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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (0850)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Good morning.

We're meeting pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) for our study of Canada's response to the violence, religious persecution, and dislocation caused by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

I want to thank all of our witnesses and guests for being here today. I'll introduce you all, then, starting on my left, we'll go to your opening statements. We'll finish up with our friend in London, England, who's joining us via video conference. Once we've had all the opening statements, we'll just go back and forth over the next couple of hours for members' questions.

Once again, thank you all for being here.

I'll start by introducing, from One Free World International, Reverend Majed El Shafie, the founder and president. Thank you very much. It's very nice to see you here.

From the Chaldean Iraqi Catholic Church in Canada, we have Father Niaz Toma. Welcome, sir. We're glad to have you here as well.

Next we have, from the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Toronto, His Eminence Sotirios Athanassoulas, the archbishop there. Welcome, sir. We're glad to have you.

As an individual, we have someone we've had at our committee before: Mokhtar Lamani, former Ambassador, United Nations-League of Arab States, in the office of the joint special representative for Syria, Damascus. I believe the last time we chatted, you were inside Damascus and we were talking via video conference. Welcome, and glad to have you back.

Joining us via video conference from London, England, we have, as an individual, Dr. Payam Akhavan, who is a professor at the Faculty of Law at McGill University and the Kellogg College at Oxford University. Welcome, sir. We're glad to have you join us via video conference.

I'll now turn it over to you, sir. Welcome, and the floor is yours. You have eight minutes.

The Reverend Majed El Shafie (Founder and President, One Free World International): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for having me here.

My name is Reverend Majed El Shafie. I'm founder and president of One Free World International for human rights. Our focus is the freedom of religion around the world.

I used to be a prisoner back home in Egypt before I came here to Canada. I was a refugee. So the work I do is not just a job. It's my life.

I visited Iraq twice, once in September 2011 and once in September this year. I had members in the Canadian Parliament—Mr. Brad Butt, Mr. Russ Hiebert, and Mr. Leon Benoit—as observers. They came with me on the trip. We visited Kurdistan; we visited the front line, Erbil; and Dohuk. We visited three refugee camps—a Christian refugee camp, a Yezidi refugee camp, and a mixed refugee camp with Christians, Yezidis, Muslims, and other different minorities.

What we saw was that right now, as we're talking, there are over 1.6 million refugees and displaced persons. As for the situation on the ground, we witnessed what we believe is the beginning of a genocide. People from the Christian minority, from the Yezidis minority, are being killed, massacred, and crucified. Their families are being hunted down and they are given very few options; basically, convert or die.

One story that touched my heart was about little girl by the name of Rahma, 14 years old, who witnessed both her parents being killed in front of her. Another story was about a Yezidi mother who was stuck on top of the Sinjar mountains. In order to save her baby, because there was no food or water, she had to cut her finger to feed her baby her own blood. We heard from witnesses, from women, that many of them had been sold for \$20 in the market. We interviewed some of these women who had been rescued after they had been raped and tortured.

The two main things that we found are really needed right now are medication and housing. Of course, in the winter it's very hard right now with the rain and the strong wind. Tents will not solve the problem. The two main needs that we found were basically housing and medication.

Mr. Chair, I'm aware that we are now at eight minutes, and that instead of ten minutes the opening remarks are eight minutes. I'm trying to speed up my statement.

I'm wondering if it's eight minutes in Canadian time or Egyptian time—but that's another story.

Voices: Oh, oh!

●(0855)

The Chair: If you go a little over, we won't count that.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Turning to the recommendation, right now, even though One Free World International supports the government decision of military air strike confrontation.... We do support it, because we believe that both of them, humanitarian aid and military intervention, have to be in balance. Without security, you're dropping aid on dead people. It's as simple as that.

Even though the military intervention is very important, the military air strikes will not solve the problem and will not end the ISIS problem. You cannot defeat ideology with bullets. The solution is education, education, education.

How will we be able to defeat ISIS? In my opinion, number one, we have to stop their funds. We have to affect their funds. We have to monitor and hold accountable the governments that support them financially—governments like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and especially Turkey—that become places for the foreign fighters to go to help with ISIS.

Second, we have to find reconciliation within the Iraqi government itself. Right now, according to our sources, when ISIS entered Iraq, they entered with 1,500 to 1,800 fighters. It's impossible, with this number, with just 1,500 soldiers from ISIS, that they can take 40% of the country, including the second-largest city, which is Mosul. The truth and the reality is that after 10 years from the Maliki regime, the Shias persecuted the Sunnis and other minorities so badly that they had to cooperate with ISIS in order to survive.

The Iraqi central government has to form a reconciliation within the minorities—Christian, Yezidi, Muslim, Sunni, Kaka'i, whoever the minority is—and they have to make a peace agreement and give them the right of self-governance.

In the end—that's now my eight minutes—we witnessed the Holocaust. We witnessed Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur. I pray that our Canadian conscience and our international conscience will not remain silent. In the absence of light, darkness prevails. We are the conscience of our world, and Canada is the temple of human rights.

I thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go now to Father Niaz Toma.

Rev Niaz Toma (Chaldean Catholic Church in Canada): Thank you very much.

Honourable members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, dear friends, and Your Grace, I am blessed and honoured to be with you this morning and also honoured today to represent one of the most ancient civilizations on earth, the Babylonian civilization. My ancestors invented the cuneiform, as you know, and the first law was written. The wheel was invented, although the Greeks claim they did it. Don't believe that. We did it.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Rev. Niaz Toma: Iraq is not only the cradle of civilization, as you may know, but also the cradle of monotheism, where God called

Father Abraham to leave everything and to follow the voice to the promised land. This happened in the city of Ur of the Chaldeans.

Christianity entered Iraq in the first century. We date back to the evangelization of St. Thomas, who was one of the apostles of Our Lord Jesus. Not many people know that the first church in Iraq was built in the year 80—that's eight-zero—because sometimes people are surprised to know that there are Christians in Iraq.

Yet the reality of persecution was a reality that accompanied the church throughout the 2,000 years of Christianity in Iraq. In the first 500 years, we were persecuted by the Persians. The persecution by Islam was on and off, and then the Mongolian invasion was another page of persecution, to the extent that our church was and is still called the "church of apostles and martyrs".

Today this reality is back again. Once again, persecution comes to the surface. It is like yesterday, when our patriarch, Simeon Barsabae, was beheaded, along with hundreds of thousands of Christians in the 4th century. This was repeated in the 16th century. Between this time and that, there was the persecution by the Muslims, which was on and off.

Mesopotamian Christians always have represented a beautiful mosaic. They are mainly Chaldeans, who are descendants of the first civilizations on earth, and Assyrians as well, who inhabited the northern parts of Iraq. Then we have the Syrians, the native people of Syria. But with the rise of Islam, things changed, and we decreased in numbers because of three factors: forced conversion, immigration, and massacres.

Let me jump to 1991 and the drastic change that happened on the Iraqi Christian scene. From 1.5 million Christians that were there, the number decreased to 800,000 and now it is estimated that there are only a quarter of a million Christians in Iraq.

In 2003, the church in Iraq so courageously opposed the war led by the United States of America. It is clear now that this opposition was not for the sake of Christians, but rather for the sake of peace and stability in the entire region and to avoid the tragic scenes of violence and killing that we began to see on a daily basis, which represent an insult to the dignity of the human person.

We strongly believe that the so-called Arab Spring was in fact a miserable, cold winter that led the entire region into darkness and will continue to lead the Middle East to an Islamic-Islamic endless conflict, where the Shia are backed up by the fanatic Islamic regime of Iran, and the Sunni are backed up by the fanatic part of the Saudis. The wealth of oil and the radical jihadist movement, which is fundamental, unfortunately drive all to the culture of seeking power to terminate others.

●(0900)

All are victimized, including the Shia and the Sunnis, but especially the peaceful minorities, such as Christians, Mandaeans, and Yezidis, who have neither the reliance on the tribal system, nor the existence of the militia, nor the presence of powerful, effective political parties.

As more than 150,000 of Mesopotamian Christians are still outside their land and homes living in tents and caravans waiting for a light at the end of the tunnel, doubts have started arising as to whether the people want to go back to Mosul, for instance, the second-largest city in Iraq, or any other town or village. Obviously there is a lack of trust in the Iraqi government, lack of trust in the Muslim neighbour who welcomed ISIL and supported their acts.

The military air strikes led by the United States of America to terminate ISIL will, in our opinion, be unable to end this intrinsic evil. The surprising fact is that the more frequent the strikes are, the more advanced ISIL gets on the ground.

The termination of ISIL can be achieved in two ways: one is short-term and the second is long-term. The short-term can be achieved by providing ground military forces, while the long-term will be met by helping and pressuring the Iraqi government to establish a strong army whose loyalty is to Iraq, not to any religious affiliation or neighbouring countries.

A long-term solution to the problem of the evil of ISIL, or any other movement that we may see in no time, can be achieved through an international endeavour to educate those who live in darkness. More work should be done at the international level to pressure several governments to change their elementary and high school programs that oftentimes teach hatred, racism, and the culture of killing.

Yet democracy cannot be dictated. Everything should start at home and at school, thus leading to a culture of life. That is why it seems to be a very long journey. But it's not impossible.

On the Canadian level and in light of the two recent attacks against our troops, it is so important to highlight that ISIL was not invented recently. It didn't start recently. It was there all the time, with the mentality and the ideology that anyone is ready to terminate anyone who differs. It is an intrinsically evil mentality of killing—killing the dignity of the human person, killing the diversity—and thus a culture that violates the very essence of our great Canadian values.

I echo the words of some Canadian officials, thanking them for their great witness, believing that under no circumstance is Canada ready to give up its values of human rights because of any religious or cultural considerations.

On the Iraqi level, a solution for the situation seems to be semi-impossible. For instance, even if we hear that the new Iraqi Prime Minister is well educated and there is a difference and he wants to lead the reform, he belongs to the same ruling party that is absolutely influenced by Iran. On the other hand, the political scene is much more complicated than before as a result of enhancing the sectarian quarters and tribal system.

Although it is the American Thanksgiving, I cannot but express on behalf of my people our deepest gratitude and thanksgiving to the Canadian government for what Canada has done so far. Our Canadian government took the lead when the rest of the world chose to be silent. The millions of dollars that Canada has contributed, the visits of Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird to Iraq, and the active follow-up of the Canadian Ambassador to Iraq, who visited only three days ago the farthest Iraqi Christian village on the

border between Iraq and Turkey, has made it clear that Canada is a true beacon of hope to the world.

Yet Canada can do much more on both the local and international levels. I'd like to end my presentation by sharing some of our concerns and suggestions.

● (0905)

With all the millions pledged and contributed by the Canadian government in support of the displaced, we have been hearing from volunteers and people they serve that they have received nothing, at least from the Canadian government. I understand that Canadian donations usually go through international agencies, yet I believe it is important for Canada to act on the ground to be closer to the people in need.

We learned that the Department of Foreign Affairs met with some representatives of Iraqi agencies to discuss the Canadian contributions and donations recently. Most of the attendees were from Iraqi Muslim and Kurdish agencies, while the persecuted were not well represented. Iraqi Christians were always not politicized, thus the church will continue to be their only representation, especially in light of the failure of all the Christian political parties, which are not more than followers of the main dominating parties on the Iraqi political scene.

The great heroic efforts of the committee, which was formed of the five bishops who represent the main Christian apostolic denomination, offered our persecuted and expelled brothers and sisters a true refuge. That was not going to happen without the support of the Vatican and some of the main organizations of the Catholic Church like Caritas and Kirche in Not of Germany.

As winter is at the door in Iraq there are serious concerns about sanitation and health conditions of the displaced. The fear of diseases and epidemics is a stressful reality. There is a concern about prostitution because when there is poverty and instability you can see all these phenomena.

The interrupted and stopped education of the children and youth represent another serious concern, especially with the incapability of the schools of the Kurdistan region to accommodate the number of displaced students. Since education is something fundamental for an Iraqi Christian, it becomes very frustrating for families to see their children left without school.

In light of the concerns stated above, I believe Canada can play a significant role and be instrumental in the area of development programs at this stage. Housing, education, and health services should be the priority. If this is done it will be a mission of saving a nation from a true genocide.

Thank you very much.

● (0910)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Father.

We'll now turn to His Eminence. The floor is yours, sir.

His Eminence Sotirios Athanassoulas (Metropolitan Archbishop, Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Toronto (Canada)): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and honourable members of the committee.

I believe I come with a little bit of a different message. Did the Crusades profit humanity and advance Christianity? Did the Inquisition profit humanity and advance Christianity? The truth is that these historical events harmed Christianity immensely, including the sacking of Constantinople and devastation to the Byzantine Empire during the Fourth Crusade. The truth is that these historical events deviated from authentic Christianity and the teachings of Jesus Christ, the true Messiah, the only redeemer and saviour of the world, the only true God. These sinful acts were recognized and stopped. Glory be to God.

Evil acts done in the name of religion only serve to hurt and diminish that religion. Are these experiences applicable today? Are there lessons that we can learn from them? How can we as Canadians join together with peace-loving people around the globe to combat the self-righteous fanaticism that tragically pervades so many parts of the planet? Is it not true that Christianity, hand in hand with ancient Greek democracy, established peace-loving and prosperous societies, namely western democratic countries? How would peace-loving people have reasoned, for example, with a Canadian-born jihadist who said before his death this year, “We kill and pray to be killed to join Allah in paradise”?

Is it not the mentality of terrorists to fiercely yet incorrectly believe that they are right and we are wrong, that they are true believers and we unbelievers, infidels? Can we describe the acts of al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State, the jihadists in general, without using words like pure evil? How do we address, for example, the practice in Egypt, where it is illegal for Muslims to convert to Christianity and where Christian girls are forcibly converted to Islam; or in Pakistan, where blasphemy laws are abused to persecute and kill Christians? How do we address the horrific violations against the dignity and freedom of men, women, and especially children being carried out by the Islamic State?

According to a November 2014 United Nations report, “Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria”, ISIS has executed women as well as men for unapproved contact with the opposite sex, and ISIS prioritizes children as a vehicle for ensuring long-term loyalty, adherence to their ideology, and a cadre of devoted fighters who would see violence as a way of life. These and so many other associated actions are so heinous that governments, including Canada's, must defend and protect their citizens from all such enemies as well as defend and protect innocent people around the world who suffer at the hands of Islamic terrorists.

Is it reasonable to believe that one of the greatest threats in our world to our way of life and our freedom and to all people is not Islamic-based extremism? How do we respond to a self-righteous fanatic who systematically and without regard slaughters Christians as well as different followers of Islam in the name of God? How do we respond to the perverted notion that terrorist jihadists are innocent or, put differently, not responsible for their actions because they are only doing the will of God? These individuals are misguided and require rehabilitation.

We should note that not all terrorists are Muslims, and while some are self-radicalized, are not Muslim terrorists led astray by fanatic teachers in their factories? As a consequence, should not every effort be made to reform the teachers and the factories that produce terrorists to produce peacemakers?

●(0915)

If the focus is only on killing terrorists, we know from experience that they will become like Lernaean Hydra from Greek mythology. We know that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. We also know that prevention is less expensive than cure, in both human and financial terms.

Is it not of utmost importance that all governments, but especially governments from predominantly Muslim countries, sponsor and promote the observance of proper moral principles among their citizenry, including respect for human rights and freedom? Canada's response to the Islamic State, like all governments but especially governments from predominantly Muslim countries, should focus on reforming the factories that produce terrorists—jihadists—and that sponsor and promote radicalization.

Alone, however, governments will not be able to succeed. They need to engage both the leaders and the followers of Islam. It is the duty of all governments and all people of good faith with proper moral principles to defend the innocent from Islamic terrorists—jihadists—and to work to reform the factories that produce terrorists, making them factories of peacemakers. Only this way will we be able to untie the Gordian knot of Islamic extremism perpetrated by the Islamic State and other similar terrorist organizations.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to former Ambassador Lamani.

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani (Former Ambassador, United Nations-League of Arab States, Office of the Joint Special Representative for Syria, Damascus, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

Thank you for inviting me to be a witness and to give some ideas, but very, very briefly; I don't know what I can develop in eight to ten minutes.

I was twice the special envoy in Iraq and once in Syria. In Iraq it was immediately after the war in 1991; it was mainly for the humanitarian side and the exchange of prisoners of war; and then in 2006 and 2007. I developed a relationship with all parties—everybody except al-Qaeda, which was the only one because they have an agenda going beyond Iraq—until I resigned at the beginning of 2007, protesting the designation of the agendas. Then I was in Syria from September 2012 until last May, and again I did resign protesting the designation about what was done, even if it was done in the name of the UN.

I can say very briefly that we have to take into consideration that the crises in Iraq as well as in Syria have some commonalities. Both crises have to be addressed at three levels: the local one, the regional one, and the international one, because there are so many actors.

The second remark I would make is that both societies have very deep problems, but mainly two problems: they are strongly fragmented societies such that I cannot tell you how many actors there are in both cases; and the second one is the very high level of mistrust between the people themselves, between Iraqis as well as between Syrians. They don't even make a distinction between dialogue and negotiation. So you have to dialogue without even knowing the framework, and it's very hard. I can give witness to a lot of things about when I was there and talking. I developed, and I'm still developing, a relationship with everybody. Just last week I was in Istanbul to meet with both the Syrian opposition as well as the Iraqi opposition and to see where things are moving.

There are also some differences that are historic. Ibn Khaldun talked about the *asabiyya* and the difference between the tribal mentality and the commercial mentality, which is Syria and Iraq. The way it is addressed...I witnessed even the development of Daesh. What I have to say about ISIL prior to that is that al-Qaeda is not an organization; al-Qaeda is an ideology that is becoming like a franchise. It's like a McDonald's. The ideology is there, and there are so many groups claiming part of this ideology and looking for the same objectives.

How should we address that internationally? How should Canada be a part of very seriously addressing this? It's not only a matter of security. I think one of my predecessors spoke about education.

I think one thing that's missing—I tried very, very hard on this when I was in Iraq—is some changes in the constitution; that, when they were discussing the constitution, the constitution in this part of the world should be based mainly on two principles: equal citizenship and respecting pluralism. This is strongly missing from there.

In the way it was addressed, especially during the time of President Bush, there were so many mistakes. When I was asked to meet with Secretary James Baker, and the Hamilton committee in Baghdad, I told them the way they were working here reminded me of what Winston Churchill said in his memoirs: that the Americans, before doing the right thing, have to exhaust all other alternatives. Unfortunately, again it's the case in the way of fighting ISIS. If we cannot develop a culture of respect and if we cannot address things that push a lot of people into frustration.... If we have one, two, or three boys in their twenties blowing themselves up to kill others, it can be abnormal, but if it is repeated, then there is something wrong. We have to go very deeply to address all kinds of problems.

When I was in Iraq in 2006 and 2007, it was the beginning of ISIL when it was just the Iraqis with...and al-Zarqawi was killed in 2006. Then when I moved to Syria, al-Nusra, which is the branch of al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, the guy who established al-Nusra, was asked by Daesh, by the Iraqi people, because he was in Iraq with them, to come to Syria to have a branch of al-Qaeda. He came, but he didn't do it the Iraqi way, the tribal way; he did it the Syrian way, or the commercial way.

• (0920)

I can give you some examples. In the beginning, in the area that was controlled by al-Nusra they used to do like the policy of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. They tried to help people, to bring doctors, and to work with other armed groups, even the most secular

ones, that the enemy is the government, to target only intelligence and military buildings—until the Iraqi al-Qaeda came. They came for another objective. They had two things to control: oil in the eastern part, and the smuggling areas especially along the border with Turkey. Then they had problems.

This is the time immediately after the meeting of France and Syria in Marrakesh in which Moaz al-Khatib, the leader of the Syrian opposition at that time, condemned the Americans for putting al-Nusra on the list of terrorists, because, you know, those are our brothers. It was very complicated, and many people didn't know. When problems arose between al-Nusra and the Iraqi al-Qaeda, then came the fighting.

The ideology is the same, but it's the approach; as the French proverb says:

[Translation]

“It is the skill of the chef that is the most important thing, not the ingredients that go into the pot”.

The skill of the chef

[English]

was totally different for the two of them.

I remember also, since my predecessors are religious leaders—I'm not—that I did a report when I resigned from Iraq and came back home to Canada. I joined CIGI, the biggest think tank in Waterloo. They were very supportive, and I did a report that I called “Minorities in Iraq: The Other Victims”.

I did it as a reaction to the report that was done by a colleague in Congress in which he was stating that we have to put pressure on the Iraqi government to have three representatives: one from the Christians, one of the Yezidis, one of the Kaka'is. I was strongly against it. There has to be equal citizenship. Every single Iraqi has the right to be prime minister or president. It is very hard—it is like a dream now—but there is no other solution.

I presented this report also in the British Parliament. Unfortunately, now things are getting bad. I remember one thing that was very shocking for me when I was doing this report. Many people moved in 2006 and 2007 from Iraq to Amman, and I went to meet a lot of people. Some, because they didn't have money and nobody was helping, were going back home. I was verifying with UNRRA and the UNSR to see these people who went back from...and when I'm talking minorities, I'm not talking only about religious minorities but also ethnic minorities; that's a huge problem as well. No one from the minorities went back to Iraq, and that was very, very sad; very sad.

How should we address these issues? There's a huge difference between Iraq and Syria ISIL. Many people couldn't even understand what the differences were. Why was ISIL in Syria? Everybody was against this; even the other branch of al-Qaeda was fighting against it; the Islamic Front—everyone. They had no one. In Iraq, no, they counted very strongly in the six Sunni provinces. What I know about the six provinces is that with a sectarian government, especially during the time of Maliki, who was very strongly sectarian.... I personally had a lot of problems with him about these issues when I was there.

The Iraqi army in Mosul, when Daesh came, in these six provinces was seen prior to that as an occupying army. No one was looking to the Iraqi army as a national army. Some very high-ranking people in the army even told me—it's very hard to verify—that the current army, even with the pressure of the Americans after the Awakening forces in 2006 and 2007 defeated al-Qaeda in this area, has fewer than 5% Sunni and fewer than 2% Kurds. They are backed by some Shia militia that are at least as dangerous as ISIL. Now they are fighting together against ISIL. We saw it after the Awakening forces, when the Americans were trying to push Maliki to make the 150 fighters who fought—and defeated—al-Qaeda at that time part of the Iraqi army. Maliki just refused, because for him, before being fighters against al-Qaeda they were Sunni, and he didn't want them.

So if we don't go back, what I used to tell the Americans.... Just last June I was invited to Washington, and I insisted: don't consider the train that left and think that you can order what they call “national reconciliation” in one of the coming stations; it's not going to work. And we saw that. After 11 years, it's not working; the train has to go back, to agree about the constitution, to agree about this.

● (0925)

They cannot do it alone. They have to be helped as well as forced internationally. If not, it's just going from....

I know my time is running out, Mr. Chair.

Maybe Canada was also leading the humanitarian side in catastrophes and also some political approaches. Last week when I was in Istanbul I met some of the members of the military council of Iraq. This is the old resistance against the American occupation. I'm not talking about al-Qaeda, those are Iraqis who were against the occupation and took arms. Now there are a lot of changes. Suddenly they feel strongly between two things they hate—a government sectarian that they're fighting, and from the other side, especially in their area because there are many Sunni, ISIL.

They said, well, you have to be very clear about ISIL. This is a human problem, and it has to be condemned. They said they are killing us, but nobody is talking to us, and we don't want to repeat the experience of the Awakening forces. When the Americans asked our tribe to fight against al-Qaeda, and we did, al-Maliki America rejected us.

I think we can help these parties to talk to everybody, to develop a dialogue. Canada can be a leader and can help. I know that some of the Nordic countries are doing that. They are inviting people, listening to to everybody, and trying to explore some possibilities of national reconciliation proposals as well as bringing some points to the Security Council, to Washington. I think it's time for Canada to

do something. I don't want Canada to be a prisoner when it comes to signing a cheque or humanitarian things or whatever.

I think there are a lot of things to say, but I will stop here and will endeavour to answer any questions.

Thank you very much.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now join our colleague in London, Dr. Akhavan.

The floor is yours, sir.

[Translation]

Dr. Payam Akhavan (Professor, Faculty of Law, McGill University and Kellogg College, Oxford University, As an Individual): Mr. Chair, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for having invited me to appear before you today. I would also like to thank the Canadian High Commission in London for having made this video conference possible.

[English]

My testimony today will focus on the context within which ISIL has emerged, with a view to identifying the policies that are required for a meaningful long-term solution to the calamities afflicting the peoples of the region.

By now, we have all become familiar with the beheading of western hostages transformed by ISIL into a social media spectacle. We've also witnessed the mass murder, not only of Christians, Yezidis, and Shia populations, but also of defiant Sunni tribes. The fact that not even children are spared demonstrates the genocidal nature of these killings based solely on the victims' religious identity. Those who are spared, the women and girls, are sold into slavery. It is reported that the price for a Christian or Yezidis woman is \$43 if she is between 40 years of age and 50 years of age, \$86 if she is between 20 years of age and 30 years of age, \$129 if she is between 10 years of age and 20 years of age, with the highest price of \$172 for girls up to the age of nine. ISIL has been rightfully called the “caliphate of barbarism”, or simply a death cult. Its cruelty toward the innocent is beyond belief and it is still happening as we speak here today.

Under these circumstances, it is not difficult to declare the Islamic State as the enemy. It is not difficult to bomb them in disgust. There may be the rational objective of degrading their military capabilities, but there's also the emotional appeal, a certain moral clarity, to this relatively effortless micro-crusade against savagery. Therein lies the danger of self-delusion, of historical amnesia, of failing to appreciate the circumstances that have brought us to this nightmare in the first place. Without understanding this context, there can be no meaningful long-term solution.

The battle of Kobani has demonstrated that ISIL's will to fight cannot be underestimated. It is clear that ultimately they can only be defeated by transformation of the same short-sighted policies and circumstances that they have successfully exploited in order to impose their extremist ideology. It was in the recent historical past that prominent western pundits and policymakers spoke of the Islamic arc of crisis as an opportunity to contain Soviet expansion in the region and to incite jihadist fury against Moscow among Soviet Muslims.

Extremism was seen as a weapon of the Cold War, and it played out in theatres such as Afghanistan, where the mujahedeen proved to be a useful instrument until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, after which a country, brimming with jihadists, was abandoned because it ceased to have any geopolitical value—that is, until September 11, 2001.

It played out in Iran, where many fantasized that Ayatollah Khomeini would become the Iranian Gandhi, presiding over a pragmatic government—that is, until the American hostage crisis.

It played out in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which received unconditional western support throughout the Iran-Iraq war, even during the genocide of Kurdish civilians by poison gas, until he decided to invade Kuwait. Today it is the same Kurdish Peshmerga forces, that Iran supported at the time, that are the ground forces fighting ISIL. It proved easy to overthrow Saddam Hussein after the American-led invasion of 2003, but misguided policies, such as entrenchment of sectarian power-sharing and rampant corruption among the political leadership, contributed in significant measure to alienation and armed insurgency.

• (0935)

In the context of the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the post-Saddam vacuum was filled by sectarian violence with both sides supporting proxy extremist militia based on the Shia-Sunni divide reflecting their respective ideologies. It was against this backdrop that Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, defied his master Zawahiri by encouraging sectarian war against the Shia, and today it is al-Baghdadi who leads this expanded movement, joined by other forces in the region, including the spillover of the Syrian conflict.

Let us not forget that the Iranian-backed Badr and other Shia militia respond by committing similar atrocities against Sunnis.

In Syria, meanwhile, the mass murder of peaceful protestors by forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad, including the use of chemical weapons and the extermination of Sunnis by the notorious Alawite shabiha militia, was a policy of deliberate incitement of sectarian violence as a survival strategy. As Iran and Hezbollah fought to preserve the Assad regime, Turkey and Saudi Arabia supported Islamic rebels. There are even accounts of Damascus helping the rapid rise of ISIL through prisoner releases and other measures. Apparently, this has proved to be a successful strategy of transforming Assad into the lesser of two evils, making him the beneficiary rather than the target of western air strikes.

To make matters more complicated, the bombing of ISIL in this tacit military alliance between the west and the Assad regime has resulted in more sympathy and more recruits for the extremists, even

from the ranks of the Free Syrian Army, once the main rebel movement and competition to ISIL. Against this backdrop, to say that politics makes strange bedfellows would be an understatement. There is a dialectic of extremism at play. The cynical, short-sighted instrumentalization of religious identity by regimes espousing hateful and discriminatory ideologies will continue to rip the region apart and provide a fertile ground for sectarian violence, whether by ISIL or other forces whose atrocities against civilians are not much better, even if they are less internet-savvy at broadcasting their crimes.

Beyond military strikes and the necessity of a renewed peace process in Syria or humanitarian assistance to refugees, Canada should consider a meaningful long-term engagement in the region. In particular, Canada, together with like-minded nations, should use its diplomatic influence and other resources to discourage and disincentivize regional powers from using extremism as an instrument of power. Canada can also make efforts in concert with other nations to balance commercial interests with measures against the rampant corruption, which is yet another breeding ground for extremism.

Finally, Canada can invest in programs to strengthen civil society, independent media, and educational resources that help promote pluralism and tolerance, and I am aware that the government has taken certain steps in this regard. Although the world noticed ISIL only last year, it was a long time in the making. Any lasting solution will require a new vision for the Middle East based on pluralism and interdependence. It cannot be accepted that it is this region alone that is somehow immune to the historic forces of integration that have shaped the world elsewhere.

• (0940)

The forging of a new, unified Middle East can be achieved through either sustained engagement and courageous leadership or, otherwise, after more yet unimaginable calamities leave us with no other choice.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Akhavan.

We will now start our first round of seven minutes, followed by our five-minute rounds.

To our members of Parliament, I would just ask you to direct your questions to someone specifically so that they know who is being asked to answer.

Mr. Dewar, you have the floor for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all our witnesses for their absolutely superb presentations. I wish we did have more time. Maybe one day we'll actually amend the rules around committees so that we can get into issues in a little more depth, but alas, I only have seven minutes.

I just want to read something into the record, Chair. It's a report about Yezidis being able to "choose between conversion, expulsion, or execution", and about militants targeting Yezidis, "shooting dead 23 on a bus and bombing several villages resulting in hundreds of deaths". You would think that was just from this past year, or this past six months. But what I'm reading into the record is a reference to former Ambassador Lamani's work from 2007.

The reason I read this into the record is that, as Professor Akhavan just told us, the roots of this and the warnings for this were a number of years ago. I think it's telling that Professor Akhavan tells us that there seems to be a pattern here, where we ignore the facts until they look us in the face, and we seem to be on that road again.

Former Ambassador Lamani, one of the things you cited in your presentation was the need for a diplomatic engagement. I just wanted to get this from you, based on your experience. You've been to Istanbul recently. You've talked to some groups who presently are outside of the "coalition", I'll call it, or at least the engagement. Who would they be? What other countries could be engaged, along with Canada, to do this diplomatic engagement? And what should be the criteria for engagement?

In other words, before we go in and start talking, there should be some framework. I'm particularly thinking of the UN resolution that was passed with regard to ISIS, or the non-Islamic State. Perhaps you could help us with that.

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani: Thank you, Paul.

It's...well, I think dialogue with everybody but al-Qaeda. When I was the special envoy there, I said it very clearly; it was talking to everybody except those who had an agenda going beyond the border of Iraq, or now both Iraq and Syria are the agenda. There's a fight with them, an international fight. There are so many resolutions of the Security Council, so many lists. I think that work should be strongly continued. We have to continue this work.

I am talking about orders where they have no choice. As you remember, in 2003, when President Bush decided to invade Iraq and couldn't have a resolution from the Security Council, the way it was done made a huge divide in Iraqi society. And also with the mistakes of, I'm sorry to say, Ambassador Bremer especially, dismissing the army and all institutions, telling them, okay, you have no authority, go to fight against Assad. I remember when I arrived there it was just a huge mess. It was a huge mess, but underground you can see that group of Iraqis, they accepted a political process and their occupation, and orders—there's no way to accept anything—and the opposition; that was the huge problem when I was trying to work on national reconciliation.

I kept telling our friends there—the American ambassador at that time, and as well when I used to be invited also to Washington—that we are doing things; it seems you decided to have war, but there's nothing after the war. This is why you have, or you're not talking....

They were trying. They asked even for my help at that time. I was trying to organize a meeting between Ambassador Khalilzad and Harith al-Dari, the leader of the Association of Muslim Ulama, just developing this kind of dialogue, but there were so many problems it was almost impossible. And also, there was a high level of mistrust with those occupying.

This is why I think that Canada, the way it is in Canada, as well as the Nordic.... The Nordic are very active. I keep receiving a lot of invitations about national reconciliation and work to prepare so many things. I think these groups, all these groups, nobody is talking to, except some Europeans. I know these groups or some intellectuals who are strongly respected by these groups. They were recently received by the European presidency, as well as Norway and Sweden. If you are interested we can give you also the counterpart in the Nordic countries, to understand their experiences and where Canada can be leading, especially working with the Americans and trying.

Paul will remember when I myself agreed in 2009 or 2010 to do some activities, immediately after the election of President Obama, with Ellen Laipson and the Stimson Center in Washington, we did four sessions on Iraq. Two were political—one was on political and one was on security—in Washington, and with the help of Paul we had two here in Parliament in Ottawa, one on federal institutions and one humanitarian and minorities.

I think this kind of work, if it is done by Canada, with the image of Canada, even if now it is changing a little bit, is a niche that can be strongly exploited by diplomacy.

● (0945)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Professor Akhavan, I want to ask this very quickly, because I have literally a minute left.

You know UN resolution 2178, I'm sure, which states in part:

...Member States must ensure that any measures taken to counter terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law...underscoring that respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law are complementary and mutually reinforcing with effective counter-terrorism measures, and are an essential part of a successful counter-terrorism effort....

It goes on to talk about all member states having to abide by international law and comply with that.

As an expert in the field of international law, can you comment on the importance of ensuring that Canada's response to ISIS corresponds with our international legal obligations and what else we can do to ensure that we gather evidence to bring perpetrators to justice?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Well, other than the obligation of Canada to comply with international law, we have to realize that we are engaged in a struggle for hearts and minds, and the ends don't justify the means. I think the way in which Canada and other western democracies conduct themselves will have far-reaching impacts in the region.

In terms of the prosecution of the perpetrators, of course, this is a very difficult situation given the problems that the International Criminal Court has already faced. I think in addition to bringing them to justice, we may be thinking about how we can promote reconciliation, for example, through truth commissions as a means of healing the wounds, the sectarian wounds that have ripped these societies apart.

We should bear in mind the experience of the South African truth and reconciliation commission and other countries that have gone through transitional situations. The advantage of such a process is that it allows for a widespread public participation in a way that criminal trials may not.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Dewar.

We'll now move over to Mr. Anderson for seven minutes, please.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all of our witnesses for being here today.

I just want to follow up a bit on that last question. I would like to get your opinion on the role of the military. Do we have to wait until a professional army is put in place in Iraq before ISIS can be dealt with successfully?

Professor Akhavan, you talk about dealing with hearts and minds, truth commissions, and those kinds of things, but what needs to precede that? How important is that establishment of the professional military in Iraq to a successful conclusion here?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you, sir.

Of course, I'm not an expert on military matters. I would say that clearly there is an important role to be played by the military in preventing ISIL from committing further atrocities. All I was trying to emphasize was that the military solution is only a short-term solution to prevent the worst excesses and it will certainly not solve the problem.

So while it is imperative to prevent ISIL from continuing to perpetrate atrocities against vulnerable minorities, we need to look beyond this knee-jerk reaction, if you like, to the atrocities and figure out what a comprehensive solution will be to the problems in the region.

● (0950)

Mr. David Anderson: Do you think that can be resolved without a very strong military component?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Well, we've had a strong military component now for many years in that region of the world, and it has really seemingly only exacerbated the problems. Does Iraq need a solid national non-sectarian army? Absolutely. It's a pity that after all these years, there was a failure to create such an army, as some of the other witnesses have explained.

In the long term, western military involvement is only going to be a small part of the solution. We need to create strong national institutions in Iraq and somehow in neighbouring Syria as well, but beyond that, we need to invest much more in aid and reconstruction

in creating the institutions and political spaces that will move those societies away from sectarian violence.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Lamani, you talked a bit about the importance of citizenship and people seeing themselves as citizens of a country. I'm just wondering, do you have any suggestions on how we could encourage that perception of citizenship at a time like this? What are some of the things that we could be doing from here?

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani: Let me, as a practitioner, give one real example. When they were discussing the constitution, we were asking them to bring some experts from other countries who have huge experience about that, and we were trying to explain that it is protection for everybody, majorities as well minorities. When we developed the idea of....

I remember some of the talks that I got in Iraq on equal citizenship. They said, "We are not like the west." I said, "Well, India." It happened once that India had a prime minister from a minority Muslim and the president was from another minority, was a Sikh. But nobody was saying that they were not Indians. So if it's working there, why isn't it working in the Middle East?

I do strongly believe that, if we don't put that in the constitution and work on it, there is no way of just trying to have some other solution. What I don't agree with in general, especially the west, is that it's much more in the position of reacting than acting. We saw it everywhere. Now we're hearing about beheaded westerners. You know, the same day they beheaded a westerner, ISIL killed more than 1,000 Muslims, and mainly Sunnis from their own communities that they are pretending to develop.

So if we don't go deeply into all these issues and help them with the institutions, then it's just not going to work.

Mr. David Anderson: Father Toma and Reverend El Shafie, one of the things that we've been emphasizing is religious freedom, and we have the office that's been put in place. There are three principles behind what we're trying to do. People need to have some basic rights: the freedom to believe, the freedom to practise that belief, and the freedom to be able to change that belief.

I'm just wondering, how can we work to realize those things in this area, or is this not a time when we're able to do that realistically?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Thank you, Mr. Anderson, for your question.

First of all, of course it's important that Canada built a freedom of religion office here with the leadership of Dr. Andrew Bennett. It's a great step not just on Canadian soil but even internationally. However, I think one of the main issues we have to deal with when this comes to the situation in Iraq is education. I really believe this is part of the problem that we are facing right now.

When the Arab Spring started...and we indicated previously that the Arab Spring has turned out to be a cold, deadly winter for the minorities. Allow me to express that we are all against dictatorships—Mubarak in Egypt, or Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, or Gaddafi in Libya, and so on—but the problem when you take a dictatorship out is that you create a political vacuum. The ones using this political vacuum are the Muslim extremists and that's what we saw happening in many countries—Libya and Egypt, and so on.

If we speak about the Egyptian society, for example, we find that 30% to 40% of the Egyptian society is illiterate. They don't know how to read and write their own name. Even if we reform the constitution they don't know what they are voting on. They will follow somebody with a beard who says, "You know, you'll go to Heaven if you follow me." That's where the office of freedom of religion comes in, by promoting freedom of religion. There will never be a true democracy in the Middle East without establishing two foundations: number one is the freedom of religion; number two is the separation between the religion and the state. There will never be a democracy in the Middle East without the separation between the religion and the state.

I find that the office of freedom of religion here in Canada and abroad can be a strong instrument when it comes to education, when it comes to the next generation, when it comes to putting in place dedication to separating between the religion and the state, and establishing true freedom of religion using our aid as an encouragement tool.

Thank you.

● (0955)

Mr. David Anderson: Father Toma, do you have any comments?

Rev Niaz Toma: Thank you very much for the question.

I can see that the key is the integration between the principles and the values of human rights, and the values of each and every religion. If we have an integration then there is no problem.

The problem in the Middle East, especially with Islam, is that there is a teaching, which is widely accepted among Muslims, that if you are a Muslim and change and convert to any other religion, you are sentenced to death. That's the main obstacle.

If we are talking about Canada, we are concerned; there is a freedom of religion, but we are concerned about a situation where somebody will jump in and say one day, "Well, it is multicultural, multi-faith, freedom of religion; I believe in this and that, and my religion tells me to do this and that." The charter of human rights will say, "Oh, yes, we approve of this. This is your religion, and we are a free country."

We are very concerned that we reach such a situation here in Canada. The obstacle in the Middle East is what I shared with you. It is a widely accepted teaching in Islam that whoever converts to any other religion is sentenced to death. So we have this dilemma. It will take a long time until....

I had back home in Iraq—I still consider myself a newcomer although I came to Canada 12 years ago—friends who converted to Islam but in secrecy, complete secrecy, because of the fear. Even here

when they have families, extended families, there is still this social fear and pressure that they feel.

We have to work one step at a time in order to enhance the values of freedom of religion.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you very much, Mr. Anderson.

We'll finish off the first round with Mr. Garneau. Seven minutes, please.

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Thank you very much for your testimony. Please don't think me rude if I interrupt you. I only have seven minutes today, and I want to ask three questions. My first is for Dr. Akhavan.

Many people have mentioned the lifeblood to ISIS of funding—I'm not talking about black-market oil—from countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and others. Is it realistic to be able to stop that flow? Do you know if the governments of those countries are doing anything to try to stop that flow? It's certainly an important element.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Thank you, Mr. Garneau.

My understanding is that there have been certain divisions of opinion within the Saudi Arabian political establishment itself about Saudi Arabia's regional role, and that certain steps have been taken to try to control the flow of funds, and much more needs to be done. Part of the solution, as I explained, is to dis-incentivize the use of religious extremism as an instrument of power in the region. Of course, part of that also is to accommodate Iran, which also is using religious extremism for its own purposes. That's why I explained, there's a kind of dialectic of extremism, but the funding flows are very important.

The danger, though, is that ISIS, unlike al-Qaeda, is a state that has resources that it can use to raise revenues on the black market. So beyond cutting the funding from the Gulf States, that is another problem that has to be accommodated. There were even some accounts of the Assad regime buying oil from ISIL in the early months of its rise, apparently to help ISIL gain some further strength and prominence. As I explained, in a very cynical strategy of positioning, the Assad regime is the lesser evil of the two.

● (1000)

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you.

Reverend Toma, I had the opportunity to be in Iraq and to go up to Erbil in September, and I met with Chaldean clerics, including the bishop of Mosul. We talked about ISIS having possession of Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq, now with two million people, or probably fewer because many have fled. But I'd like to get a sense from you, do you know how strong that control is? This is the biggest city, we're told, that ISIS controls. Do they have full control of the population? Are they imbedded, or is it a tenuous hold?

Rev Niaz Toma: Actually, all our sources of information from Mosul confirm that they have absolute control, especially with the sympathy shown by the people of Mosul.

Just to back up a little bit, there was always a tension between the Muslims of Mosul and the Christians, although it was something not floating on the surface, because of the Saddam regime, because of the transitional stages that Iraq faced during the last century. Yet with all the information provided, I can say that they have full control. Not only that; they have high technology. An eyewitness told me that when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered his speech at the Mosul mosque on Friday, he was very calm. It was very secured to the extent that even cellphones in the area were cut off. Who owns this technology? You can't buy this technology at the corner store.

As another example, when the Americans started their air strikes, there was a huge establishment that during the Saddam regime was a military-industry establishment. ISIL took that establishment as a headquarters for themselves in Mosul, and from there they were running it. The night before this building was bombed and destroyed completely, ISIL evacuated, so....

Mr. Marc Garneau: Very quickly to Mr. Lamani, ISIS has been particularly successful in predominantly Sunni provinces, such as Anbar. How much are they winning over Sunnis as they move forward, and how much of it is just, "Well, we'll cooperate out of fear"?

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani: I think the population in these provinces is much more reacting against the Maliki government and sectarian government—the enemy of my enemy can't be a friend of mine—but I heard from a lot of people that they don't trust and they don't want.... They had a bad experience with the same groups that pushed the Americans to have the Awakening forces in 2007-08 and defeated them. Now the tribe they would like to join, but now they don't want to have the same experience joining, risking their lives for nothing. They're asking what is going to happen to be part of Iraq.

If I may, on what was mentioned about the UN declaration on freedom of religion, it's freedom of religion and belief. It's also freedom "from" religion as well as freedom "of" religion.

• (1005)

The Chair: We'll now start our second round with Mr. Hawn.

You have five minutes, sir.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for being here.

I agree with the distinction between short- and long-term solutions. In the short term, one of course being security and stopping ISIS, stopping the killing and so on.

So initially for that, Mr. El Shafie, I agree that the air campaign is an important contribution, but it can't succeed on its own without boots on the ground. In my view, and I think most views in Canada, those boots should not be western boots: American, Canadian, British, or whomever. Canada has a lot of experience and is very good at training. I'm told by folks who have experience in this that there is about a 20,000-person cadre of the Iraqi army that is very trainable and is/was at a fairly high level, and within about six months, with about 350 or so professional trainers, that division could effectively be in the field.

Do you have any thoughts on that?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I agree with you that the boots on the ground can't be western boots. However, I will share with you something from my own experience that's very important. I travelled to Afghanistan before and I saw our training. Definitely the Canadian soldiers did a great job training the military there. The only problem is that often when we train an army like that.... America has been in Iraq for the last 10 years training the Iraqi army, and where's the Iraqi army now?

I will be honest with you. I will not be politically correct here, because I am really sick and tired of political correctness. I will just say it the way it is. The Americans supported, for example, bin Laden during the time of the mujahedeen and turned against them; supported Saddam Hussein during the Iranian war and turned against them; supported the Libyan rebels who killed their American ambassador three months later.

What's the definition of insanity? It's repeating the same action and expecting different outcomes.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: With respect, that's not what I'm talking about, sir. I'm talking about the viability of training forces so that local forces can provide boots on the ground.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Yes, I agree with you that this is a good step. However, we need to find a trusted partner to do this with.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I totally agree.

I would like to switch to the longer term. We talked about education and reconciliation, and Your Eminence, you talked about schools in Canada, about terrorist factories, and trying to find a way to shut them down. Could you expand on that? Where are the terrorist factories in that part of the world? Where are they in Canada or in the west?

Archbishop Sotirios Athanassoulas: I'm sure all of us realize that everyone is not self-radicalized. There are teachers and factory schools that teach them. It was mentioned before that in the Middle East everyone is fearful that you can't even change your allegiance. You have no freedom whatsoever.

What about the places that are run by people who teach Islam? The government should know those places better than I do. It is the duty of the government, not only of Canada but of the governments of the world, to find them and correct the situation because long-term solutions can only be found that way.

This young lady Malala, for example, who was not able to continue going to school, those things should be corrected. Those are the places and the factories that produce the jihadists. I can't go on naming places because first of all I don't know them, and I don't think it is necessary. Everyone understands who they are.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: They do, and I wish that political correctness would allow us to be a little more open about that. Maybe that time will come. I think there should be government involvement in that. Whether it's in Canada, U.S., Great Britain, or wherever, we cannot let that go on underground and just pretend it's not happening. Hopefully we'll get to that point.

We also talked about the organizations that come in with apparently the best of intentions, and they come in and they do good things: Muslim Brotherhood, Taliban, organizations like that. How do we get people to see through—and maybe we can't—the real intentions of organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood so that people are maybe not quite as accepting or quite as gullible when they come into their neighbourhoods, so to speak?

●(1010)

Archbishop Sotirios Athanassoulas: It was mentioned here earlier that sometimes the Arab Spring that was supported by us westerners did not bring the best results.

I was talking to some people, especially the Copts, who say that they were much better off with Mubarak, and even today, than they were when they had a democratic government there. How do we understand this? It's not easy to say. But at the same time, we know that they are organized, the teachers of Islam. I mentioned before that in Christianity we have made mistakes. It's about time they realized that what they are doing is harming Islam more than harming anybody else. It's harming their people more than they're harming the rest of the people.

I don't know whether I'm on subject, but I would like to say something else here. In England, remember that it was reported in the news that some Muslims said, "We don't care about your laws. We have to obey the laws of God." God is not only the one that they believe in. We must think here: is it a false god that we believe in when we teach things like this? And how should we respect the freedom of the individual? I personally believe that freedom is the element that makes human beings perfect. Without freedom, a man or a woman is not a perfect human being.

We have to think about those things. As I said in my introductory remarks, we should find the long solution rather than the solution of the day, because unless we change the thinking of the people—especially the Muslim people—we are not going to be able to do anything. That's what I believe.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move over to Madame Laverdière for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

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

I also want to thank all the people who have come today to provide these very interesting presentations. There have also been comments I took good note of, in particular the ones concerning longer-term humanitarian aid, but also the ones on governance and education, which are very important topics.

As to the current situation and reaction, some of you mentioned that the bombings could contribute to radicalization. According to

the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, after the first American bombings, ISIS managed to recruit more people.

Reverend Toma, you made a comment in your presentation and I would like to know if I understood you correctly. I believe I understood that the more frequent the attacks, the more progress ISIS makes.

Did I understand you correctly, and if that is the case, could you provide more details about that situation?

[English]

Rev Niaz Toma: Thank you very much for the question.

Yes, unfortunately, as Reverend Majed mentioned, ISIL started with only 1,500 fighters and now they are estimated to be at 30,000. We have to understand the mentality of these people. These people are coming to die at any price. They are coming to die anyway so that they can go there and enjoy the 72 virgins, and this and that, and all these promised gifts. That explains how they are increasing in numbers and how every action has a reaction. When they saw the international coalition, they got aggressive.

Yes, they are advancing on the ground. The only solution—I have to say this—is that when you have military forces on the ground and they are organized military forces, they will go like the wind in no time. They are there to die, so no tactics, no military capabilities.... There will be a chaotic defence in their approach, but they are taking advantage of the absence of a true Iraqi army. There is no army.

Paul Bremer made a comment recently. He was answering a criticism that he is responsible for the decision on the dissolution of the Iraqi army, that he opened the doors. I asked him this in person: "Was it a personal decision or was it an American administration decision?" He didn't answer in such a format. He told me that a decision of this size cannot be a personal decision; I have to say this. He was answering the criticism of the dissolution of the Iraqi army by saying that was no Iraqi army to dissolve because it all disappeared. We don't know if this is true or not, because when it comes to national security, I think all the former officers of the Iraqi army would answer a call to defend their own country.

ISIL is advancing and is taking advantage of the absence of the Iraqi army and the absence of ground combat troops. They are increasing in numbers and they are getting more aggressive in their approach.

●(1015)

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you.

There is also the issue of the funding that supports ISIS. These funds often come from other countries, although some experts tell us that that source is diminishing. The funds also come from oil sales that are done through Turkey, and arms purchases that happen in that same country. We are told that the border between Turkey and Iraq is very porous because those countries are occupied, and because of the situation in Syria, with the refugees.

Mr. Lamani, do you think it would be an option to try and asphyxiate ISIS by helping Turkey to strengthen its border to the east?

[English]

The Chair: As quickly as you can, please. We're over time, but we'll have an answer.

[Translation]

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani: The governments, secret services and other organizations do a lot of work and there are a lot of programs. Here is the background to all this.

Turkey is a member of NATO. I know that every secret service in the western world and beyond, and NATO are at the border. On the other hand, the jihadists are not parachuted in. They come from somewhere. There are so many programs, things that are left unsaid, and secrets.

Turkey has a lot more choice than Chad or Mali, that have no ways of monitoring their borders. There are a lot more choices in this case.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to finish off this second round with Mr. Menegakis, please.

Welcome, sir.

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing before us today. We certainly appreciate your comments and your opening remarks.

Your Eminence, I'd like to begin with you, if I may. Christians and religious minorities in the region have been the subject of persecution for centuries. Certainly, the Greek Orthodox faithful have not been immune to such persecution. Can you give us a sense of the lasting effects on a community of people who endure such bias and such hatred, particularly the effects on the children and the future of the children?

Archbishop Sotirios Athanassoulas: If we take, as an example, Turkey, we will see that all the minorities are almost gone. In 1917 or 1922 there were millions of minorities. Now there are not more than 100,000. Does this not say, though, because they impose their will on the people, "Either you become what we are or you are killed, or get out of here"? This is the situation. As far as I'm concerned, in those places, in those countries, unless things change drastically, there is no hope for the minorities.

• (1020)

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

Reverend El Shafie, you said, "In the absence of light, darkness prevails". That's a very striking comment. As you know, Canada has joined like-minded partners in participating in the military effort against ISIL. Do you see any possibility of resolving the barbaric actions of ISIL in the region without military intervention?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: To be honest with you, I don't. Just in Iraq, there are a lot of elements that can help. I think if the Iraqi central government made a peace agreement with the Sunni tribe groups that would help a lot, as would respecting the minority rights of such groups as Christians and Yezidis and so on and so forth. I think those are all elements that will help. However, without military

intervention by a local western-trained army that respects western values, I don't think this will be possible. I don't see this coming to a conclusion.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

Father Toma, can you give us an estimate of the number of Iraqi Christians and other religious minorities still under the control of ISIL? What is known of their fate today?

Rev Niaz Toma: According to our information, there are no Iraqi Christians under the control of ISIL, although we hear in the media that there is a price for Christian women. We have one account of only three people who are elderly. One of them was visited at the hospital. He couldn't leave the city and he converted to Islam by power, and the others are two very old ladies. The information we have is that there are only three people.

Apparently ISIL did receive instructions. The way they treated the Yezidis was quite different from the way they treated Christians. Apparently the instructions were to just take the Christians out of their towns, their villages, their cities, their houses, confiscate everything—even heart medication was confiscated from an elderly person—and kick them out. The instructions with regard to the Yezidis were, no, torture them; kill them savagely.

They were asked the reason for this differentiation. The answer was that in the Koran, the book they believe was dictated by God to Muhammad, Christians are described as "The people of the Book", and there is a verse in there that says to treat them well: "*Aaamiloo houn husna*". So they are literally going by the Koran. The Yezidis are, for them, blasphemers; they don't believe in God.

So according to our information, there are no Christians under the control of ISIL.

Thank you.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Menegakis.

That concludes our second round.

We'll start a third round, and we'll lead off with Mr. Goldring, please.

Go ahead for five minutes, sir.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you very much for being here today. It's a very interesting discussion.

Your Eminence, we had a discussion recently about an organization, the Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy. It's an organization of some 25 countries that have members of Parliament from the various countries in this organization. I believe it gives a good forum for discussion, certainly on orthodox concerns, as they are predominantly in the European concerns of today. But it also has subcommittees on policy, education, and many other things that people can collaborate on. Canada is not part of this, although our colleague Mr. Menegakis has attended a session. I believe Canada should be represented there officially in that organization, to take part in these discussions.

My question is to you, Ambassador Lamani. Would this not be a format or something that could be considered by countries with Muslim parliamentarians, who could come together to collaborate on particular issues? We talked about the importance of education and other things to be discussing, not like in the United Nations where it's Arab countries, but countries that have Muslim populations, such as in Canada, the United States and many other countries, so that we can have a more moderate consultation and discussion and, perhaps, maybe get into some of these questions of education and other issues that could be collaborated on together.

• (1025)

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani: I think I'm not in a position to answer in the stead of some states, but I think they have interparliamentary associations as well. I know there are two at the Arab level, and there's one at the Islamic level. There's an interparliamentary organization. I'm not sure where the headquarters are; I know the Iranians were interested in the Parliament of Iran having the headquarters.

I think there are some issues that should be developed internationally. When you talk about human rights, it has nothing to do with belief. When someone's rights are abused, it has nothing to do with that. He might be Muslim, Jew, Christian, or whatever. So there are issues that should be addressed internationally in a very firm way, because they are human principles.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Is this an organization that you can give us some information about? I'm not familiar with the organization.

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani: Yes, I think they have a website. The Islamic one, I'm sure it's in Arabic, French, and English on their website.

Mr. Peter Goldring: I would think this would be a good forum for this type of dialogue, to have these conversations. I know the organization on the orthodoxy is certainly a good forum to have discussions on problematic situations around the world.

Your Eminence, maybe you could comment on the Interparliamentary Assembly of the Orthodoxy as to how effective you have seen this organization to be, and perhaps how it might be improved to have more effectiveness in the future.

Archbishop Sotirios Athanassoulas: I do not know very much about this. I've talked to the chairman in Greece. He is a member of Parliament in Greece, and together he and a few others had a meeting there. The only thing I know is this. And I know that they cooperated very much with all the countries in Europe for the orthodox situation and the problems that exist. It's a very friendly organization and they try their best. I think it's very good that they can exchange ideas.

One thing with the members of Parliament of Islam is that it would help a lot, especially when they are from this country, from this continent, the western world and the east, if they would be able to exchange ideas and see that freedom would be respected for all people.

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

We'll turn it over to Mr. Dewar for five minutes.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to start my question and I want to make a comment for all of our witnesses that you should know and that I should have mentioned at the beginning to you. We are doing a study on this issue, but we're going to be doing a report. For anything that's not captured, or you have a thought afterwards, please feel free to send in recommendations, reports, or thoughts to our capable crew here to help us with our work.

I want to start with Father Toma. I was with Mr. Garneau, as well as Minister Baird, and we were all very troubled by what we saw. I'd been in the same region in 2007 when it was an island of stability, security, and diversity, and it was quite shocking for me to see. I want to follow up on a comment you made because there are some things we disagree with the government on. There are things we agree on and there's a consensus on; that we should be involved, and that humanitarian assistance was absolutely critical. Mr. Garneau I'm sure would agree that everyone we talked to, including our ambassador, was emphatic about the need to immediately help those in need, and that notwithstanding that there has been some help, there's not enough.

I wanted to quickly hear from you. You were saying that the pledges have been made, but the response, the aid, has not been delivered. A clear question is who should Canada be dialoguing with? We met with people from the Barzani group, which is an NGO. Is that who we should be coordinating our efforts with? Churches obviously, but help us here, because I think it's critical that we get our support on the ground and get the aid delivered. Perhaps you can help us with that, how we can speed things up.

• (1030)

Rev Niaz Toma: Thank you very much for this question.

I think the focus was given to the Yezidis. I described how they were treated in a different way. There were more damages. They suffered a lot. The Christians who fled to Erbil, Duhok, and Slemani were welcomed by the church agencies. It was the church's establishment that was incapable with their capacity to accommodate all of the needs, but it was quite different. I think the focus was given to the Yezidis.

We already met with some officials. They told us that the Canadian government made a contract with the Red Cross and we asked "Why the holy cross?", because these international agencies spend 30% of the amounts they receive on administrative expenses. We heard confirmation that "No, we made an agreement with them that we reduced the 30% to 10%, and we think it is reasonable". Then we heard that "Oh, 50% will go to the Red Cross and 50% will go through agencies that we will approve of, so who do you suggest?" We suggested some agencies like CNEWA because at least it's a Canadian registered agency that is reputable and credible. We suggested Caritas Canada and we suggested Development and Peace.

These agencies work so closely with the people, with the displaced, that we're going to be able to show that this donation, this support, is coming from the Canadian government. Our people never heard about something that came from the Canadian government.

I don't know. We are caught in this situation.

Mr. Paul Dewar: That's very helpful. I would encourage you to think of other names and partners. That would be great.

In the time remaining, I want to go to you, Professor Akhavan, and perhaps Mr. Lamani. We have a concern with regard to Syria and we haven't talked about that. There is the door open within the military combat mission that the Canadian government has engaged in, that there's a possibility—and certainly we're asking about it in the House of Commons right now—that we might be looking at air strikes within Syria. Based on some of your commentary, I want to hear your analysis of what the perils of that might be, particularly in the way Assad is playing the game.

Professor Akhavan, maybe to start with you.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: As I explained, the Assad regime has successfully positioned itself as the lesser of the two evils, and there is in effect a military alliance now between the west and the Assad regime. One of the questions, of course, is not to identify ISIL as the enemy, but to think about what is the endgame. What is the endgame that the international community wishes to pursue with respect to Syria and with respect to Iraq and the wider regime? Otherwise, we're just going to be putting out one small fire in the middle of a much bigger conflagration.

The question remains about somehow restarting a peace process in Syria and dealing with the massive crimes that the Assad regime has created against the population. There can be no meaningful long-term solution and stability unless those underlying issues are dealt with.

I do want to end, though, by saying that while I think the military solution is insufficient, it is of course very important, for example, that ISIL has been denied the right to use a hydro dam, oil facilities.... The denial of those facilities through military means is important in defeating ISIL.

We have to also recognize that most of the advances on the ground have been by the peshmerga working in conjunction with the Iranian revolutionary guards. As I said, politics makes for strange bedfellows, and there is a profound realignment going on in the Middle East today.

• (1035)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Monsieur Lamani?

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani: My concern when it comes to strikes is that we have had very bad experiences. I was in the session of the Security Council when I was still ambassador there, after the international community decided to go to Afghanistan. I remember that one of the talks we got there was about how the Americans were going to be strongly in Kabul, and that if the Taliban were in the mountains, they were going to strike. I remember that I was one of the people defending against the idea and saying, "No, it's not going to happen that way, because if you strike there, you are going to kill innocents and you are going to make the Taliban more popular."

It's very slippery. It has to be done in a way.... It was mentioned several times about having boots on the ground, local boots, but the right boots.... This is going to take a long, long time. I'm not convinced that what is being done now with the Iraqi army, which is sectarian, is the right thing.

Mr. Paul Dewar: But should we be going into Syria with air strikes?

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani: It's a very hard question. I really don't know if.... For Syria, while there are some new proposals now for a lot of things, it is very cynical. I myself have used several times the words "the crisis of Syria". I've been doing this work for more than three decades, mediation and this. It's just Kafkaesque. Absurdity has no limit. It was mentioned about the peshmerga now working with Iran from the other side, ISIL with this government or the other government.... Everything can happen. I'm not sure.

The Chair: Thanks, Paul.

We're going to finish off with Mr. Anderson for five minutes.

Mr. David Anderson: I want to follow up a little further on what Mr. Dewar started. He talked about Syria, but I'd like to hear a bit more information about how you see the national interests of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran playing into this as well. We only have five minutes so I realize this is ridiculous, but perhaps, Professor Akhavan, you can address that to start with, and maybe Mr. Lamani can as well. What are the national interests of those three countries going to do to affect this?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Well, much of what is happening in Syria, and what has been happening in Iraq as well, has been a regional power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The fault lines have been the Sunni-Shia divide. Clearly, the Assad regime would have collapsed had it not been for the intervention of Iran and of Lebanon's Hezbollah.

I think that once Assad crossed the "red line" in using chemical weapons and there was no western military intervention forthcoming, it was a profound turning point. Now, of course, the Free Syrian Army is disturbed that the only time there is western military intervention it's in favour of the Assad regime.

I think these contradictions have to be understood, and there has to be a wider rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia if there is any meaningful solution to the regional problem.

Lastly, the Assad regime is of course essential for Iran's ties with Lebanon's Hezbollah and the wider balance of power between Iran and Israel, so all of these pieces have to somehow fit together.

Mr. David Anderson: Before I go to Mr. Lamani, what do you see as Turkey's role in this? We get conflicting reports of their interests and how they may be playing that out.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: I think Ambassador Lamani said it correctly, that Turkey is not a country like Chad or Mali. It has tremendous military intelligence resources. I have heard many sources explaining how, for example, members of the al-Nusra front were moving freely across Turkish border points.

So it is not a secret that Turkey has tried to establish its own sphere of influence in northern Syria using these Islamist elements, but the Islamist elements are incredibly complex and there are many shifting alliances. So what we call ISIL could itself be transformed many times over as new alliances are struck. Part of an effective solution, beyond military strikes, is to give an incentive to those Islamist elements to defect from ISIL and to be given some other constructive role in the future of Syria.

• (1040)

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

Mr. Lamani, could you bring Qatar into this as well, if possible?

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani: During the Cold War, the most extremist about any crisis were the superpowers, the Soviet Union and the Americans. The neighbours try always to find a solution because they are always scared to have some problems, except now. We see extremes much more from the neighbours of Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, much more than the Russians and the Americans. They went too far.

Maybe I disagree a little bit with the professor about the internal situation, which I was following for the last two years. First of all, there's nothing in Syria called the Free Syrian Army. If you want to be accurate, you have to add an "s", Free Syrian Armies. I myself tried to have data about the armed groups. You cannot imagine; they're called brigades, but of course "brigade" has no military definition. They can be five people as well as 30,000 people. I counted more than 2,000 different brigades.

The second problem is that when you are talking about the coalition or about the political opposition there's a huge problem. What is their impact on the armed groups? It's very limited, and I'm not talking about the extremists, al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, ISIS. It's becoming very complicated, and I agree with the professor that you need to have even those who you consider as part of the problem to be part of the solution. For this you need a political will, which is not there yet.

Mr. David Anderson: Actually, I was going to follow that up before, and you did talk a bit about how can we contribute to that

political approach. I wonder if you just wanted to build on that a little bit further. What roles you see the Canadian government having the potential to play in encouraging this? You talked about dialogue with some of the Scandinavian countries, but do you have any other suggestions as well?

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani: They're different, Syria and Iraq. Let's begin with Iraq. I think if you have a committee, or if you charge a foundation or a university or whatever to invite and to develop a kind of dialogue, first separately, with people, you should avoid some mistakes that were done in 2006 and 2007, especially by the Nordics. I remember I was invited once by the Norwegian government, which was trying to help in Iraq for national reconciliation. When I went to Oslo I found that there were only members of the parliament, because at that time in the parliament everything was blocked. I said, well, those are not concerned by the national reconciliation; national reconciliation is those who accept the political process under occupation and those who are opposing, by arms, to have everybody.

In these things, especially with the complications now, we should have an objective. The objective is to isolate ISIS, if you have the other Sunnis. This is the difference with Syria. In Syria everybody is against, except if there's cynical work to use them or whatever, which is happening on the ground.

By inviting these groups, inviting members of the government and different parties, and then organizing a kind of seminar of national reconciliation, developing this and bringing some experts from Canada—because they need a lot of help, they don't know a lot of things—on institutions, federalism, changes in the constitution, I do strongly believe Canada can do a lot in this kind of dialogue.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

To our witnesses today, thank you very much for what was a very informative and a very good round today. Thank you all very much.

With that, we will adjourn the meeting.

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