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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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•(1535)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP)): Colleagues, we are going to get started. This afternoon we are going to follow up on our study pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the situation in Syria.

I'm delighted to be inviting our two witnesses from Washington, who will be providing testimony for the first hour. In the second hour we'll be hearing from some other witnesses. I'm delighted to be welcoming Ameenah Sawan and Heba Sawan who will provide us with their testimony.

We'll be giving you about 10 minutes each for your testimony. Then we're going to have members of our committee pose questions.

I welcome our guests. Please, the floor is yours.

Ms. Heba Sawan (Teacher and Student, National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces): Hello, everybody. Thank you for listening to our stories.

My name is Heba Sawan. I'm 24 years old. I studied English literature at Damascus University. I come from a small town called Moadamiyeh al-Sham. It's a Damascus suburb, just 15 minutes to the downtown. My town is surrounded by a lot of military forces, the military airport, and there's the 4th division, the famous 4th division.

The town joined the revolution at the very beginning of the revolution. It started with a non-violent resistance movement. It was all peaceful. I came also from a revolutionary family. My dad has all the time encouraged me to join the revolution, to do what I have to do for my country. I have a very good relationship with my dad.

In 2011, I was arrested in Damascus for three days by the security forces after a peaceful demonstration. The regime started killing people and doing atrocities in my town. At that time we weren't able to take the injured people to the hospitals, so we had to learn how to be nurses. We had to take courses at the Red Crescent and from some pro-revolution doctors.

At that time, my dad and I tried to help, and to help those injured people. At the end of 2011 my dad was arrested by the regime forces. He is still detained now, and we don't know anything about him. After he was detained, we continued our way.

Moadamiyeh's sons and other people were forced to carry weapons and to defend themselves. After one year of peaceful demonstrations and peaceful movements, with the atrocities and brutalities that the regime committed in the town, its sons carried weapons to try to defend themselves and their people.

In 2012 the regime entered Moadamiyeh many times and committed many massacres. Every massacre was sadistic. Every religious holiday and festival, every day, they entered the town and committed some atrocities and massacres in Moadamiyeh.

The people in the FSA, the Free Syrian Army, decided they would not allow the regime to enter the town again, so they liberated the town in October 2012. After that, the regime wasn't able to enter the town or break in, so they started a new policy called "kneel or starve" or "surrender or starve". They blocked all the entrances to the city. No one was allowed to get into Moadamiyeh or to leave it. Also, food and medical supplies were prevented from entering the town.

At the beginning of 2013, I was engaged to my cousin. He was with the FSA, the Free Syrian Army, and I was a nurse at the medical field centre. January 25 was supposed to be our wedding day, but he died from the shelling. The next day I went to visit his grave, and the 4th division were also in the mountains. The graveyard was exposed to the 4th division. They shelled the graveyard and I was also injured.

•(1540)

I couldn't continue my job as a nurse. I stayed at home with my cousin Ameenah until I recovered. At that time, the suffering and the shelling every day were covering the whole face of the city. People were trying to survive. They planted every little area. They tried to find food, but they couldn't find anything. Some people tried to escape from the town, but the snipers were ready and killed everyone who tried to escape.

At that time, we started to work with kids, because for the kids, their childhood was stolen. Their whole environment was full of violence, bloodshed, and killing. In their minds, their dreams—everything—were destroyed. We tried to do some educational activities, some entertaining activities for them, because all the schools were being bombarded. There was no school in Moadamiyeh. There was also no electricity, so there was no TV, and they weren't allowed to play in the streets.

We did a wonderful job with them. We tried to help them survive, to keep them busy, until August 21, when the chemical attack happened. My cousin Ameenah will tell you more about that day. After that day, when 82 people died, we had to continue our lives. We had to survive, but the suffering was stronger than we were.

You would wake up in the morning hearing the sounds and the crying of the kids. They wanted something to eat. At night you couldn't go to sleep early also because of their cries. Pregnant women were giving birth to dead babies. We witnessed a lot of mothers cooking only water with spices and salt and feeding it to their kids as soup.

Also, you might hear a knock on your door, and when you opened the door, you would find a little kid holding a plate and asking for something to eat. At that time, you would have that difficult struggle and that conflict inside yourself. If you had something, some food, and you wanted to give it to that kid, you would deprive yourself and your family of that amount of food, but then you would close the door with your heart broken.

We had a lot of suffering there. People started dying. More than nine people in my town died of hunger. More than 1,500 were killed by the mortar shells, by the shelling.

In the middle of October 2013, and in a filthy game, the regime opened a way to those people who he himself was besieging, who he himself was killing and detaining. He opened a way and allowed only the women and the children to leave the town in order to portray himself as a hero, as a saviour for those people who were kidnapped and held like hostages by the terrorists, which is not true. At that time, the media and the whole world were watching this operation of evacuation so he couldn't arrest any of us, but the regime humiliated us a lot and they forced us to chant to Bashar al-Assad. I can't forget that day.

● (1545)

After that, the regime and his forces tried to capture and to detain all the activists who were in the town. They arrested some of our friends and our family members in order to reach us, so we realized that we had to leave the town. We had to leave the country. We fled to Lebanon illegally and then to Istanbul. Then we had this chance to come to America and tell our stories to these people.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Ameenah, you were going to provide us with testimony. Thank you.

Ms. Ameenah Sawan (Teacher and Student, National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces): Good afternoon, everybody.

I am Ameenah Sawan, from Moadamiyeh al-Sham, a city in the eastern part of the Damascus suburbs. I am 23 years old. I left college in 2011 at the beginning of the revolution. I was a student at Damascus University, the department of translation.

My city was involved in the revolution from the very beginning. The regime tried to kill and end the revolution. They massacred many in my city, including a few executions. They slaughtered people, burned bodies, and did whatever you could imagine. That was going on with support from the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iran Revolutionary Guards.

In November 2012, the Free Syrian Army liberated my city because we couldn't handle the fact that the regime was going to enter the city again and do another massacre in it. The regime started

using the helicopter and the MiG airplane to shell the city with more shells because they couldn't enter it.

Tasneem Juma'a is a kid from Moadamiyeh and she is six years old. On January 2, 2013, she was sitting in her house with her family. They were really afraid but they didn't know that the airplanes they heard in the sky were going to hit their house, which had two floors. The MiG airplanes hit their place and ruined it. She lost her parents, her five sisters, and her brother, Mahmood.

People tried to take them out of the ruins, but the regime also hit the same place with ground-to-ground missiles and 35 people were killed. That included her family and the people who were trying to help. Then we witnessed many massacres because of the shelling.

The 4th division shelled Moadamiyeh and some part of the Damascus suburbs. It's a part of Moadamiyeh on a mountain and Moadamiyeh is on the hillside.

As Heba said, we were trying to do some psychosocial support activities for the kids in 2013 in some basements during the shelling. We were living under siege and we couldn't feed those kids. We thought we could sing with them and let them forget they were living under shelling and that they were hungry and afraid and missing their schools.

Every day whenever the kids in Moadamiyeh went to bed, they had innocent dreams maybe about a small piece of chocolate, maybe chefs, maybe teddy bears, maybe going on a trip peacefully with their family outside the siege.

On August 21, 2013, many kids of Moadamiyeh slept, dreaming as usual, but they didn't wake up because Bashar al-Assad hit my city with a chemical weapon. Eighty-two civilians were killed that day and 400 people were injured. That day I rushed with Heba to the field hospital and the situation was crazy. People were suffocating in the street, having spasms, rushing, and when we reached the field hospital, they were putting the dead bodies and the injured people on the floor on both sides of the street. They hosed their bodies with water. That day we witnessed the most severe shelling on our city.

● (1550)

The MiG airplane made 19 shots on the city. They hit the city with ground-to-ground missiles and hundreds of mortar shells. They were trying to break in at all the entrances. Maybe they thought since they hit us with a chemical weapon and we were now busy with the dead people and injured people and many of the people who were trying to help were dizzy, that they could enter the city and slaughter the others and in the revolution in Moadamiyeh, but with God's mercy, they couldn't.

At 11 a.m. many of the medical staff in the field hospital—it's a 300-metre basement, not a hospital. It's just a place where you are trying to help people. You can't even call it a hospital. One of the doctors was feeling dizzy. I was standing next to him. He was holding a baby. That baby was about 10 months old. He said, "Ameenah, hold this baby." I took the baby and rushed around the room trying to wake him up and do CPR on him.

We couldn't find anything to help the people injured by sarin gas, except snuggling them in blankets, putting some vinegar on their noses, trying to do CPR, and washing their bodies and faces with water. That's it. I rushed to the room, and tried to do CPR on that kid, but he didn't respond. I tried to put some vinegar on his nose. Then he rushed into the room, and said, "Ameenah, what are you doing? That kid is already dead." I said, "We have to try. We have to do something." He said, "All his family was killed. Why do you want to wake him up? He went to a better place where he could find justice. He went with his family".

That day we lost touch with my brother's family: my brother, his wife, and their three kids. In the middle of the day we found out they were fine. They were hidden in some basement on the next street. I was really afraid when I saw their neighbours coming with dead people and injured people.

Also, the field hospital was full of dead people, so we had to move some of them to the house next door. We moved 43 dead people to that house. They were already dead. That wasn't enough for the regime, so it hit that place with five mortar shells. They were already dead. It thought the Syrian people didn't even deserve a decent death so it killed them twice.

Seven days later, the same brother who survived the chemical attack with his family was planting to defeat the siege, planting some eggplant, lettuce, just some little things. You can't even feed yourself. You are feeling hungry.

My brother and his wife were dreamers. They had dreams. At that moment my brother was standing with his wife while his three kids were playing around, and a mortar shell fell on the building in front of them. The shrapnel killed my brother, his wife, and his son Ahmed, who was seven years old. They had survived the chemical attack day through a miracle.

Assad has all kinds of weapons. If he couldn't kill us with this weapon, he could kill us with the other weapon. The international world was asking us if we felt safe when they told us Assad was handling chemical weapons. I said no, because you see, one example is my brother and his family, but we have hundreds and thousands of examples. Our problem is not totally with the chemical weapons.

• (1555)

I don't know what the problem is. Areas, like Moadamiyeh, have been under siege for a year and a half and then they did the evacuation, but they didn't bring aid to Moadamiyeh.

Assad has hit many areas with chemical weapons. They asked them to hand over the chemical weapons and not to leave. They're not even thinking about solving the source of the problem.

The Syrian people have lost a lot, but they didn't lose hope.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you both.

At this point I'm going to turn this over to my colleagues who are going to ask you some questions. Thank you so much for your testimony and for really being able to voice a very traumatic and horrific experience.

I will turn it over to Madame Laverdière who will be asking you questions for the next seven minutes.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you very much, indeed, for your testimony which was very moving and troubling.

We are different political parties around this table, but I think we all share the fact that we care deeply about what's happening in Syria and to the Syrian people. We hope for peace for the people of Syria.

I was quite impressed, I have to say, by one of your last words which was the word "hope". I think it's important, and we must continue working and hearing testimony like yours.

I was also struck by all that you said about the work you did with children, both to fulfill their educational and psychological needs, as well as all the basic human needs. I was impressed by the work you've done with them.

I am wondering, because it's a preoccupation here also, what's happening to all the people in Syria, but particularly to the children. How can we help in this respect? How can Canada and the international community best help with respect to the children in Syria?

• (1600)

Ms. Heba Sawan: Children and all civilians in Syria are suffering a lot. They also lost all their basic needs. I guess what is required is serious pressure on the regime to allow the United Nations and humanitarian aid to get into the besieged city and to continue the educational process for the kids in order to provide all their needs. This is required from the whole world and from Canada.

It's about serious pressure because when the whole world decided that the regime has to hand over his chemical weapons, they couldn't force him to do that. Why couldn't they put the same pressure on him and force him to allow some humanitarian aid and the basic needs, educational needs as well, to be provided to the civilian people, especially kids? It's about serious pressure.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: We also know there are talks in Geneva. There are meetings and what we call head-to-head talks.

Ms. Heba Sawan: Delegations.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Yes. What do you think of this process? Do you see any hope of this process succeeding?

Ms. Heba Sawan: Actually, this process is the bloodiest peace talks ever. The international world didn't force the regime and the other parties to a ceasefire, and to allow humanitarian aid to get into a lot of places in Syria that are in a needy situation.

How can the Syrian people believe in these delegations which talk about peace and there is no peace in their land actually?

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Also, regarding this tendency to have a siege and basically starve people, we've seen some evacuations taking place from Homs. Do you think what's happening right now in Homs is a model that could be used elsewhere? What's your opinion on the situation there?

Ms. Heba Sawan: Of course not. We are not asking for those people to be evacuated from their homes. We want the aid, the humanitarian aid that is needed to get into their towns and their cities. That is not going to solve the problem at all. It may be increasing it.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: What is the current situation in your own home place? I understand women and children have been evacuated, but the men were left there. What's the current situation?

Ms. Heba Sawan: Actually, not all the people, not all the women and children were evacuated at that time. Now the regime is trying to force a kind of surrendering of those people. He's still holding the entrances to the city and he's still holding the food, so he's forcing them to stop the fire and the conflict with the regime, to hand over all their weapons, and to stop even any kind of peaceful revolutionary acts in the town. In return he allowed a small amount of food to get into my town every day, but that's not enough for a meal.

If they moved or if they did anything wrong and he didn't want it, as protest, as uprising, as demonstrations, he just stopped and reblocked the entrances and stopped allowing the food and the medical supplies into the city. It's a kind of force, forcing these places to surrender. He knows that he lost the legitimacy and he would not be able to convince those people that he is the leader of this town legally, but he is trying to force them to surrender and to make like a political victory, that he recontrols those places and those areas. Those places, those cities, when they regain the power and they stand on their feet again, they will return to their revolution, to their uprising.

• (1605)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you.

We're now going to turn our questions over to Mr. Anderson, who is with the government and is Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): I want to thank you for being with us today. As Ms. Laverdière said, we are of different political parties, but I think we all join together in appreciating your story and trying to determine how we can best work as Canadians and the Canadian government.

I want to thank you for your courage.

I'd like to begin at the present and work a little bit backwards. I'm just wondering, what is your future? What are you doing now, and what do you see in the near future and in the distant future in terms of your work?

Ms. Heba Sawan: Actually, now we're staying in Istanbul. We are preparing for some activities with the kids.

We are planning to go back to northern Syria. We know that the future is difficult. We know that there are obstacles in front of the Syrian people, the rebuilding of everything. The social environment,

the social texture in Syria is all divided and destroyed. We know that it's more difficult for us, but we still have hope. We still have the will to continue. It's as if we're running in a tunnel, in darkness. We know that at the end of the tunnel there is a light, and there is a piece that is trying to catch us and eat us, so we have to continue our running until we get to the end of this tunnel.

Mr. David Anderson: We need encouragement from those people around us, and you had talked about your father and the values that he has given you. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about those values. What are the values that he has given you that have been most important to you?

Ms. Heba Sawan: Since I was a child, my dad has told me how this regime that holds the power in Syria perpetrated many atrocities and massacres in the eighties in Hama.

I personally have experience with the regime. When I tried to do some volunteer activities in Syria, the regime arrested some of my friends. I realized that I can't do anything to improve the situation in Syria and build the country that all Syrians dream about until the tumbling of this regime occurs.

My dad used to take me to the demonstrations by himself. My mother was afraid for me all the time. She kept talking to him and telling him that his daughter is taking a lot of risks. He always said to let her do what she has to do for her country. Although he was afraid for me also, he didn't stop me.

Mr. David Anderson: Ameenah, do you have anything to add to that concerning things that you feel are important or that you got from your family?

Ms. Ameenah Sawan: My brother, who was killed, as I mentioned, had three kids. Ahmad, who was seven years old, was killed with his parents, but we still have Fatima, who is eight years old, and Hanan, who is going to be two years old next Mother's Day.

You can't imagine how powerful those kids are. Some people were telling us, "It's been three years. You left your college. You guys lost a lot. Don't you feel bored?" We will say, "If you ask Hanan and Fatima how they feel, you'll find the answer and the inspiration in their smiles."

• (1610)

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

Ms. Heba Sawan: I want to add that we want the people of Syria and the entire world to take back the rights of all these kids, to give them back their fathers' and mothers' blood. They need justice.

Mr. David Anderson: Let me ask you a question that I think is unrelated to what we've just been talking about. I want to talk to you about the communication of your message.

I wonder what avenues you have had to get your message out, including from inside the cities. All electronic communications are cut off, and you talked about the electricity being down and those kinds of things. What avenues do people have to communicate with the rest of the world, and how can we help with that communication?

Ms. Heba Sawan: Actually, we have a lot of difficulty communicating inside Syria, especially in the besieged area and in the revolutionary cities. As you said, electricity and communications, including the Internet, were cut off. We had a lot of difficulty finding oil and petrol to turn on the generators. We also used to have a lot of chargers in every house, so we tried to turn on the generators and tried to charge those chargers and batteries to help us continue our communication work for maybe two days.

Ms. Ameenah Sawan: The problem inside Syria is that many areas don't have satellite Internet. Sometimes the regime has cut off the Internet for the cities. It is trying to kill them silently. This is really a big problem. Sometimes we can't find out what's going on there.

Ms. Heba Sawan: We want communications, machines, and all that, but first you have to open the scene to allow those machines to enter these towns. We didn't die from hunger because we didn't have food; we have food outside the city, but we weren't allowed to get it in. That's also for the communications, the machines, and all that stuff.

Ms. Ameenah Sawan: We did a lot of communication things during the last three years, and the whole world has the main idea about what's going on in Syria, so that is not a problem.

Mr. David Anderson: What groups do you find most trustworthy, do you feel to be most helpful to you in your country?

Maybe my time is up.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): We're going to come back to that question in a minute perhaps.

We're now going to turn it over to Mr. Garneau, who's the spokesperson for one of the opposition parties, the Liberal Party.

Mr. Garneau.

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Thank you to both of you for speaking to us. Your testimony is very powerful.

We're trying to learn more about what is going on in Syria. We realize there are many different factions that are involved in the conflict in your country. I'd like to begin by asking you about the organization you represent, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. Could you tell us what the primary objective, as you see it, of your organization, of the coalition, is?

Ms. Heba Sawan: Actually, we are not representatives of the coalition. Maybe....

Mr. Jason Hunt (Officer, Government Affairs, National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces): I was just going to clarify for you, sir, that the coalition has helped fund their trip here and helped arrange some of these meetings, but they are not members of the coalition. They are speaking as citizens—

• (1615)

Ms. Heba Sawan: —and field activists.

Mr. Jason Hunt: —as field activists and as representatives of their local community.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Sir, could you just identify yourself.

Mr. Jason Hunt: I'm sorry. I failed to do that at the beginning. My name is Jason Hunt. I'm the government affairs officer for the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces in our representative office to the United States. I'm just helping with logistics. It's their testimony.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you very much for that clarification. Is it fair to ask you any questions about the coalition, or are you not familiar with that organization?

Ms. Heba Sawan: I'm sorry, we don't have that much information because we just left Syria three months ago. We were concentrating on our work on the ground.

Mr. Marc Garneau: All right, I'll try to redirect my questions.

There are many organizations and factions that are fighting in Syria and we see from the Geneva II talks that there is not necessarily a unity among the different forces. Do you have a sense of how much of the conflict in Syria is between different factions as opposed to being between the opposition forces and the Assad regime?

Ms. Heba Sawan: I don't think there's a division between the opposition forces. They are maybe not as united as we are longing for, but that doesn't give an excuse for what's going on in Syria for the world. They are all the time claiming that the opposition is not united enough and they are not working well, but that's not an excuse.

As you said, sir, in your Parliament, you have also different parties and this is also the Syrian opposition.

Ms. Ameenah Sawan: Everywhere we have different parties and different thinking, but our goal is the same. It's one goal.

Ms. Heba Sawan: Maybe on the ground the Syrian revolutionary people are fighting many groups, but all of them are against the regime. They are fighting the regime itself, and they are fighting the Iranian revolutionary guard and Hezbollah party, which are both classified by the international world as terrorists. Also, there's ISIS, the Islamic state in Iraq and al-Sham, which is the second face of the same coin of the regime. The Free Syrian Army in the north of Syria is fighting ISIS because of their terrorist activities and also because it is proven that the regime is buying their petrol and oil from ISIS. That proves they are just two faces of the same coin. The Free Syrian Army and moderate [*Inaudible—Editor*] are fighting terrorists and fighting many groups involved in terrorism.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Yes, one of the perceptions we have, reading the media information coming out of Syria, is that there are, how could I put this, more radical groups such as al-Nusra that are not necessarily working side-by-side with the Free Syrian Army to overthrow the Assad regime. In some cases there have even been suggestions that they have fought with each other. What is your perception of that?

Ms. Heba Sawan: Actually, those groups wouldn't be able to get into Syria without the regime first allowing it. The international world didn't support the Free Syrian Army from the beginning. When the international world supports the Free Syrian Army, that would weaken and reduce the power of al-Qaeda and al-Nusra automatically.

Mr. Marc Garneau: I have one last question. We hear there are millions of Syrians who have been displaced not only outside the country and have ended up in places like Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan, but also many have moved internally.

Can you speak a little bit about those who have had to leave their homes and move to other places? Are there any quiet places in Syria, or is it a dangerous place everywhere?

• (1620)

Ms. Heba Sawan: There is no quiet place in Syria, except for some of the areas that are under the control of the regime with people who were pro-regime from the beginning. It's just the difference between how dangerous the areas are. A very dangerous area was besieged and there is shelling every day. There are hot areas and warm areas. There is no safety anywhere in Syria right now.

Ms. Ameenah Sawan: Even the people who are not under siege are really stuck in their area. They can't move to other places because of the checkpoints. Many people, maybe hundreds or thousands, are mostly civilians, and were killed at checkpoints by field executions. This is also another problem.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): We're going to go now to Ms. Brown, who is the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Development.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, ladies, for being with us today.

Your testimony is very compelling. I can assure you that Canada is watching very carefully the things that are going on in Syria. We are most concerned. We have condemned the actions of both sides that are injuring, maiming, and killing people all over Syria.

To you, we express our deep condolences on the loss of your family members.

We trust that this situation will soon come to an end.

You spoke, Ameenah, about the need for the international community to call on free access for humanitarian assistance. We have done that repeatedly but we find, from both sides, opposition to getting humanitarian assistance to those who need it most. Do you have suggestions on how we might make that appeal, so that both sides are prepared to work to allow the humanitarian assistance to get in?

We've seen opposition to that call from the regime, but we've seen equal opposition to that call when opposition members have not

allowed free access. It's deeply concerning because we know there are people, as you said, many of them children, who are desperately in need not only of food but they're also in need of medical attention.

I wonder if, from your experience, you have any suggestions on how the international community might make the appeal, so that we get consensus from both sides to allow that aid to get through.

Ms. Heba Sawan: I may say that watching carefully and condemning what is going on in Syria is not enough for the Syrian people at all. I'm very sure that it is not true that the opposition is preventing the humanitarian aid to get into these cities. It is the opposition themselves who are inside those cities, in the very need of the humanitarian aid. The regime, every time, tries to find some way to prevent the convoys from entering the city.

I remember one time in Moadamiyeh, the UN sent a convoy to Moadamiyeh, so the regime said, "Okay, go into the town." The militias' defence—I don't know their names; they are with the regime and they are armed militias but they are not with the army—stood in front of the convoy, shot at it and forced it to go back. They didn't allow it to enter the town, although we could see the convoy from the entrance of Moadamiyeh. We could see the cars and the buses coming with the aid and we were so happy. We let the kids hold flowers to give to those people who would allow food to enter into their town. We saw also desperately that the convoy was going back and they didn't enter the town.

It is only the regime who is preventing the food and the humanitarian aid from entering those cities. There is no benefit for the opposition to stop that aid from coming into the besieged area.

• (1625)

Ms. Lois Brown: If—

Ms. Ameenah Sawan: Actually what we needed—

Ms. Lois Brown: Sorry. I was just going to say, if condemnation from the international community is not enough to get this through, what do you suggest we do?

Ms. Ameenah Sawan: First of all, all of the organizations that are related to the United Nations are dealing with the regime and we were really shocked when we figured out that organizations like OCHA or the UNICEF are still giving the regime aid. He is giving it to his supporters. I can assure you that none of the refugees who left the besieged area are getting any of the aid.

The regime is giving it totally to his supporters. He is not trying to enter the besieged area; he is preventing entering into the besieged area. I suggest that the organization has to deal with the local councils. In each city we have local councils handling the situation there. They are really organized and they are doing things correctly. They could communicate and do that instead of the regime. The same killer that is killing us can't feed us.

Ms. Heba Sawan: My suggestion is also the real pressure again. The real pressures would work. The whole world could push the regime to hand it over. His chemical weapons, they can push on him again, make a real threat. A threat of using power against the regime would also help to allow the humanitarian aid to get through to these cities.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you. We have just one last question to Madame Laverdière before we finish.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Very rapidly I will say I was impressed by hearing you also talk about hope and light at the end of the tunnel. I was wondering, if you dream of Syria, a Syria of your dream in the future, what would it look like?

Ms. Heba Sawan: A state of law, where there is justice and democracy will overwhelm all of the people there.... No one is above the law or has any power to do what he wants to do. That is what we hope for, a state of law.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Maybe that's a good place to end, with that idea of a vision of hope.

Thank you so much for your testimony today. We can't imagine what you've gone through, but the fact that you've provided your testimony to us is extraordinarily helpful. We will be doing a report here at our foreign affairs committee, and we will be making recommendations to our government. Thank you for helping us today.

We wish you all the best. May you one day live in a Syria that is ruled by law and democracy.

Thank you so much.

Ms. Heba Sawan: Thank you very much. Thank you for listening.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): We'll suspend for a moment while we transition over to our next witnesses.

•(1625) _____ (Pause) _____

•(1630)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Members, we'll recommence.

Thank you to our guests, some in Ottawa and some joining us by video conference.

Here in Ottawa, from the Mennonite Central Committee, we have the director of the Mennonite office in Ottawa, Paul Heidebrecht—it's nice to see you—and Bruce Guenther, a director.

Joining us via video link, we have Joshua Landis, who is in Oklahoma; and we have all the way from Prague, Andrew Tabler, a senior fellow with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

I suggest we go in order, which means we'll start with our guests here in Ottawa, then go to Mr. Landis, and finish with Mr. Tabler from the Czech Republic.

Please commence, Mr. Heidebrecht. You have about 10 minutes.

Mr. Paul Heidebrecht (Director, Ottawa Office, Mennonite Central Committee Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair and

distinguished members of the committee, for the invitation to discuss the situation in Syria.

I'm here as a representative of the Mennonite Central Committee, MCC. I direct our advocacy office here in Ottawa. I'm joined by my colleague Bruce Guenther, who's the director of our disaster response program. Bruce is based in Winnipeg.

I'll share our opening statement, and Bruce will also be available to answer specific questions about MCC's programmatic response to the crisis in Syria as well as in the neighbouring countries, Jordan and Lebanon. We hope that hearing the perspective of one Canadian non-governmental organization will be helpful as you consider this very complex situation.

MCC is the relief, development, and peace-building agency of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in Canada and the United States. We currently support programs in 60 countries through the efforts of more than 1,000 workers, and in Canada, more than 13,000 volunteers and 120,000 members of our supporting churches.

MCC has worked in Syria since the late 1980s, in Jordan since the late 1960s, and in Lebanon since the late 1940s. Thus I want to begin by stressing that MCC's response to the Syria crisis is rooted in long-standing partnerships. We did not arrive on the scene recently, and we intend to be there over the long term.

In Syria, for example, for two decades before the conflict broke out, MCC accompanied local partners as they strove to build just economic relationships, dismantle oppression, and practise non-violence. Through the provision of funding and training, and the placement of international volunteers, we established meaningful relationships with Syrian communities and with key leaders in these communities. Now that we are no longer able to place staff inside the country, these same partners are able to implement MCC's response by identifying needs, planning, coordinating, and delivering aid where it can make the most impact. This is where often other agencies have been unable to gain access or provide consistent support.

Over the past two years, MCC has allocated \$15 million in U.S. funds for our Syria crisis response. This includes \$8.2 million for programming in Syria, \$4.8 million in Lebanon, and \$2 million for programming in Jordan. We're grateful for the generosity of MCC supporters in Canada, who thus far have contributed almost \$1.4 million in cash. Beyond that, Canadian supporters have also contributed material resources valued at \$1.8 million, enabling MCC to ship a total of 31 containers containing 83,000 homemade blankets, 83,000 hand-packed relief and hygiene kits, and 120,000 school kits. This has truly been a remarkable level of support from our constituents for a crisis of this sort. We're also grateful that the Government of Canada has enabled us to scale up this response, through direct contributions to several MCC projects and through MCC's account at the Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

MCC's Syria crisis programming has four main dimensions or components. First and primarily, we have focused on the provision of emergency humanitarian assistance. Thus far, over 13,000 Syrian families have received food, non-food items, or shelter assistance. Second, as the crisis has gone on and the needs have continued to grow, we have focused on capacity building in order to make MCC's response, and that of many other NGOs, I should add, more effective. This has included training on the delivery of humanitarian assistance for 130 Syrians within and beyond our partner network. Third, we have focused on education, which has included things like tuition support for children in Syria and Lebanon and an informal education program for refugee students in Jordan. Fourth and finally, we have focused on peace building and psychosocial support by providing training that has equipped almost 400 individuals with conflict prevention and peace-building skills and training that has equipped over 230 individuals to identify and respond to trauma.

We think these conflict prevention and peace-building initiatives are a particularly interesting dimension of MCC's response.

I'd like to give you a glimpse into one of these projects in Lebanon.

In September 2012 the Permanent Peace Movement, an organization MCC helped get started at the height of the Lebanese civil war, ran a three-day training and dialogue session. Participating in this session were representatives from the youth sections of all 18 different political parties in Lebanon. The goal was to build connections among these very diverse youth leaders in order to prevent violence and the outbreak of violence.

• (1635)

Remarkably, several months later and after lengthy negotiations, the same group was able to come to agreement on a civil code of conduct that included the absolute rejection of violence in all its forms among student groups. This code was signed in a public ceremony in Beirut on December 2, 2012.

I also want to stress, however, that conflicts have been prevented and the prospects for peace have been enhanced in less formal ways, thanks to the efforts of creative, courageous, and resourceful partners implementing MCC's humanitarian assistance projects within Syria.

To give you one example in greater detail, an organization called the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue has been implementing MCC's emergency food assistance response in the Qalamoun region, supporting 5,000 families that fled the city of Homs in 2012. It turns out that the provision of food baskets to these Orthodox Christian and Sunni Muslim families ended up being multiplied in unexpected ways. Not only was the food itself shared far beyond the initial recipients, but the interfaith relationships it helped to sustain ended up being strong enough to overcome significant tests during several recent periods of conflict. In one striking incident last October, armed members of an opposition group took control of the town of Deir Atiyeh. Soon after they attempted to defile the Christian church. Upon entering the church, however, they were met by a group of Muslims from the town who stated, "If you want to defile this church, you will have to kill us first."

Stories like this are not often told, stories of cohesion and solidarity between Muslims and Christians in the midst of a context of division and crisis, but they highlight the larger point, that the impact of neutral and impartial humanitarian assistance can go far beyond the obvious project objectives.

I'll conclude our statement with a few observations and recommendations.

The key humanitarian needs that MCC's partners have identified will not be news to this committee or to staff in the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. These include support for shelter, food, and education, which align well with the priorities currently guiding the Government of Canada's response. Indeed we appreciate the leadership role that Canada has been playing in encouraging the international community to increase its commitment to meet the ever-increasing needs in the region. We're also grateful for efforts to secure humanitarian access inside Syria, and for efforts to address the longer term impact of Syrian refugees on host communities in surrounding countries.

I'm sure you won't be surprised to hear me say, however, that MCC is reminded every day by our partners that there is more that we can do, and more that our government can do.

From a political policy perspective, there's also much that MCC can affirm in the Government of Canada's approach to the Syrian crisis, and more that we would like to see. For example, we've appreciated statements from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and from a united House of Commons, emphasizing that more violence is not the answer to the crisis. In our view, deciding to not support the arming of opposition forces does not mean that our only option is to sit on the sidelines, but alternatives do require creativity, effort, and perseverance. Thus, we urge increased engagement on the part of the Government of Canada in seeking opportunities to intervene diplomatically in support of a political resolution to the crisis. This kind of engagement is clearly evident in contributions Canada has made to the effort to rid Syria of chemical weapons. Our partners would also welcome concrete actions in order to address the way that free-flowing arms threaten the stability of the entire region.

Beyond these broad initiatives, however, we think that MCC's partner organizations make it clear that there's tremendous capacity for peace-building initiatives among religious leaders and civil society organizations in Syria and in the surrounding countries. This capacity has not been widely recognized, nor has it been receiving much support from the international community. As one of our partners put it in a meeting in Beirut earlier this week, "There's actually a quiet, peaceful revolution still occurring on the ground in Syria, but it doesn't get press."

In closing, Mr. Chair, I would like to invite this committee to highlight the crucial role Canada is positioned to play in efforts to address the situation in Syria, particularly if we continue to enhance our humanitarian assistance and our diplomatic engagement, and particularly if we find new ways of supporting grassroots peace-building initiatives.

Thank you for your attention, and we look forward to your questions.

• (1640)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you.

We're going to now turn to Dr. Landis for his testimony. You have provided us with a PowerPoint deck for your presentation, and I thank you for that.

You have 10 minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Joshua Landis (As an Individual): It's a pleasure to be with you.

I'm going to divide my talk into three sections. I'll do three minutes on a historical background and how I see the conflict in Syria; a second section on who are the main players on the ground, what they want, and how powerful they are; and a third section on what those in the west in general can do and what are the various possibilities open to them.

If we start with a little PowerPoint, I would like to propose to you that Syria and the whole Levant area, that's Iraq, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, these parts of the Ottoman Empire, which are multi-ethnic and multi-confessional, are much like the Austro-Hungarian Empire and central Europe after the First World War when nation-states were drawn. They were drawn around peoples that did not share a common religion and often a common ethnicity. They were expected to get along and form a nation. They have not done so.

In almost every country, we see a struggle between minorities and majority, much like you did in central Europe. The First World War was about drawing those boundaries and breaking up an empire. The Second World War in Europe was about ethnic cleansing and rearranging. It was a great sorting out. Most of the minorities that were trapped within the borders of these countries got wiped out. That was true in Poland. Before the war about 64% of people in Poland were Polish, and after the war, almost 100%. In Czechoslovakia it was the same thing: 32% minorities, and after the war, almost none left. We get this kind of ethnic cleansing, and it's a nation-building process.

We are seeing something similar in these post-Ottoman lands. In Lebanon the Christians were left, and after the French left in 1946, they were the dominant power. They have lost that power in a 15-year bloody civil war, not all of it, but much of it. It is still not over yet. There is contention between Shiites, Maronites, Sunnis in Lebanon.

In Iraq it was the same thing. A Sunni minority was left in control by the British when they left after World War II, and the Americans helped the Shiites take over. The Shiites were 60%, Sunni Arabs only 20%. What we have today is an ongoing civil war in Iraq where the Shiites are consolidating their power and the Sunnis are fighting

back. About 1,000 people a month are being killed in Iraq as this continuing ethnic sectarian civil war carries on.

It is the same thing in Israel-Palestine, where Arabs and Israelis are fighting it out and the Israelis are winning. Israelis were a minority in 1948, about a third of the population. Today they are the majority and they have been able to turn themselves from a minority into a majority. The Palestinians have largely lost. I don't think there will be a two-state solution. There might be, but chances are it's a zero-sum game for these minorities.

In Syria you have about 20% religious minorities. The Alawites, the ruling sect, if you will, the sect of President Bashar al-Assad, are about 12%. You have another 4% or 5% of other Shiite groups, and you have Christians, maybe only 6% Christians. Usually it says 10%, but they are probably more like 6%. You have 20% Kurds and another 10% Sunni, but they are a different ethnicity and speak a different language. They have already declared autonomy in the far northeast.

If you have my PowerPoints, we could go to a map of Syria.

• (1645)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): We have them in front of us. We have them on our iPads.

Mr. Joshua Landis: If you flip forward beyond the map of Lebanon and Iraq and just go to Syria, you will find a Kurdish region in the northeast. Anyway, I can't see where you are, so it doesn't matter.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): We have it.

Mr. Joshua Landis: What we're getting is a big sorting out, and the minorities are only 20% in Syria, but they have military power in the form of the Syrian army, which has largely become an Alawite militia today, and they have centralized government, and they have help from Iran and Russia. They have significant advantages for not being pushed out of power.

Although Sunni Arabs are 70% of Syria, they are very divided. There are probably over 1,000 militias working in Syria today, but there are several big umbrella groups of militias. The main one, the Islamic Front, which formed in November and encompasses a bunch of militias, is a very loose group, but it's largely Salafist. It advocates that it does not want democracy. Its leaders have spoken out against democracy as being the tyranny of the powerful. It says it wants an Islamic form of government, where imams would play an important role in deciding how constitutional issues are worked out. It's mostly non-democrats.

The Syrian opposition we see in Geneva today—it's speaking, a Syrian opposition coalition—is pro-democratic, largely made up of people who have been in exile for years and have been educated in the west. They are a minority in Syria in terms of power on the ground. On the militias on the ground, you have the right-wing militias which are al-Qaeda connected, you have the Islamic State of Iraq, and Syria which is now divorced from al-Qaeda because it's too violent even for al-Qaeda. They have Nusra, another major militia. They own a big hunk of Syria.

If you go to the map of Syria of who owns what, which is beyond the Kurdish.... It's quite far advanced. It's beyond the various different militias. You will see in the rebel-controlled north of Syria and the east there are big swaths that are various militias, mostly Islamic Front, and big swaths that are the al-Qaeda-linked groups, or previously al-Qaeda-linked.

The Free Syrian Army, the moderate groups that America might have tried to arm up to kill the more Islamist groups and then to destroy Assad, are a minority. They are weak on the ground, and even they have denounced the politicians who are in Geneva.

This is the very difficult situation in which John Kerry arrives in Syria. The regime owns the south. It owns the west. It has destroyed large sections of the three major cities that it owns, Damascus, Homs, and Hama—three of the four largest cities of Syria—because they are mostly Sunni cities. It has pacified them to a degree, but will never pacify them very easily. This government is powerful. It has an air force, it has tanks, and it has artillery, things the opposition does not have.

We are looking at a terrible, grinding war which at its base has become a sectarian and ethnic war in Syria.

What should the west do? Kerry arrived in Geneva a month ago, and he said, "Assad is the problem. We need regime change, first and foremost. We have to have Assad step down," which is tantamount to regime change. A ceasefire and negotiating wider humanitarian issues are secondary. The first issue is regime change. Why? Because Assad is the supermagnet for jihadism. As long as he's there, jihadists from around the world are going to come to Syria, infest it, and we're never going to end this jihadist issue.

The Russians of course take issue with this. The Russians want Syria and the Assad regime to survive. They have said they don't care about Assad in person, and that's probably true, but they want a Syrian army, which is really a reflection of Assad and Alawite power, to survive because they are hoping it will destroy what they see as the Islamist and jihadist problem that bedevils them in Russia. They're trying to convince the United States that Assad is going to remain, and that the U.S. should side with them and with the Assad regime to destroy jihadists in Syria and retake Syria.

• (1650)

I don't believe that Assad can retake all of Syria. There are just not enough forces, and 70% Sunni Arabs don't like him. Many are still working with him because they don't know if he's going to win or not. Some don't like the Islamists at all and are sticking with Assad, but the majority find his government tyrannical, destructive, and evil. This leads to—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): I'm sorry, could I ask you to wrap up at this point. Thank you.

Mr. Joshua Landis: Yes.

Basically, this leaves the west in a terrible dilemma because they are supporting regime change, but they're unwilling to destroy the Assad military, and they have a lot of resistance to it. America has spent \$2 billion on Syria, which is about the equivalent of three days' spending in Iraq at the height of the Iraq war. We spent that over three years.

It's quite clear that this administration is not going to bring down Assad. Therefore, to ask for regime change is a recipe for getting nothing done. It's walking away from the problem because America doesn't care about Syria very much. That's the bottom line here, I think. This war is going to grind on because there are very powerful backers of Assad, and he's got the big military, but there are tons of Sunni Arabs who don't like him and they have the support of Saudi Arabia and many other Sunni regimes throughout the Middle East.

I see a recipe for a very long, grinding, sectarian battle.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you.

Finally, we have Andrew Tabler in Prague. First, before you begin your presentation, thank you so much, because I know it's very late there, and we really appreciate your staying up this late to provide your testimony to our committee.

Please go ahead.

• (1655)

Mr. Andrew Tabler (Senior Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy): It's my pleasure, Mr. Chairman, and members.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the House of Commons of Canada's Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Following the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, I've had multiple opportunities to speak with members of Canada's government, the diplomatic corps, intelligence services, and military, either in Ottawa, at the Halifax security forum, or in Washington, on what I think the previous testimony has shown can only be now described as Syria's meltdown.

While a long-term resident in Damascus as well, I met often with Canadian diplomats who were very concerned with Middle Eastern and national security issues. As much as I liked all those meetings, the real reason I'm with you today is that Canada has remained a stalwart ally of the United States in a rapidly changing world in which there are no easy answers to foreign policy dilemmas which have already been outlined here today.

The rapidly deteriorating situation in Syria now represents not only the biggest humanitarian crisis in a generation, but also the most complex in terms of short- and long-term security challenges. The effort by President Bashar al-Assad's regime to shoot its way out of what started as peaceful protests demanding reform has set off a bloody civil war in which more than 130,000 people have been killed, between a third and a half of Syria's population of 23 million has been displaced, and what remains on paper as the Syrian Arab Republic has been divided into three complex entities in which terrorist organizations are not only present but ascendant in each area.

In the western part of Syria, the minority-dominated Assad regime is holding on, not only through using the full lethality of its arsenal, including poison gas and scud missiles, but also through the direct aid and coordination with U.S.-designated terrorist organizations. These include Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and a number of Shiite militias from as far away as Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the majority Sunni-dominated centre, al-Qaeda affiliates such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq in the Levant have grown in response to the regime's slaughter, the presence of Iranian-backed forces, and perceived international inaction to stop the slaughter, particularly the U.S. decision to put off, at least until now, punitive strikes against the Assad regime for its assessed use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians.

Last but not least, in Syria's northeast, the Democratic Union Party, PYD, the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK, dominates those areas.

The longer the war has gone on, the more bloody and sectarian it has become, particularly between Alawites and other minority factions that dominate the regime and Sunnis who dominate the opposition. Here I'm speaking in broad brush strokes, not specifics.

Extensive Sunni-Kurdish tensions and violence have grown as well, particularly in tandem with the growth of al-Qaeda factions in Syria's centre and northeast. Syria's Christian population has very much been caught in the middle, fearful of extremist elements among the Syrian Sunni-dominated opposition, all the while knowing that seeking security from the brutal Assad regime is not in keeping with its long-term interests in the Middle East in terms of survival, let alone the teachings of Jesus Christ. As a student of his words and the values they inspired, I share their concerns and fully appreciate their dilemmas and the dilemmas that they'll continue to face.

Sectarianism has grown with the help of each group's regional backers, with Shiite-dominated Iran supporting the Assad regime and Shiite-based forces on the one side, and the Sunni Arab Gulf and North African countries standing on the side of the opposition. Assistance has included donations from governments as well as individuals in these countries and the flow of assistance has been haphazard, which has helped fuel extremism on both sides.

In many ways, the battle for the future of the Middle East between Iran and the Arab countries is being waged in the streets, mountains, and fields of Syria, but these are not the only regional interests at stake. Turkey and the Kurds are also vying for power and influence in Syria. Globally, Russia continues to support the Assad regime with weapons and the west supports moderate factions of the opposition overtly with non-lethal assistance and covertly with small weapons and training.

Las Vegas rules don't apply in Syria: what happens there doesn't stay there. We don't see that so far, and I don't expect it will change any time soon.

Syria's primary importance, as has been outlined, to the west as well as to the Middle Eastern region as a whole, remains its central geographic position in the regional security architecture, that is, the Middle East post-World War I boundaries. The Syrian war is now

spilling into Lebanon to the west, which has seen multiple terrorist attacks in the last few months, and east into Iraq, where similar attacks are taking place.

• (1700)

If the fighting in Syria continues apace and spreads south into Jordan, which hosts hundreds of thousands of refugees in and out of camps, and in the north into Turkey, the Syrian crisis will directly threaten the security of key Canadian and U.S. allies, all the while eroding the current state boundaries in the Levant and the Middle East as a whole.

But a spillover into the west could happen directly as well. Recent reports citing U.S. intelligence sources indicate that some extreme Sunni factions in Syria could be planning attacks in the United States and elsewhere in the west. Other reports indicate that Iran, the Assad regime's ally and an ostensible enemy of Sunni extremist forces, could be supporting these elements as well. Others indicate that the Assad regime is buying oil products from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and refraining from targeting its forces, instead hitting more moderate rebels supported by western countries, a Machiavellian strategy that drives all sides to extremes. Syria is increasingly a Middle Eastern twilight zone: a place where none of the usual rules apply.

Making matters worse, efforts to foster a transition in Syria that would have a hope of reuniting the country remain dim. President Assad is now putting forward a forced solution masquerading as a reform plan centred on his "re-election" to a third term as president. I observed the last election in 2007 in which he won by a laughable 97.62% of the vote. Given the level of Assad's brutality and the minority nature of his Alawite-dominated regime, not to mention the Assad regime's past manipulations of elections and referendums, this is a non-starter for the Sunni majority-dominated opposition. Since Assad's forces, even with Hezbollah and Iranian assistance, seem unable to re-conquer and effectively hold all of what was the Syrian Arab Republic, implementation of Assad's plan would mean a prolonged de facto partition for the country. Such an outcome would perpetuate human misery, lawlessness, and a haven for terrorists.

The days of easy foreign policy options in Syria are over.

Here I'm going to get to some specific recommendations. They're along three lines.

The matter is not just as simple as arming the rebels or re-engaging with Assad, as the media often portrays it, but that does not mean the west is out of options. The war in Syria is likely to go on for years, and it is important that Canada and its allies explore multiple tracks to constrain, contain, and eventually bring the Syrian war to an end. The best way to do so is through a more assertive, three-pronged approach, prioritized by tackling first threats first.

First, and the immediate thing facing the U.S. government at the moment, is the issue of chemical weapons and the implementation of the Geneva communiqué of 2012. Why do I put them together? One, concern is growing in the U.S. government that the effort to destroy Syria's chemical stockpile "has seriously languished and stalled". It's not just because Syria is predictably behind in the schedule to dispose of those chemical agents, but because Damascus is now demanding its chemical weapons sites be inactivated instead of physically destroyed as is required under the convention for the prohibition of chemical weapons. The Assad regime is revising its position. This element, especially following the regime's consolidation of control in the western half of the country, indicates that the Assad regime is dragging its feet on fulfilling its obligations in order to achieve concessions from the United States and the London 11 countries concerning the formation of a transitional governing body in Syria.

This is where I think I differ with Professor Landis. I think what the United States specifically wants is a negotiated transition in Syria, not a regime change à la Iraq, although that transition would at least require that President Assad and his family and the Makhloufs, their immediate cousins, depart Syria. Other than that, the contours of that agreement are not clear.

In order to counter such pressure, the United States and its allies should turn the tables on Assad's gambit and use Syria's compliance with the chemical weapons convention as leverage to gain Assad's compliance with a transition in Syria as outlined under the Geneva communiqué. Fortunately for the United States and Canada, both Syria's compliance with the rules set out by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the Geneva communiqué are actually enshrined in the same UN Security Council resolution, resolution 2118, which is enforceable by chapter VII measures, such as sanctions and the use of force following the passage of a subsequent chapter VII resolution. In the likely event of a veto by Russia or China, the credible threat of sanctions or the use of force should be used to ensure Assad follows through on his obligations to give up Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. Successful follow through could also help foster a real long-term transition in Syria based on, but not limited to, the Geneva communiqué.

• (1705)

Second is humanitarian access and evacuation. The humanitarian situation in Syria is rapidly worsening. The Assad regime continues to use starvation campaigns that violate not only the Geneva Convention but international humanitarian law as well. Canada should support, and I believe is supporting the current proposed Security Council resolution concerning humanitarian access in Syria, which also, by the way, emphasizes the Geneva communiqué.

Third is counterterrorism. Combatting terrorism should occur on multiple levels, including a plan in conjunction with regional allies to back moderate opposition elements at the expense of extremists. But that will not be enough. Plans should also be developed using offset assets—here I'm talking about missiles, but it's not limited to only that—and drones to hit all designated terrorist groups operating in Syria, no matter what side they're fighting on, that are deemed to be aiming at Canadian, U.S., or international targets. Those would be based on not only the intelligence assessments, but also what we can learn publicly.

Such an approach would constrain and contain Assad on the use of chemical weapons, the possibility of their leakage to non-state actors and terrorist groups, and the regime's use of starvation and siege as a form of warfare. It would also contain, alienate, and help eliminate terrorist groups operating in Syria among the opposition and the constellation of forces helping to prop up Assad.

Doubtless the priorities on this list will likely change multiple times before the Syrian crisis is over, but I believe the basic pillars for present and future courses of action are there.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony. I'd be happy to answer any questions you have.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you.

Thank you to all of our witnesses.

I'll turn it over to the official opposition.

Madame Laverdière, you have seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Thank you to all of you for your testimony.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Heidebrecht, thank you very much for your presentation, which was very interesting. I am particularly impressed with what you do to promote a culture of peace. Here we talk about "peace building". I would be pleased if we could hear more about that some day.

I also noted your appeal to greater diplomatic involvement in controlling the flood of weapons into the region. The financial aspect must of course also be considered. The amount of money we can allocate to help resolve the terrible situation in Syria is one issue, but there is also the process to be considered.

Over the past few weeks, several people involved in this file have told me that the process lacked clarity, among other reasons because they are often asked to reply to calls for proposals quickly, but then do not know when the money will come, when the projects will be approved and when it will be possible to implement the programs.

Can you tell me if you have encountered this situation in one way or another, and especially what more we could do to improve the fluidity of the process?

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Heidebrecht: Thank you very much for the question.

Mr. Chair, I'll defer to my colleague Bruce to give a bit more of an in-depth response.

As I understand the nature of the question, it centres on the funding process with the Government of Canada for MCC or other NGO responses to the Syrian crisis.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Yes.

Mr. Bruce Guenther (Director, Disaster Response, Mennonite Central Committee Canada): Thanks very much for your question.

We were very encouraged that the Government of Canada...that in the last year there have been four different opportunities where we have submitted proposals. In total we have submitted eight.

There are a couple of ways in which this could be improved. The timing of the decision could be more predictable. Oftentimes the humanitarian scene is shifting, so needs are very particular to one time. With an average of two to three months in the decision-making time, the situation changes on the ground.

As well, oftentimes the needs are seasonally based. What we're currently doing now for winterization is happening in February. We would like to have had those distributions happen sooner.

All of that said, with the last four decisions that have been taken, we are moving in the right direction in terms of a timely decision.

● (1710)

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much.

Your point is well taken indeed about it being seasonal. If you prepare for winter, you have to do it during the fall, ideally.

I would also like to hear a bit more about your program on trauma healing in Syria.

Mr. Bruce Guenther: We have undertaken trauma healing training both for refugees in Lebanon and for community leaders for people in Syria. That is twofold.

One is a training of trainers for people who come into contact frequently with internally displaced people or refugees. That also functions as a respite for people who are humanitarian workers. In one way, it is a training of trainers on trauma healing, and it also functions as psychosocial support for people who carry a very heavy burden. I think of Bishop Selwanos in the city of Homs, the Orthodox bishop there, who buries many people during the week. How can we best support him in thinking about a respite that we can also provide there?

In terms of the training, one of the additional things, aside from specific training on psychosocial support, is support for education. What we've learned from this conflict and from other conflicts we're involved with is that it is important to keep kids in school and to try to establish as much of a routine as possible. We would also see the education support we're providing as having the primary objective of being a psychosocial support to those children.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Indeed, I think this is a common preoccupation with what we call the lost generation of children, who are affected psychologically and who also very often are missing their basic education.

Coming back to adults, I know that you have partners in Syria, notably, churches and religious partners. We've seen some attacks and we hear about attacks on religious representatives and leaders. How do you feel about the safety of your partners in Syria?

Mr. Bruce Guenther: That's a very good question.

For sure, the safety of the humanitarian workers in Syria is a real concern. To clarify, we do work with church partners. We work with ecumenical partners in a variety of faith-based groups in Syria and outside Syria. In the last month actually, during a distribution that was happening in the south, in Durah, two humanitarian workers

with the Middle East Council of Churches were killed when they were caught up in mortar fire.

So yes, for sure we fear for their safety. The commitment and effort of these volunteers is courageous. They would say that they have no choice but to do that work.

When we work with our partners, we definitely stress that they need to err on the side of safety and remain flexible in terms of when the distributions take place, but because they know the community and they have knowledge of the local community governance, they are able to have a heads-up about potential incidents and to work at alternative security measures in those areas. That's the real benefit in those areas of having those strong relationships that are connected to a variety of people in the community.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you.

We'll turn it over to Mr. Goldring, for seven minutes.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you very much, gentlemen, for appearing here today.

It's not a very encouraging situation at all.

I'd like to ask a question of Dr. Landis that's a little bit more on the military logistics, if I may.

You mentioned in your paper that the opposition is fielding some 100,000 fighters. What is the number that the government has fielded in their military, their raw number in their military?

Mr. Joshua Landis: Now, these numbers are completely made up, but I put them in there because nobody knows the numbers. I just want you to know that this is completely made up, and that any numbers you do see are largely made up, because these militias are shifting in numbers all the time.

The general number for the Islamic Front is 50,000 to 60,000, but it could be off by 20,000. This is the problem. They don't give out counts. They all give out counts that are way too high. If you used their own counts, it would probably be 250,000 for each of them. The militias all exaggerate.

For the Syrian government, it's very hard to know. Andrew may be able to chime in here and help me. The Syrian army was at perhaps 400,000 people before this conflict began. Many of the Sunni recruits have fallen away. The government doesn't trust many of them anyway—they're sort of the rank and file—because it's become such a sectarian war. What they've done is they've turned to Alawites, Christians, and other minorities, which they have filled the ranks of the military with. The officer corps is very highly sectarian in order to preserve loyalty. This is why the military has not left.

● (1715)

Mr. Peter Goldring: Are there any from other countries?

Mr. Joshua Landis: Yes. They get help from Hezbollah from Lebanon, particularly in the battles that are right next to Lebanon's border. We saw in Qusayr a big Hezbollah piling on. Hezbollah has been training and giving advice. So has Iran. Iran has been training, and there have been Iranian soldiers in Syria. It is getting considerable help, advice, and support...and also from Iraq. Wherever there are Shiites, they are volunteering. That is the sort of pan-sectarian element to this.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Would it be fair to say that the numbers of the regime could well be four to five times the numbers of the rebels?

Mr. Joshua Landis: No, I don't think so. The regime forces, probably—the good forces—might number only 60,000 to 70,000 men in their really trusted elite, but there are a lot of other people. They have developed the militias.

Mr. Peter Goldring: I guess what I am driving at here is that this would be the manpower situation, the boots on the ground, I guess you could say. Also, they have the advantage of having fighter aircraft, helicopters, tanks, and artillery as well. It is a David and Goliath sort of thing, you might say, because I would think the opposition members, as you've mentioned, have small arms.

Do they have anything like “point and shoot”, those aircraft missiles that take down aircraft? Do they have anything in heavier armament at all?

Mr. Joshua Landis: They do have some heavy arms, and they are getting more all the time. They have lots of mortars, and they are getting some tanks. Particularly, they have mounted guns on the backs of pickup trucks; that's the big new element. They have a lot of shoulder-held rockets, but not a lot of anti-aircraft, not enough. They've taken down quite a few helicopters and other things with shoulder-held stuff, but they don't have a real flow.

This is not Afghanistan, where Stinger missiles destroyed the Soviet army. The west has not wanted to let those in, because they know they could get into the hands of al-Qaeda. They have put a lot of pressure on Saudi Arabia and other allies of the rebels not to allow this advanced anti-aircraft weaponry to get into their hands. That has crippled the Syrian...[*Technical Difficulty—Editor*]

Mr. Peter Goldring: Where is it coming in from?

Mr. Joshua Landis: Well, we saw a big supply come in from Croatia. It was bought and flown in from Croatia on Saudi planes to Jordan and funnelled across the border. There have been guns from all over the globe coming in. There is a big arms bazaar in Turkey. Tons of Libyan arms came in. There were accusations that the CIA had helped funnel those arms in, and Saudi Arabia, and so forth. Qatar was helping with a lot of arms to begin with. There are arms coming in from every direction.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Would you say, then, that this is a war that is going to be going on for a long time? If it continues this way, it's more a war of attrition, with starvation and with the heavy guns on one side. Is there any reason why the president of the regime should even step down? This makes it sound as though it is inevitable that he is going to win.

Mr. Joshua Landis: That's the regime's side and that's the Russian side. There are even people in Washington.... We have heard it from a number of people. Ex-CIA head Hayden said that the regime should win, because we don't want what comes next, which is going to be worse. Ryan Crocker, one of our top diplomats, said something similar.

That is not a majority opinion. I think it is a strong opinion in intelligence and on the military side, because they see the rebels as being too dangerous and think that if the rebels conquer all Syria, Syria will become a failed state and they will be encouraging the people they were fighting against in Iraq. Other people say that

Assad is much worse than the rebels, that he is the kind of tyrant who is killing people in bigger numbers and is more responsible for killing people, and that America should get rid of him.

I believe that Assad cannot win and reconquer all of Syria, because of the ethnic component and the minoritarian situation. I think that what is going to happen and what I think America should do is encourage a ceasefire. That would leave rebels in control of the north and Assad in control of the south and west. The difficulty would then be to get the rebels to try to create a regime that the west likes. If they could create one half of Syria that was friendly, then perhaps the rest of Syria would want to join in, like West Germany.

• (1720)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you, Mr. Landis.

We will go over to Mr. Gameau.

You have seven minutes.

Mr. Marc Garneau: First of all, thank you to MCC for all the hard work you've been doing in the area for the past few decades.

I'm going to direct my questions to Mr. Tabler and Mr. Landis. I have the same two questions for both of you, so if we're going to get through them, I'm going to ask you to be succinct.

The picture you are both drawing is a picture of an endless stalemate, possibly a war of attrition. The regime change pressure is not working; al-Assad has no intention of stepping down. Russia seems to continue to be a solid backer, not to mention China and Iran.

Mr. Tabler, you have raised the point that one of the things that may be needed is military intervention by other countries', western countries', use of drones and cruise missiles. Do you believe that this is ultimately going to be necessary to break this stalemate?

I would like Mr. Landis as well to respond.

Remember that I have another question after this.

Mr. Andrew Tabler: Specifically, my major concern is that we need to get chemical weapons out of Syria, period. I think there's international consensus on that and that this is the reason President Barack Obama, a man who has a very hard time using military power, threatened to use it. We saw how that played out.

There was an agreement to rid Syria of chemical weapons: 500 tonnes in the first shipment, which was due out at the end of last year, and another 700 tonnes due out by the beginning of February. Those were always ambitious targets, and al-Assad has until June 30 to meet them. The big problem we have is that Assad is revising his commitments to the OPCW.

The conflict that we have just described is not just staying in Syria; it has not only metastasized, but has also been spreading to neighbouring countries. The way this really becomes a major threat across the globe is if it is accentuated by and carried through the use of chemical weapons, whether by the Assad regime or through those that would fall into the hands of the rebels. That's the primary concern.

To be succinct, the use of these offset assets and drone strikes is part of a counterterrorism aspect, and I have advocated developing plans. Using those things in the long term is very issue specific. I don't advocate it loosely, and it would depend on what the situation is, but I think we're looking at a very dire situation going forward in which such assets might have to be used overtly or covertly.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Mr. Landis.

Mr. Joshua Landis: If you want to get rid of chemical weapons, the best way to do it is to work with Assad. He presented this package with Russia of getting rid of the weapons because he thought it would re-legitimize him. If America is willing to come to terms with Assad's surviving in the parts of the country that he already owns, I think Assad will be happy to deliver those chemical weapons, which have not been an important part. He wants to use them to help him win stability and his own longevity in the areas he controls. If America is willing to help him survive there, he will give up his chemical weapons, and Russia will help build him up, and he will be a happy guy.

I think Assad is coming to the conclusion that he cannot reconquer the whole country. I think Russia and Iran would be happy to have Assad survive in Damascus, because this would preserve all the national interest that they need, which is to be able to resupply Hezbollah, the Shiites in Lebanon, and for the Russians to have a toehold in the Arab-Israeli conflict and to have a port on the coast and be a player in the Middle East.

Regime change is going to bring the end of those things to all the actors. They are not going to cooperate with the United States, whether on chemical weapons, humanitarian issues, or ceasefire, as long as they believe that the United States is trying to undermine their interests.

If you want to get rid of chemical weapons, you have to deal with Assad. That's why he presented the package in the first place: he did not want to be destroyed.

● (1725)

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you.

If we assume that magically for whatever reason the Assad regime were removed and was gone, given the fact that so many factions in the conflict are now involved, what do you rate as the chances of some eventual stable implantation of democracy in Syria? I'd like to have your crystal-ball feeling about that, starting with Mr. Tabler.

Mr. Andrew Tabler: It's a very good question.

For implantation of a liberal democracy that we have in the west, I think the chances right now are very slim. Could you have local governance through local elections? We have seen those in a number of areas. Interestingly, even President Assad, in outlining his reform plan, has also talked about the need for local and more administrative

elections, but that wouldn't deal with the national leadership. That is a very far way off, and could come out of the country's not only de facto partition, but also its de jure partition long into the future. I'm not saying that's going to happen, but it could. The analogy most used is the federally administered tribal areas in Pakistan where you have a very loose control of the central government. That's a phenomenon we see not only in Syria but throughout the Middle East as regimes, however brutal, prove also inelastic to deal with the demographic problems and other social and other problems within their countries.

That's my humblest prediction at this point.

Mr. Marc Garneau: To you, Dr. Landis.

Mr. Joshua Landis: They're very unlikely to get democracy. None of the major players want democracy and are not calling for it. There are tons of people who would like to see democracy in Syria, but they don't have any guns and they don't have political representation that can bring them there today.

As I started out on this, I think that Syria is so deeply divided, the distrust is tremendous. People cling to the coattails of those who can defend them. We see this in the Kurdish region; we see this among the Alawites, the Christians clinging to Assad. I think the Sunnis are doing the same thing today with their militia leaders, many of whom are very undemocratic and unlikely to become democrats.

So I don't see this happening. I think that if you destroy the Assad regime, you are going to be in for years of real militia chaos in Syria. That's the problem. America has no good options today. We're not going to occupy Syria and develop a central government the way we did in Iraq. The only reason Iraq has a central government today is that America suppressed and disarmed all the other militias and built up a state. That's not going to happen in Syria, which is why the recipe for this "Somaliaization" is very high, as we see in the rebel-held regions. Rebels have been fighting among themselves in the last few months and many have been killed. I don't think that's going to stop any time soon.

● (1730)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): We're going to have to leave it there.

I want to thank all of our witnesses. It was obviously a very sobering testimony from all of you, but we really appreciate your testimony today to help inform us in our deliberations and ideally some recommendations to government. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Mr. Joshua Landis: It's a pleasure. Sorry to be such a downer.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Well, a realist maybe. Thank you.

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