what's going to come?"

We've seen that play out before in the Arab Spring as well. We all hoped for the very things you bring to this table, but the end result was something completely different.

I would suggest too that has to be the focus; democracy has to be the underlining fact that has to come out of it. I would suggest and encourage you to look to Turkey, too, and encourage Turkey to continue a lot of—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Kesteren. That's all the time we have.

We're going to finish up with Madame Laverdière, and then we have to go in camera for about five minutes to talk about future business. I'm going to ask Madame Laverdière to finish off for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank the witnesses. Your remarks were both moving and very interesting. You have given us food for thought.

Faisal said that the lack of support for the armed resistance on the ground has made it possible for more radical groups to emerge, which is why people on the ground should receive support. Generally speaking, we all agree that providing weapons to Syria is not necessarily the solution. That is our position.

What are the other solutions? We have talked about them on more than one occasion, but I would like us to review the facts. What else can we do to support the Free Syrian Army?

Mr. Faisal Alazem: Thank you. I am going to answer to both, since the questions are somewhat connected.

In light of what is happening in Syria, we feel that the solution will inevitably involve force. Anyone who is even a little familiar with the politics and the geopolitics in that region—be it the Gadhafi regime, the Saddam regime or any other dictator's regime—knows that those regimes do not believe in political transitions. They have been around for decades. Just think, we are the first hereditary republic in the history of the world. The one after us is North Korea.

It is not realistic to hope that the Assad regime will step down because of missions like those of Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi. The only way it will happen is if there is a shift in Syria's balance of power. There are two ways to do that: either through an intervention, like in Kosovo, or on the ground, on Syrian territory, by tilting the balance of power. One way to achieve this is to support the freedom fighters.

I can tell you that the revolution in Syria was not violent for the first six or seven months, but the regime did everything in its power to turn it into an armed revolution. It specifically targeted non-violent activists like Ghayath Matar in Darayya. He was nicknamed "Little Gandhi". He gave water and roses to Syrian military officers. Of course, the activists on the list were targeted and, after they were tortured and their throats slit, they were taken back to their parents. The regime did everything it could to militarize this conflict.

Unfortunately, the only way to end this regime and to make Syria's transition to democracy possible is through force. We have no doubt about that.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much. I want to also thank our witnesses for being here today.

It's obviously very sensitive and very touching testimony. We appreciate your taking the time to be here.

Yes, Mr. Dewar.

•(1040)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Chair, I just want to ask if there is any opening from government to consider a motion.

Mr. Bob Dechert: We'll have to consider that.

The Chair: What I want to talk about in camera is what we're doing here. These are all the witnesses we have, but I want to discuss timing.

Thank you all, once again.

I'm going to suspend for about one minute to clear the room and get us in camera to talk about future business.

Thank you very much.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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