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Mr. Dean Allison

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● (0850)

[*English*]

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

Pursuant to standing order 108(2) we are studying Canada's response to the violence, religious persecution, and dislocation caused by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

I want to welcome our witnesses who are here with us today.

We have, as an individual, Mr. Rabea Allos. Welcome, sir, glad to have you here in Ottawa. Joining us via video conference from Oxford, United Kingdom, we have Professor Matteo Legrenzi, who is from the University of Venice. Welcome, sir, glad to have you here. Joining us from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, we have from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Mr. Andrew Tabler, senior fellow. Welcome, sir, glad to have you here as well.

We'll start our opening statements in that order. After all your opening statements, we'll go around the room for questions back and forth from all the members.

We'll start with Mr. Allos.

Mr. Rabea Allos (As an Individual): Honourable members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, good morning to you all.

I would like to thank you for the kind invitation. I'm honoured to be here today to speak on behalf of the Iraqi Christians, one of the oldest churches and one of the oldest civilizations.

I am here as an individual who has been working as a volunteer over the last few years helping Iraqi refugees resettle in Canada through the private sponsorship programs through the office for refugees, affiliated with the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto.

I was working mainly with Iraqi Christians who have fled Iraq to neighbouring countries, mainly Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. The program was started by the Honourable Jason Kenney, the former Minister of Immigration back in 2009, and so far more than 20,000 Iraqis have been resettled in Canada. Those are refugees looking for new beginnings, looking to start a new life, and a future that will only be brighter.

Since last July, the situation in Iraq took a turn for the worse after ISIL took over the city of Mosul and the neighbouring Nineveh Plain villages, where the majority of Iraqi Christians reside. Within days, Christianity that had existed from the first century in that region disappeared. All Christians, except for a handful, escaped for their lives and faith. They made a decision to give up their lives, their jobs, their savings, and flee to keep their faith. Unfortunately, this is happening in the 21st century.

The main reason for the rise of ISIL and similar groups is the politicization of Islam; groups who represent the minority of Muslims, who are bullying the rest of mainstream Muslims as well as non-Muslims, Christians, the Yazidis, Mandaeans, and other minorities. Some Muslims label those who politicize Islam as Islamists. We should make this distinction clear: not all Muslims are Islamists, but certainly those Islamists should be considered, like the Nazis, hate crime groups. These groups are not a threat to the region of the Middle East only. They are a threat across the world. We have clerics in Canada who are Wahabis, Muslim Brotherhoods, and other similar groups, who are teaching young kids hatred of anything that is different from who they are. There are reports that hundreds of young individuals from Canada, the U.S., and many European countries are joining ISIL to fight for the Islamic State.

According to the Koran, under the Islamic State the people of the book, mainly Christians and Jews, are allowed to keep their faith as long as they pay the *jizya*, which is the tax. However, atheists and people of other religions have the choice of conversion to Islam or the sword. Basically, under the Islamic State, atheists, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and others will face death.

There is certainly a need to stop ISIL and this will need collaborative efforts by many parties, regional and international. The coalition, led by the United States and of which Canada is a part, is certainly needed, as well as air strikes and military advisory support to the Iraqi army and the Kurdish regional army. ISIL forces need to be weakened through military air strikes while the Iraqi and Kurdish armies fight them on the ground. At the same time, international pressure is needed on some of the regional players to stop the financial and the logistic support to ISIL, whether it is coming directly from governments or from individuals. To defeat ISIL quickly, there is a need to enlist the support of the land forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey, countries that are mainly Sunni Muslims. There is a need to show that the extreme fanatic splinter groups of Sunni Muslims are fought by moderate Sunni Muslim forces, not Shia Muslims, and certainly not crusaders.

There is a need to impose restrictions on clerics who preach hate and we need to stop the Internet fatwas. Those clerics and their fatwas are driving young kids from around the world to follow the path of terror and will continue to do so.

As for Canada's response to the crisis in Iraq, joining the coalition is certainly needed. ISIL is not going to be defeated by being idle. The effort to fight ISIL should involve regional forces, but it has to be led by an international coalition to give comfort to all parties in the region. The tensions and sensitivities between the Shia and the Sunni Muslims have reached very high levels and only international intervention can stop it from ballooning.

● (0855)

As for the humanitarian supports, the Canadian government has been very generous in its support to the internally displaced. The Canadian ambassador has been on the ground in the Kurdish region, personally following up and making sure the aid is reaching those who need it. Unfortunately, we are hearing reports that Christians who are staying in the churches, monasteries, or schools are not seeing the support. However, the Canadian ambassador recently visited the Iraqi bishops to get more first-hand information about the aid needed. Continued help will be needed, especially since winter has started. There is a need to open schools and medical centres, as well as a need for psychological support to women and children who have suffered mentally through this crisis.

I believe Canada should look at the possibility of accepting a few thousand refugees directly from Iraq, especially those who have families in Canada. The program, if channelled through the private sponsorship program, will minimize any costs to the Canadian taxpayers.

One last suggestion on how Canada can help is for Canada to host an international conference inviting ministers of foreign affairs in the region along with top Christian and Muslim clerics to discuss the situation, and Muslim clerics and muftis should declare that the persecution of Christians and other minorities is not acceptable and not permitted.

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move over to Professor Legrenzi, who's joining us from Oxford.

Professor.

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi (Professor, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, As an Individual): Thank you so much. It is always a pleasure to be back in Ottawa, where I lived for quite a few years.

I'd like to start by saying that there is not an exclusively military solution to the challenge of the Islamic State, because in the short term, military action may well be necessary to prevent the collapse of the central Iraqi government as well as the Kurdish regional government, but in the longer term, a political solution needs to be devised.

Military strikes by coalition forces, albeit necessary, provide recruits for the Islamic State, since civilian victims are inevitable. The essential political problem in Iraq has been the character of the rule by the previous government for at least, let's say, five or six years. The removal of al-Maliki as prime minister is definitely a step in the right direction. Still, a lot more needs to be done by the current Iraqi government in order to deserve allied support.

Simply put, the sectarian and exclusionary nature of rule by the central government in Baghdad makes a large part of the population in the areas controlled by the Islamic State receptive to a message of liberation, however misguided and brutal. They need to be convinced they would be safe if there were a return to central government control.

The military personnel of the Islamic State include many former Baathist officers who have proven to be very effective on the ground, certainly more effective than the bulk of the Iraqi army stationed in Mosul in the north of the country. Let's ask ourselves why three divisions of the Iraqi army simply melted away. In large part it's because they were not there. There are in excess of 50,000 ghost soldiers in the army, and this estimate is by the Iraqi government. Why did the ones who work there not actually fight or even sabotage their equipment before fleeing in the face of the enemy?

The challenge, therefore, requires a long-term political solution and a profound rethinking of the nature of rule by the Iraqi central government and a marginalization of sectarian gangs aligned with the government. They were the ones who, paradoxically, were brought up from the south to actually prevent Baghdad from being overrun. They were the ones who could be counted on to fight, and yet they exacerbate the problem.

We should also not forget that everything that is going on requires a sustained development and educational intervention. From these points of view, Canada should be very proud of the role that it has fulfilled so far.

All of this is happening in the context of our having failed to meet the challenge of preventing another generation of conflict, just to quote a book by David Malone, my friend who is now in Tokyo. The security-development nexus has to be taken into account without neglecting either aspect.

Thank you very much.

● (0900)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor.

Andrew Tabler, I believe you were here before when we talked about Syria. Welcome back, glad to have you.

I'll turn the floor over to you.

Mr. Andrew Tabler (Senior Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy): Thank you very much.

It's a pleasure to be here with you today, Mr. Chairman and ranking members. It's always easier to go last, but hopefully I can add more to the discussion, for what's likely to be a long discussion today, in a series of discussions going forward into the coming months and years concerning the threat posed by ISIL. It is perhaps the most complex threat facing Canada and its allies in the foreign arena certainly, and will be for years to come.

Following from the previous comments, I think bombing your way, or bombing one country's way, out of this problem will not be sufficient. This is where I think until recently...which has been the high-profile bombing campaigns in Iraq and Syria, combined with the arming of some groups inside of Iraq, most notably Kurds. This is part of the containment aspect of ISIL.

Some of that has been outlined in terms of protection of minorities, which is a major concern not only for those of you in Canada but in the United States and the world over, and justifiably so. ISIL's tactics are extremely severe. They not only pose an existential threat to these minorities but they also challenge the world on whether it will stand by in the face of such atrocities.

The problem going forward will be in this political solution that has been mentioned previously—how it will actually take place, and what shape it will take. All of these, ISIL and other Jihadist groups who are inside Iraq and Syria, are a product of wars inside Iraq, and most recently in Syria, as those states broke down, mostly because the central authorities in those countries did not include the majorities in each country. That's the reason why, until now, the basis of the strategy in Iraq, at least for the United States but I think also for Canada, has been to try to empower the new Iraqi government under Prime Minister al-Abadi to try to be more inclusive to Sunnis, Kurds, and others in the country and not simply benefit a Shia-dominated government backed by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In Syria we do not have those kinds of options. The government in Syria, the regime led by President Bashar al-Assad, is a completely minority-based, inflexible system at its core. It doesn't mean that it doesn't have majority Sunni who are attached to it, but it has proven to be, at its core, one of the least effective countries in the region at any kind of reform—political, economic, or otherwise. It's a considerable challenge to expect that the regime will reform under such circumstances in the foreseeable future.

That makes this settlement in Syria that much harder to attain. I think you've seen recently the efforts by the UN representative, Staffan de Mistura, to try to bring about a ceasefire, or rather a freeze, around the city of Aleppo, where the government is poised to yet again encircle and siege a city, this time arguably Syria's largest city in one way, shape, or form. The freeze is an idea at the moment. There really are not substantial plans attached to it as of yet, although there are lots of other ideas. Like all of these efforts, they'll take a long time to roll out. In the meantime, unfortunately, a lot of minority populations in areas that are controlled by ISIS will suffer.

The complexity of the solution in Syria is particularly difficult for the international community to grasp. It's there where we actually need to bring about two things that seem inconsistent. One is the defeat of ISIL. The other is the transformation, in one way, shape, or form, of the Bashar al-Assad regime into something that takes into account the country's majority Sunni population. Sunnis in Syria represent roughly 75% of the population—it depends on how you cut it and which census you use—that is the base of ISIL.

● (0905)

The only way to really politically deal with it and to politically undermine ISIL is to bring people who support that organization or are forced to support that organization, Sunnis, away from those organizations and jihadists into some other kind of political arrangements in those areas, or concerning the Syrian central state. That requires a political settlement inside the country, and unfortunately, that remains very far off.

I would encourage all of you to follow the news, read scholars like those who are testifying here today, and work together to try to come up with a real political solution that does not simply have a military foundation. We need to find something that goes beyond the current efforts by the western countries that can try to bring peace to these very troubled lands.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to start with our first round, which will be seven minutes for each party.

I'm going to start on my left with Mr. Dewar for seven minutes, please.

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

Thank you to our witnesses. I believe that we have heard some of these points underlined in our study so far.

I should start off by saying, for information for our witnesses, that our study is going to be with recommendations. If there are things that you have perhaps forgotten, please feel free to send in some of your points and recommendations to our team here.

Mr. Tabler, I want to start with you. You provided us some great insight when we were doing our study on Syria—and thank you for that—and it connects to some of the other points that were made today on the political solution. I think there's a slight disagreement in this country about actions that were just recently taken with air strikes. Put that aside, and I think most people agree on the robust humanitarian support, protecting minorities, and dealing with those who have suffered from sexual violence.

I think everyone in this room, in this country indeed, who cares about this issue knows that the military solution in and of itself will not solve the crisis there. That leads us to the point—and we're the foreign affairs committee—how can we be involved in diplomatic ways to deal with Iraq? Let's focus on Iraq for now, but you're quite right to touch on Syria.

There are some groups involved in the Sunni awakening who have still not been brought in. I think some of the leadership is in Turkey right now. There are groups who have not yet been integrated. I know there is a new Prime Minister, and we have to give him some time, but we also want to make sure we're vigilant to ensure this is going to be a real transition to a real inclusive government.

What do you think of the idea of bringing some of those leaders together? We heard from one of our witnesses here in Ottawa about bringing some of those key actors together to do some confidence building, to do some relationship building as a first start, be it here in Ottawa or somewhere else. If that's the case, what should the goals be? We've seen these attempts made before, where sometimes the agenda's too open and not focused enough.

I'd just like to have your take on that.

Mr. Andrew Tabler: In terms of Iraq...but I guess it could apply to the process in Syria as well, bringing different actors together. In the case of Iraq, it's hard to say this but actually the situation is markedly better in that you have the semblance of a state, one that controls more territory arguably than the government does in Syria. It depends, of course, on how you look at this. Because we have the ability to change governments in Iraq, and Iraqis have the ability to elect new leaders, it gives us some political flexibility in a process that we are used to here in the west and can plug into, so to speak.

I think bringing people together is an excellent idea, and it's something that happens periodically, not only in the Middle East as a whole, going back to the peace process or even earlier, but in other aspects, and it's a good thing to bring people to the table. In all the 20-some years that I've been dealing with the Middle East and writing about it, I think actually that these efforts oftentimes are a process for a process's sake. What's missing oftentimes is the part of the story here of what creates necessity for each side to make real concessions.

One of the takeaways from living in the Middle East for a long time, or maybe from just getting a little older in general, is that I don't think people really change fundamentally unless they have to, and I think the same can be said of regimes and governments as well. People and governments don't change unless they're in a dilemma...a real choice between equal goods or the lesser of two evils. To get into the heart of your question about how to make this more effective, I think we can think about how we can create necessity here in the international community for different parties to make hard decisions. It's perhaps there that the full tool box of diplomacy as well as military force could be best used at certain key moments, rather than simply trying to bomb or degrade a group, and at the same time, as one of the previous guests had mentioned, bombing into areas that are full of civilians and making the situation that much worse.

I'm afraid in Syria and Iraq that's oftentimes what we're involved in, even though we're actually trying to defeat these groups that are diametrically opposed to our interests.

● (0910)

Mr. Paul Dewar: I don't know if I have time, Chair, but I'd like to hear from our other guest in Venice and our guest here in Ottawa.

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Very briefly, I would say I agree with what has been said. My concrete policy advice would be to be very tough with the Iraqi government because right now Canadian lives are on the line. They cannot shield behind sovereignty. We saw this coming. It's not that these people came out of a desert as it is sometimes portrayed in the press. We knew it was going to happen. We told them. They told us not to worry, that they had everything under control, and then their army melts away.

So if you have Canadian lives at arm's-length, you have a right to be very tough and to demand specific action of the Iraqi government.

Mr. Rabea Allos: Certainly I'm against war but there is an immediate need for those internally displaced refugees to go back home and go back to a normal life, and the only way to do that is to defeat ISIL immediately. At the same time we need to go through the process of reconciliation. We need to go through the process of nation-building. Unfortunately, in the Middle East, third world countries, in general, and Iraq, in particular, have tribal societies. People do not have loyalty to the state. They have loyalty to their tribes. They have loyalty to their religious leaders, but certainly not to the states.

Mr. Paul Dewar: If I may, because my time is running short, you brought it up, and I actually like the idea of Canada being involved in some form of that reconciliation, noting what we just heard from our previous witnesses about not just having dialogue but a very focused process to really get some results on the ground.

Mr. Rabea Allos: One of the witnesses mentioned the ghost soldiers. I heard about this back in September when I was in Istanbul. Some of the colleagues I met with who came from Iraq mentioned this. There are certainly more than 50,000.

What's happening is for a general to become a general, he has to pay a bribe, and this could go up to the prime minister's office, sometimes up to a million dollars, and to make it up, they recruit soldiers and tell them, “Stay at home, we'll pay you half the salary and I'll keep the other half.”

● (0915)

Mr. Paul Dewar: By the way, the 50,000 is an important point. It is from Iraqi sources, so that's a good point.

Mr. Rabea Allos: Exactly.

That's why the army, even those who were at the bases, were not trained properly, because even then they were bribing so they'd just sit around and do nothing. They were not prepared.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Yes, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Hawn, sir, for seven minutes.

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

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here.

You've all talked about the necessity for military action but, obviously, not only military action.

Professor Legrenzi, you talked about the 50,000 ghost soldiers. I'm led to believe there are about 20,000 real, flesh-and-blood soldiers who are at a reasonable level and could be trained into a reasonable division with appropriate support.

Canada has a lot of experience in training foreign forces like that, in Afghanistan in particular. Do you think it's something that Canada should look at? I'm told by people who have done this kind of thing that with a training force of about 350 and in about six months, they could do a pretty good job of getting an Iraqi division of about 20,000 soldiers ready to take on a more meaningful role.

Do you have a comment on that?

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Nobody doubts the professionalism of Canadians who are involved in this process, but the problem is the will to fight.

We train, if not the ghost soldiers who are at home...we place a lot of taxpayers' money into training Iraqi forces. We were told that a specific weapons system needed years of training and it was taxpayers' money that went toward that training. Then we do have ISIS forces who are able to turn around those guns and use them against the Iraqi army within a week.

Nobody doubts their professionalism, but certainly before you put Canadians there, and before you invest resources, you have to make sure there is a will to fight on the part of these men. Even more importantly, that they do not then start to terrorize their own population as they often did in the areas that are now controlled by the Islamic State.

It was the Iraqi army that set up checkpoints around their population, probably to pay the general who had recruited them in the first place.

The professionalism of Canadian forces is beyond doubt, but we need to put them in a position to be effective.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Agreed.

Was part of the problem with the melting away of the Iraqi army that they were primarily Sunnis who were being asked to fight Sunnis under the leadership of a very weak and unpopular Shia president? Did that play any role at all?

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Well, this sectarianism is oftentimes overplayed. I would say that if you look at the economic incentives, the widespread corruption, and the fact that many of these people thought that their job in the army was a sinecure, you get much closer to the actual reasons for them to not pick up weapons and fight.

Even someone as jaded as I am, who has been looking at this for a long time, was very surprised to notice the fact that they didn't even bother to sabotage the equipment, so that equipment was then quickly turned around and utilized against the Iraqi army.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you.

Mr. Tabler, I agree wholeheartedly with your comment that when you get people together, people won't change unless they have to change. People won't change unless they can be made to believe that it is in their national interest or in their personal interest to change.

We can say that about Putin in Russia. Until we convince him that it's in Russia's national interest to stop doing what they're doing in Ukraine, it won't happen.

This is obviously a loaded question that you can't answer quickly, but how do you convince people in that part of the world, the Middle East—Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and so on—that it is in their national and personal interest to knock it off?

Mr. Andrew Tabler: Well, it would depend on the process.

First of all, I would agree with Professor Legrenzi's statement. There's no sense in investing in something, unless the basis of it is sound, unless it makes sense. The problem with Iraq and Syria is that they don't make any political sense, and the responses of the governments oftentimes make less sense, not only overall by western standards, but by global standards as a whole. Corruption is certainly a big aspect of it, and I think that was raised in why these states are ineffective.

Getting to the point of your question, I think what has to happen is that we need to put in place, both in Iraq and in Syria, a process that really settles this and takes into account all of the communities inside both countries. We need a process that provides a basis of safety for them, and a basis of protecting their human rights, and also taking into account their political aspirations. As I said, in Iraq, it is slightly easier because you have a government in place; there's some flexibility in the composition of the government. They're susceptible to outside pressures, not only by Canada and the United States, but also by Iran, which is next door.

It's in Syria where the real problem still remains, and I think probably will remain for years because you do not have that transition of government there. No one else has ruled Syria but a member of the Assad family since 1970, longer than I've been alive.

It's there where we do not really see concessions from the government, and I think it's there that the international community is going to have to come up with a settlement that tries to put the pieces of Syria back together again, along with their neighbours in Iraq. Or, at a certain point in the future, and I think this is really only in a de facto sense, but in a de jure sense...we're going to need to think about the modalities of de facto partition of these countries. I don't advocate it as an end state; I think it would be better if they could come back together.

In the meantime, we're going to have to think about these countries as divided entities, as broken states, and we'll have to think about what to do in the short term. The only thing I know to do in the short term is to bring different parties together to see if you can hammer out arrangements that will at least lessen the violence. In order to do that, you will need political will on both sides in terms of the international community—and here I'm speaking between the United States and Russia—to force both sides to make real concessions. I'm not sure that each side is either willing or capable of doing so. We'll have to see what comes in the coming months, as more diplomatic attention is paid towards dealing with ISIL from the ground up.

Thank you.

● (0920)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hawn.

We'll move over to Mr. Garneau, sir.

Seven minutes, please.

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My first question will be to Professor Legrenzi, and then to Mr. Tabler.

If we assume that the objective is to defeat ISIS, then the way the scenario seems to be unfolding, at least to my understanding, is that at the moment air strikes are providing a containment role. In the meantime, there's limited ground action by Iraqi forces, some defensive action by the peshmerga. We are helping to train them and equip them, so that presumably sometime in 2015 there will be some concerted offensive action. How long that will take in order to push ISIS out of Iraq, I'm not 100% sure. I think things will be challenging in places where ISIS has embedded itself, such as in the city of Mosul.

However, let's assume an optimistic scenario, in that ISIS is pushed out of what is now Iraq. What happens then? That's the question for me. Obviously ISIS will remain in Syria, and whilst the coalition has been bombing in Syria, I don't see any scenario whereby ground troops are going to move into Syria.

How does one go beyond the scenario of pushing ISIS out of Iraq? What happens at that point?

I'd like to hear your thoughts, Professor Legrenzi and then Mr. Tabler.

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Well, Syria is particularly intractable, but let me say this first. What are those Iraqi troops, which in our best-case scenario are able to reconquer all of Iraq in 2015, going to do once they feel that they are in a position to control the territory that is now controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq? If they go back to doing what they were doing before the Islamic State came on the scene, which was to terrorize the local population, to marginalize it from a political point of view, and to extract money at checkpoints, then maybe it will not be ideal, but you can be sure that within two or three years we will have another insurgent group that will spring up.

I guess that is the easier part of the answer, but it's very important, as I said, because these are Canadian lives and Canadian taxpayers' money that is being poured into this operation.

When it comes to Syria, the situation, as the other witness correctly stated, is a lot more complex. There will be tough choices to be made in terms of how far you want to go in the direction of finding a political agreement with a regime that everybody—not the regime itself, but certainly everybody in Canada and the United States—hoped would collapse pretty soon but then instead proved quite resilient. I certainly do not have a clear answer for that, but it will be a much harder choice to be made down the road.

● (0925)

Mr. Andrew Tabler: To address your very good question about what happens if our strategy in Iraq succeeds, pushing ISIL at least temporarily but maybe in the medium term out of Iraqi territory, I'm a little skeptical about that. I think that other groups would spring up, as Professor Legrenzi has mentioned.

The plan in Syria, as much as there is a plan, and it's being debated in Washington now, is for the United States to intervene to degrade ISIL in Syrian territory to allow the Assad regime to try to consolidate some of their areas as a general containment measure. It is called now in Washington policy circles "uncoordinated deconfliction" between the United States and the Assad regime's forces: the United States is flying aircraft over Syrian territory; the Bashar al-Assad regime is not shooting at those aircraft.

The problem really is with the capacities of the Assad regime. If they were more inclusive and if they hadn't tried to shoot their way out of the country's largest uprising at the expense of 200,000-and-some killed and countless others imprisoned and tortured in such a bloody way, then I think they would have a hope of moving their forces into eastern Syria to defeat ISIL.

I don't think anyone expects them to do that. In fact, while they're advancing in the north, the Assad regime's forces are being pushed out of the south. That shows the complexity of this. It's there, in the wilds of eastern Syria, that the "train and equip" force that's supposed to be trained by the United States and its allies and its regional allies from four different sites in the region is supposed to take on ISIL at some indeterminate point in the future.

The problem, of course, is to motivate rebels who are in neighbouring countries to join that force and to fight ISIL first instead of fighting the Assad regime, which has been trying in one way, shape, or form to kill or strangle the opposition into submission. That's a circle that is very hard to square, or vice versa. Given what the United States is doing up until now—and I can only speak from an American standpoint—it will be insufficient to motivate local actors or local allies who back the opposition to fight ISIL and to displace its force in eastern Syria.

Also unpalatable is allowing the Assad regime to reconquer all of its territory, for two reasons. One is the nature of that fight and the lack of legitimacy of the Assad regime due to its actions over the last few years. But also, the Assad regime is in alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran and its forces, which are in unprecedented numbers and level of influence inside of Syria as a result of supporting the Assad regime during the uprising. That threatens to destabilize the balance between Iranian-backed governments and forces and generally Sunni-backed governments or Sunni-based governments throughout the Middle East, and it makes this potentially much more explosive.

Like Professor Legrenzi, I wish I had a solution to propose to you. I think that in the end, diplomacy and military force in combination —and specially used in smart, intelligent ways based on a real political process—will be the thing that solves this for the United States, Canada, and its allies. But I'm afraid at the moment we simply don't see it and probably won't see it for some time.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Garneau.

We're now going to start our second round, with five minutes of questions.

I'm going to start with Ms. Brown.

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

It's sad to listen to your testimony, because it sounds so hopeless. If there's one thing that all of us want to have, it's hope for the future.

Mr. Allos, let me ask you a question to perhaps help me understand. You said something that seems counterintuitive to me. You talked about Jewish people and Christians having to pay a tax. It seems to me so counterintuitive: if they kill these people, the funding is no longer available.

Is it so insignificant an amount of money that it really doesn't make any difference to the coffers of ISIS, or is it just that they are making a statement to the world by destroying these ethnic groups?

Mr. Rabea Allos: What happened in Mosul when ISIL went in is that first they called all the archbishops, the Chaldean Syriac Catholic and the Syriac Orthodox archbishops, to meet with the ISIL leaders to come up with a solution. Basically, the bishops refused because they already had left Mosul.

A few days after that they came up with the fatwa that you either convert to Islam or leave.

A few weeks later they came back and said that, no, Christians can come back and they can pay the jizya. But already the damage had been done and people had already left.

Ms. Lois Brown: So what kind of funds—

Mr. Rabea Allos: But according to Islam, basically, people of the book can pay the jizya and stay.

Ms. Lois Brown: And how much money is being demanded of them?

Mr. Rabea Allos: I've heard the figure of $400 per family in Mosul. But again, it varies.

Ms. Lois Brown: And that probably is a very difficult sum to come up with?

Mr. Rabea Allos: Yes.

Ms. Lois Brown: All right.

Mr. Tabler, could I ask my next question of you just because I don't have very much time.

You said that the central government did not include the minorities and they need more inclusion. I was just looking on the Web page here and I see that there are eight seats that are designated in Iraq for the minority groups. We heard the other day from Vian Saeed, who is a female parliamentarian, a young woman, 31 years of age I understand, of the Yazidi religious minority.

Could you give us any idea what you think the construction needs to look like to be more inclusive and to bring more of those ethnic minorities, and religious minorities, into the government?

Mr. Andrew Tabler: I'm not a specialist on Iraq per se, but I think in terms there is the issue of representation in formal government structures such as in parliament and so on, and that's valuable. These members though don't necessarily have to be representative of, or have actual long-standing followings within, their communities. They could be simply enticed into arrangements with whatever Shia-based government represents the majority inside Iraq. That's something I think that perhaps Professor Legrenzi or another witness could get into.

The real problem is—and I think this is another thing that you learn by living in the Middle East—governments in the Middle East are oftentimes only facades for the real power structure, which is centred around the leadership, in particular the security services and the armed forces. It's there where, over the course of the last few years, a lot of non-Shia personnel and leaders were forced out of the ranks of the military and of security services in favour of the majority Shia population. Prime Minister al-Maliki has been accused of being responsible for this, but it's obviously larger than just one man. It's there where you begin to formally exclude key minority members of a country like Iraq, Kurds or Sunnis, who should be included in a process that keeps the state functioning together, and for everyone's interest to be in the same place and not moving in different directions.

Unfortunately, that didn't occur and it occurred after, particularly the United States, but also I think Canada, poured a lot of money into Iraq to stabilize that country and to deal with the effects of war there. I think watching this process in the future and putting more pressure on Iraqi governments to be more inclusive will be key. But it wouldn't just involve parliamentary representation, it would have to involve the military and security services. In order to have those kinds of conversations you need to have them in a very serious way with the Iraqi leadership and with those countries that back it, particularly the Islamic Republic of Iran.

● (0935)

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you.

Professor Legrenzi, Mr. Tabler punted that over for your commentary too. Could you give us your views?

The Chair: Just a very quick response.

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Very quick.

I would agree 100%.

One thing is the token representatives who sometimes are co-opted to give the impression of inclusion. And one thing is the people who control the ground, who are on the ground. Always ask yourself, who are the men with the guns? Who are the people who actually control territory in Iraq? Look at who they are and you will understand where power resides in the country.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

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

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to thank everyone for their very interesting presentations.

Mr. Legrenzi, you mentioned in your presentation that air strikes posed certain problems, that there were civilian losses, and all of that. As the critic for international development and the deputy critic for foreign affairs, I meet with many groups that do humanitarian work on the ground in Iraq.

They find that air strikes have a negative impact on their work. First, it puts their own personnel in danger. Then, they see a very negative reaction on the ground or, at the very least, confusion among the population. In fact, people tell them that they do not understand why we are bombing them, on the one hand, and feeding them, on the other. The bombs destroy their homes, but then we help them rebuild.

How do you think these air strikes are perceived by the people on the ground?

Does this risk fuelling an anti-western sentiment?

[*English*]

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Absolutely the air strikes have the effects that you just outlined. Everything that has been witnessed by humanitarian operators on the ground and that you described is correct. On the other hand, as a sort of stopgap measure, they proved necessary, for example to prevent the overrunning of Sulaymaniyah and Erbil in the Kurdish regional government areas. Those are some of the parts of Iraq that are just about functional, where a semblance of normal life goes on. I'm afraid there is no easy answer because all the negative effects that you just described are right and correct. You're absolutely right, but on the other hand, when push came to shove a few weeks ago, these air strikes steadied the nerves of, for example, peshmerga and Kurdish fighters who were also about to flee.

I think the broader point is—and I think everybody agrees on that—that these can be interpreted. Air strikes can be interpreted only as emergency stopgap measures, and because of exactly that, they do create recruits for insurgent groups, be it Islamic State or others. They have to be accompanied by a political process that may verge on extreme pressure on the Iraqi government, that may verge almost on encroachment. Otherwise it's sort of a vicious circle. Yes, it has to be said that, from a military point of view, they prevented the overrunning of Erbil, for example.

● (0940)

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you.

I have a brief question for Mr. Allos. You mentioned the issue of the flow of money, how they are financed. To you, and if we have time also to our other witnesses, what can be done to reduce that flow of money going to ISIS?

Mr. Rabea Allos: It can be reduced by political pressure, diplomatic pressure on Saudi Arabia, on Qatar, and on Turkey to a certain extent. They should stop it. Qatar is certainly financing this, and individuals in Saudi Arabia are financing this.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Mr. Tabler, do you have a comment on that?

Mr. Andrew Tabler: I think that it's here in trying to deal with the money flows that ISIL is a particular threat, because it is probably one of the most self-sustaining groups that we have seen arise, particularly from not only the Sunni community in the Middle East overall, but perhaps of any country or any proto-state in the region. I think you've seen efforts to try to cut down on its illicit oil sales and trying to cut off transfers of money. It's a little difficult because, while Sunni states in the region have an interest, I think that in cutting off financing to ISIL it does not necessarily mean that overall Sunni society feels the same way. It's the unfortunate by-product of authoritarianism. States and their leaderships have divergent interests from their general populations. And it's there where private money transfers to some jihadist groups in Syria, not just ISIL but Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups, have proven very important.

In the case of ISIL, they were very important in terms of start-up money. That isn't necessarily the case going forward. In order to avoid the situation of having to have boots on the ground or more direct military intervention by the United States or by Canada or other countries in the future, we need to incentivize those Sunni countries that back the opposition in Syria. It's also the Sunnis that represent the sectarian basis for ISIL. We need to incentivize them to use every means at their disposal to defeat ISIL. In the case of Iraq, there's more or less some agreement. In the case of Syria they want President Assad to go as part of a transition in that country and they're adamant about it. Until now, the Obama administration, in particular, has been unwilling to fulfill that pledge which was outlined by President Obama in August of 2011 but has not been followed up upon in terms of military force since then. That's precisely what these countries want in order to defeat ISIL. I suspect that they will go along with the coalition to defeat ISIL but will not do everything they can to defeat it until we make such a concession.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move back over to Mr. Schellenberger, for five minutes, sir.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you.

And thank you very much for your testimony here this morning.

I have people who tell to me to put a fence around the area and let the factions fight it out and then work with the winner. What's your opinion on this statement?

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Well, I would respectfully disagree because at some point during the Syrian crisis, as our witness would be able to recollect, we tried in a way what we called "malign neglect". We thought that the fact that we had Hezbollah backed by Iran fighting al-Qaeda groups in Iraq would then lead to a sort of sorting out. The thinking in Washington was "well, after all, it's not so bad because we have al-Qaeda fighting Hezbollah" and so on and so forth. But as in the case of, for example, North Korea and the Korean Peninsula, this strategy of malign neglect did not work and ISIL then spread quite quickly to Iraq. So, unfortunately, and I say this poignantly, we have no choice but to remain engaged. I'm also aware, from a grand strategy point of view, that this is probably not where Canada's national interest or American national interest is going to lie in 20 or 25 years. Everybody is trying to focus on Asia-Pacific but at the same time malign neglect did not work and I very much doubt that it will work in the future. Unfortunately, we do have to remain engaged, not only for humanitarian reasons but for strategic reasons as well.

● (0945)

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Would anyone else like to comment on that?

Mr. Andrew Tabler: Yes, I would echo what Professor Legrenzi has said. We tried to put a fence around it. We tried to contain the Syria crisis. It failed following the ISIL outbreak into Mosul because the war inside Syria was never just about an uprising. It was about a regionalized sectarian proxy war. Already half of Syria's population is displaced with about two-thirds in neighbouring countries. I'd say that containment failed a long time ago. We can wish it were different, but it's not.

The best course of action, the safest one for Canada and the United States, is a policy of assertiveness, not aggression, but assertiveness. Assertiveness means being engaged, as Professor Legrenzi said. But it means not only being engaged diplomatically but the smart use of military force at the right time to push things in a direction that leads to a final settlement.

This is not the first time or probably the last time that the United States or Canada or Europe or its allies would be involved in such an effort. It is complex stuff but it is time well spent because without it, as Professor Legrenzi mentioned, we are not going to be lined up with our long-term interests.

Instead, we'll make ourselves more and more susceptible to anything from terrorist attacks to the effects of a regionalized sectarian war on energy prices and economic damage. Beyond the moral example that showed that to stand aside while so many people were slaughtered by their supposedly legitimate governments and we said we could do relatively little, we could have done much more.

I think probably the worst incident and the most shameful one was the non-strike incident of September 2013 when the United States laid down a red line in Syria concerning the use of chemical weapons and then walked away from it. I don't discount the fact that a large swath of Syria's chemical weapons had been removed. But a lot still remains unaccounted for and in the end, it didn't settle the conflict. It didn't necessarily make it safer for Syrians. Instead the Assad regime was given other options to try to blast their way out of this uprising that so far has proven the country's and the regime's largest challenge to date.

The Chair: Go ahead, just a quick response.

Mr. Rabea Allos: You cannot contain it. We had two terrorist attacks in Canada over the last six weeks. There are reports of about 100 or 200 Canadians who went to Iraq and Syria to fight. If those guys are not allowed to go, there might be more attacks inside Canada, so it definitely cannot be contained. We need to be aggressive.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's all the time.

We're going to start the third round with Mr. Anderson.

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

I want to thank our guests for being here with us today.

I'm not sure what the final resolution of this will be but certainly we've got some creative new language. I'm still trying to get my tongue and mind around the "uncoordinated deconfliction" term you used. We'll have to work on that a bit, I guess.

Professor Legrenzi, you said we have the right to demand specific action from the Iraqi government. I'm wondering if you could give us an idea what the key three or four things might be that you feel we have the right to demand from them. If you can, I'd like you to try to focus on some short- or medium-term things that would have an impact in the shorter term. We're talking about these long-term political solutions. What would you suggest we have the right to ask the Iraqi government to do in the near future?

● (0950)

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Certainly, in the near-term future we have to ask them to be a lot more accountable in terms of the behaviour of their security services, the behaviour of their army, and the behaviour of their security establishment overall. We cannot pour money and then when we demand accounting and specific action, have them shield themselves behind sovereignty.

From this point of view, as you said, the long-term political process is a much longer affair. But as long as we are engaged on the ground, and as long as we provide vital air support to prevent the overrun of major Iraqi cities, with all the problems this creates in the long run that have been highlighted by another member, they do need to be accountable.

I would stress again that we knew there was an insurgency brewing in the areas that are now controlled by the Iraqi state. It was very obvious. We had a lot of people on the ground and so on and so forth. When we confronted the Iraqi government with that information and we asked them what they intended to do about all of that, they told us not to worry and that everything was under control. This is unacceptable if we then have to move in and basically save them from extinction.

There is a very good book by Professor Toby Dodge of the London School of Economics. It's a pretty short book and it takes Iraq from occupation to autocracy and it details—it's a very brief book so it's very readable and it's very policy oriented—how the Iraqi government, under al-Maliki, assumed much more of an authoritarian character.

In the short term, we have to ask them to be accountable. If we send people to train 20,000 people into a new division, we then need to be able to check that these guys do not become ghost soldiers, that they're there, and that they answer orders. Otherwise, pretty soon we'll go back to the situation we had previously.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay, thank you.

I don't know if anyone would consider themselves an expert in this area—I think Mr. Tabler said he's not an expert on Iraq—but I want to talk a little bit about the role of the Kurds, politically and militarily. I don't know if any of you can address that.

It looks as if they have a new resource agreement with the Iraqi government. I'm wondering how that changes things, or how that impacts things as well.

Please, go ahead.

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Yes, I can address that.

Unfortunately, we sometimes have these misconceptions. We all started studying the Middle East, or at least the people who are old enough, when the peshmerga were considered a formidable military force, and Mustafa Barzani, and all of that, going back all the way to the time of the Shah. That was our preconceived notion. But unfortunately the peshmerga of today are 20, 21, or 23-year-olds who have not had the military experience of their predecessors. This is why even the famed peshmerga were not really in a position to contain the advance of the Islamic State without the air strikes that they called upon.

The Kurdish regional government itself is now behaving de facto as an autonomous entity, and you very correctly pointed to what is the key aspect of this de facto sovereignty, which is the fact that they are able to dictate the terms of energy agreements, something that the central government in Iraq had always prevented previously. But now they're in a position to do that because, even in Baghdad, the people are battling for their lives and so on and so forth, so this is it.

This goes back to the previous dilemma. Certainly, air strikes prove important to steady the nerves on that front, but the Kurdish regional government itself needs to get its act together in terms of military training and military efficiency, because these are not the peshmerga of 20 years ago.

● (0955)

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

Mr. Dewar, five minutes please.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

I want to continue with this thread, the relationship between the Kurdish regional government and Baghdad.

We are cautiously hopeful that we'll see al-Abadi be more engaged. When Mr. Garneau, Minister Baird, and I met with officials back in September, including the president and the foreign affairs minister there as well as Barzani, the message was consistent that we want to see inclusion. I think that message is a good one, for reasons that we all know. But it was interesting that not that long ago we had Barzani musing about separation.

So we can see the cards being played. You mentioned energy; we also look at their threat to separate. But we now have people coalescing. Unfortunately it is around ISIS, but it is an opportunity.

We need to see confidence building, obviously. The oil deal, if it is true, is helpful. But if it is just seen as the regional government taking advantage of a vacuum, I think that could be a problem. I think I'm reading between the lines of what you're saying and I agree.

But what about the issue of the devolving of powers? One thing that has been brought up, and it touches on this whole notion of ghost soldiers and the problem with the military, is that we see regional entities taking care of security, obviously with governance support. There was the idea of a sort of "national guard". I would try to avoid that language, because it seems just an import from the Americans, but it's the idea of making sure that security will be based on a reflection of the population but also have some accountability in the region they are trying to protect, so that we don't see a repeat of the disaster in Mosul.

What are your thoughts on that? Is it a national guard, or is it also police? Obviously, security can take different forms.

That question is to you, Professor Legrenzi.

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: I think you are absolutely right. On the other hand, the situation there is such an emergency one; it was in the past as well. Look at all the corruption that we overlook in the Kurdish regional government areas because basically they were the only ones who were functioning and were providing a decent level of security for the people living in them. From that point of view it's a dilemma, and I don't have the answer. It's not that this part of Iraq is less corrupt, but at least it has been functional in terms of providing basic security to the people living there, and this has been going on for a while.

At a broader level, you cannot rob many Kurds of the dream of independence. That is something that is passed from father to son. Having lived in Canada and all being Canadians, I am sure you know what I am talking about. From the point of view of this dream or of backing forms of the culture—literature and so on—they are not going to get rid of it.

On the other hand, it must be said that it's very difficult to change myths. It's not in their interest, and they demonstrated this by on the one hand creating what you correctly stated is a de facto government and on the other hand trying to grab as much influence as they can in Baghdad. They've been pretty successful at that. Now they can play on two fronts. This is a technique that is also used in other parts of the world.

This is the situation. If you are asking me whether the Kurdish regional government is less corrupt than the central Iraqi one, the answer is no, it is corrupt. At the same time, it has been able to provide a level of security and in some ways also well-being to its population that is unparalleled in the rest of the country.

● (1000)

Mr. Paul Dewar: This is a quick question to our guest Mr. Allos; it's shifting gears.

I think we have an obligation to adhere to the UN Security Council resolution with regard to ISIS Iraq. One thing you touched on was dealing with things here at home, with incitement.

How would you deal with it? I note that recently we made changes to hate speech laws. There was a private member's bill that the government supported. But what would be the tool in the tool kit? Some of us were concerned at the time—no one predicted ISIS, let me be clear—that when we took out those provisions it would be more difficult to go after people who are inciting. I think you know what I'm referring to—oversight and the tools in the tool kit relating to human rights tribunals.

What tool can we use? Do we need to put that tool back in the tool kit, or do you have another idea for dealing with incitement and extremism here in Canada?

Mr. Rabea Allos: Extremism is definitely not all Islam, but there are certain groups in Islam...Wahabism and, to a lesser extent, the Muslim Brotherhood. They are definitely terrorist groups and they are hate groups. They should be stopped. We're getting a lot of monetary support from Saudi Arabia to open up mosques over here, and they're sending their own clerics over here, who are teaching Wahabi Islam to young kids They're enticing them into getting into terrorism, whether here or overseas. Obviously many of them are travelling overseas, but there were two incidents that happened over here. So this has to be stopped.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Do you understand my question on the tools in the tool kit? One was taken out recently, with regards to incitement and hate speech. Would you recommend putting that back in? Do you have an opinion?

The Chair: Can we come back here? We'll get another round. We're just over time here.

Mr. Hawn, five minutes, please.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I actually want to continue on that. That's an area I was going to talk about, but more from the point of view.... Mr. Allos, you have a lot of experience with Iraqi refugee settlement, and so on, in Canada. Kind of along the lines of what Mr. Dewar was talking about, is one of the tools in the tool kit potentially using them to tell the story to Canadians of radicalization of Islam, as one of the methods of making Canadians aware of what's going on? Is there a role for appropriate Iraqi refugees in Canada to play in that?

Mr. Rabea Allos: They are, but in some cases because of what they went through, they could be giving you the extreme picture. You need a more balanced approach. Certainly people were forced to leave their country and come over here. They're not going to give you a balanced picture. There's certainly a lot of hate.

But they certainly are. I've seen people in churches arguing about whether we should be sponsoring Muslim families. In one church in the Toronto area, for example, they sponsored a family. It turned out to be Muslim and people went berserk when they found out; and they are decent, good people.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Sure.

Mr. Tabler, I totally agree that policy fails when you draw a red line and then you refuse to do anything when the line gets crossed. I think when people perceive that weakness of leadership, obviously there's no reason for them to stop doing what they're doing. We've talked about the military action. We've talked about the air strikes, and the positive side and the potentially negative side of that. We've talked about boots on the ground and everybody, I think, agrees there needs to be friendly combat boots on the ground, but the issue, at least in Canada and in some other places, has been to whom those boots should belong.

I think most people here don't feel it should be western boots on the ground—Canadian, American, Brit, or whoever. No matter the intent and no matter what they do, they would be received badly by the local populations. Training boots on the ground is a different story, but combat boots on the ground....

What's your view of western boots versus the necessity for making them regional boots?

● (1005)

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

Like you, I think that regional boots on the ground are much better than western boots on the ground in terms of an overall combat role. I think we need to avoid that at all costs in dealing with the ISIL threat and overall threats in the region.

The problem, then, with regional boots on the ground, or fighting from behind, or leading from behind, or whatever other slogan has been pushed out there about the style of the American president to date in terms of these issues, is that in order to entice and incentivize these countries into getting involved in the fight against ISIL in Iraq and Syria, you have to make concessions to them about what they want in those countries in terms of an end state and an overall regional balance. This is where we run into a big problem. They want President Assad to go. We want him to go as well, but for them, it's a much larger issue, with political ramifications. I believe that in order to incentivize them and to entice them into an alliance that truly defeats ISIL, we will be required to come up with a solution on Syria.

Iraq, like I said, and as we've talked about today, has a process that is unfolding. We don't know the end result yet, but there is the basis for something.

In Syria, I think the only solution is for President Assad and his cousins to leave power at some point. How we get there, and how we incentivize everyone to do what they need to do at a certain time, is a matter of fierce debate. But I simply don't see it. After all of this bloodshed, after them trying to shoot their way out of this uprising that turned into a horrible civil war, I don't see a final settlement coming. The longer President Assad stays, the much more likely it is that Syria will remain divided, with large swaths of his territory outside the control of the central government.

I think we need to come up with a plan to have President Assad step aside. It's a subject of much discussion, and it's one that I think is worth having. With that, I think then you would see regional parties coming to the table and being willing to do much, much more to defeat ISIL and to work with us in the future in terms of stabilizing the Middle East.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Okay.

I have a quick question for Mr. Allos. The others can chime in as well.

One of the regional parties in other places where we have taken out leadership, or where leadership has left and a vacuum has been created, is the Muslim Brotherhood, which is not listed in Canada yet as a terrorist organization.

Mr. Allos, do you think the Muslim Brotherhood should be listed as a terrorist organization in Canada?

Mr. Rabea Allos: I think so, yes. The UAE definitely listed it a few weeks ago.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Professor Legrenzi and Mr. Tabler, what are your views on that?

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: No, I think it would be counterproductive. It's not by listing organizations that have a large following in places like Egypt, for example, that you get rid of the problem.

I want to also make a broader point that I think is very important. I would be very wary of Iraqi politicians when they start blaming outside forces. Look at al-Maliki's rambling resignation speech in Baghdad, where he's blaming outside forces. That is a sign of trying to deflect responsibility.

In general, once you get regional players on the ground into a situation, they bring their own agendas. The question stops being, “How do we get out of this and how do we get an Iraqi solution?” They then risk prolonging the conflict.

One thing is to have people who come in and train Iraqi forces, for example, under strict conditions so that we avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. But the idea that you could have Egyptian or Jordanian forces fighting is not only fanciful, because it's not going to happen, but it would also be very dangerous. We have also seen this in Syria when outside players brought their own agendas. That then makes reaching a solution even more complicated.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Mr. Tabler, specifically on the Muslim Brotherhood, what's your view?

The Chair: Very quickly, because we're over time.

● (1010)

Mr. Andrew Tabler: No, I don't advocate listing the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. However, it is important to point out that members of the Muslim Brotherhood and certain aspects of it I think do have ties with Salafist and other jihadist groups and members and extremism.

I think it would be better, though, to try to work with them to isolate those more extreme members, to work with us into the future in a general sense. Perhaps we should focus more on individuals and less on organizations as a whole going forward as we address this problem.

The Chair: We're going to start our next round, which is round four.

Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar: For our guests, I want to follow up on this point. We had talked earlier about the idea of convening an international conference that would look at bringing different parties, disparate groups, frankly, together. We do now have a coalescing variable here, which was not the case before, and certainly al-Maliki was part of the problem.

I really want to underline this point to my colleagues. ISIS didn't just fall from the sky. They were preying upon the alienation that was happening, and al-Maliki and the Shia militias associated in horrific crimes. That should be noted, but I want to underline this notion that we can pull people together. The opportunity is in front of us right now. I'm a little concerned around timing because we have certain groups who before were alienated from Baghdad.

There is a new opportunity because there is a new prime minister who, again, I hope will change things, and there is some evidence that is already happening. You mentioned the MB, but what about other Iraqi groups that we could invite, obviously Sunni-affiliated groups, to look at being part of the national dialogue again? I note that there are some who are now in Turkey. They aren't part of ISIS; they were alienated by al-Maliki.

Who would they be? Can you tell me that? Second, would it be opportune right now, while the opportunity is in front of us, to engage, and probably not with a conference? That's not ready to go yet, but through, certainly, individual diplomatic engagements. Maybe that's happening, I don't know, but would that be the first step in terms of building confidence?

I'll go to our friend in Venice first on that.

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Yes, technically that's a good idea. I don't think the time is mature for a conference. You're absolutely right.

My only advice would be to try to deal as much as possible with the people on the ground. Exiled groups, I remember, quickly develop an agenda of their own, and it's very difficult and murky then to try to establish what exactly they control on the ground in Iraq, particularly in areas that are controlled by the Islamic State. So as much as possible, you have to work with the people on the ground.

I remember, before the fall of Saddam Hussein, these people in Oxford claimed to represent the true Iraqi opposition in exile and so on and so forth, assuring us that in the event of a regime change, they would have everything under control. They said that they were very much in charge of many opposition groups, and then look at what happened right afterward.

It's a worthy effort. It's the right thing to do, but always be very skeptical and realistic about exiled groups who do not interact directly with the people who are on the ground.

Mr. Paul Dewar: That's a very good point.

Mr. Tabler, I want to go to you on Syria, on the engagement with al-Assad. I note that Brahimi had tried to give him an opportunity to leave early on when Mr. Brahimi was in Damascus, and that failed, unfortunately

On air strikes in Syria, we as the opposition party have some concerns about the fact that we would actually have to get permission to engage in Syria because we'd have to go to Damascus through al-Assad.

Could you comment on whether that's something that is a wise thing to do? We think it is unwise to do that simply for reasons you've mentioned with regard to the configuration of things on the ground in Syria.

● (1015)

Mr. Andrew Tabler: I would not advise it. I think the current policy of uncoordinated deconfliction, or whatever it's referred to as, is when we fly over Syria and President Bashar al-Assad pretends not to mind. The reason why he's doing this is of course that it is coordinated with the Iraqi government, an entity we coordinate with extensively. The Iraqi government has spoken with the Syrian regime, and it speaks to them all the time about this. It's because President Assad benefits and has overwhelmingly benefited from U. S. air strikes on Syria to date.

That means that, yes, we're degrading ISIL, but we're making that settlement in Syria—a real settlement that solves this problem and doesn't generate more terrorism, extremism and suffering—that much more elusive.

I would say that for the moment it seems wise to focus activities in Iraq, to look at Syria, and look at not only what we're doing there. I think it's important to protect individuals along the way, but we need to protect all individuals, as many civilians as we can, minorities and majorities.

The problem until now has been that for the United States in particular and the western countries, their policies have been held up by extremists who say, “If you watch very closely since September 11, 2001, the west only kills Sunni Arabs. If you're anything else but Sunni Arabs you get every break and you receive even direct military assistance in exchange for a de facto alliance with the west.”

Such policies don't benefit the people of the region and they don't benefit western countries. It would be one thing if the Sunni-Shia or Sunni minority balance in the Middle East was 50-50. It's not even close to that. We need to be much more understanding of the political balance inside these countries and come up with a real solution that protects majorities and majority populations.

In Syria, unfortunately until now, I see that the bombing of ISIL has only strengthened and made more elusive that final settlement that truly takes care of this problem.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We move over to Mr. Anderson for five minutes.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to go in a little different direction than we've talked about this morning. I think it was Mr. Tabler who said that people and governments don't change without a reason to, and you need to create a necessity for change.

There are two ways that can happen. One is by pressure and the other one is by reward. I'm wondering if there are any kind of fiscal, financial considerations that some of these nations and governments would take into consideration that might lead to an end or at least a lessening of the hostilities. I'm interested in that. Is there anything that would be of enough benefit to some of the players in this area that they would say, “We need to find some solutions here because we're going to benefit in some ways that we're not benefiting from right now”?

Anyone can take it.

Mr. Andrew Tabler: I'll just make a comment. In terms of financial arrangements, one aspect of this that was pursued early in the Syrian conflict but was not followed up on in any kind of real way concerned sanctions on the Assad regime. Those were taken in tandem with increased sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran. While those two sanctions regimes took care of the problem of where Syria in particular sold its oil, they actually did not take care of the fact that Iran and Syria trade extensively in oil products and other products as well and support each other.

I think we'd have to think a little bit about how we would interrupt that assistance going forward, at what time, and how useful it would be. Obviously we're having conversations with the Iranians over what to do in Syria, but the question is, are the conversations going in the right direction?

Until recently—or until now—I don't think the Iranians would like to go with anyone else but Assad. It doesn't mean that they're married to him, but they don't see the necessity of getting rid of him in the midst of this crisis and in the midst of the threat from ISIL, but how could this be incentivized along the way?

If negotiations with Iran fail, then we would to look at stronger measures to isolate both the Assad regime as well as the Islamic Republic, but that is in the distant future and the subject of a long homework assignment for us all, I'm afraid.

● (1020)

Mr. David Anderson: Professor.

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: I take this cue from the latest comment. I think that an understanding with the Islamic Republic of Iran would really help in the short term and the medium term from a practical point of view. I like to use the word "understanding". I don't really like the word "agreement" because then people can seize on an agreement and can take it apart, and so on and so forth. If anything, when discussing the situation in Iraq and in Syria, I think it will be beneficial to reach an understanding with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

I know this is a much broader question because the main fault was there. There is no proliferation, which is a global strategic issue, and we're not yet to talk about that. We should take an entire.... If you want, we can have one next week or so on Iran in particular. I want to stress that it would be quite beneficial because otherwise we come up with this fairly whimsical formula like the one that was...big conflict, whatever it was, and non-cooperation deconfliction. So that even when our interests align, we cannot be seen as working together. That's a bit perverse.

So I know it's a much broader question but I just want to send the message that it's crunch time right now in the negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, without going into the whole issue of proliferation, an understanding with the Islamic Republic of Iran, or even an agreement would definitely help the situation in Syria and in Iraq.

Mr. David Anderson: So it seems like that agreement is quite some ways off, or do you think it's reasonable to see that something may be reached in the short term?

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Well, I'm fairly pessimistic but maybe that's because I've been at this for too long. The part where the negotiations were prolonged was good. What we do not have to expect is a "Nixon in China" moment by which we do reach a technical agreement and then trade starts flowing, and so on and so forth. It's a lot more complex. There is a lot of history there, but if we find an agreement, or even if we do not find an agreement but we keep negotiating and we can find an understanding on Syria and on Iraq, that would be very beneficial.

How many countries are we trying to contain? We do need to start finding an understanding. It's beyond even our reach and our capability. We are putting our soldiers on the ground and our men and women in the air.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Anderson.

Mr. Schellenberger.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you. I have another question. I agree with Mr. Legrenzi of the terror the Iraqi army has brought on the citizens of Iraq in the past, some of those atrocities. I sit on the human rights committee also. I look at former Camp Ashraf and Camp Liberty: the atrocities of these camps, like no sanitation, or at least not regular sanitation, no food, no regular food deliveries, no fuel, no medical; taking down any protective barriers and indiscriminately firing on these camps, killing many over the years. These were former Iranian refugees in Iraq who were protected by the Americans while the Americans were there. Once the Americans left, that's when these atrocities happened.

Do you think that a new government has the will or the desire to change their support or safety to minority groups without being overseen, say, by an overseeing force like a UN peacekeeping force, or something of that nature?

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: I fear that they do not. I hope they do, but I fear that they do not. I'm not sure what a UN contribution could be to this. I think it would further add to the entropy. But I think you said it all. Everything you said is absolutely accurate, and you correctly described what effect the withdrawal of American security overlaid had on the lives of these refugees.

So I think it's very good that you actually sit also on the human rights committee and that you hear testimony about this. We have to be hopeful, but at the same time we have to be very diligent and very skeptical so that we do not go back to the patterns that have prevailed in the last six years when we were spending in large part our taxpayers' money to then subsidize these human rights violations and extortion that you correctly described.

● (1025)

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: There's one thing that bothers me a little. You've said that Iran and Syria have an understanding, or they trade with each other and so on. That same understanding was not with Iraq. Am I correct?

Mr. Andrew Tabler: Well, there has been trade between Iraq and Syria going back even to when Saddam Hussein ruled, especially, in his later years. It was illicit trade that violated UN sanctions. Then after that there was some trade between Bashar al-Assad in Syria and the new Iraq. Also, Syria was a transit point for supplies going into Iraq during its rebuilding.

Since the beginning of the uprising, a lot of those more formal and regularized networks have been broken and now there is simply a lot of cross-border trade between Iraq and Syria, because the border between Iraq and Syria no longer exists. That also complicates any kind of effort to strangle or to isolate or to de-incentivize or incentivize either the Syrian government or the Iraqi government when it comes to areas that are controlled by ISIL.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: My thing was primarily that there's no trade between Iran and Iraq. Am I correct or is it done kind of through Syria?

Mr. Andrew Tabler: Oh, no, there is extensive trade between Iran and Iraq as well as between Iran and Syria.

The question many people ask is how did we get here, how did this happen? What we're looking at overall, beyond the uprisings and the localized reasons and demographic reasons for the uprisings, is that the Islamic Republic has been expanding its influence in the region militarily and in terms of investment for decades and it has been building slowly in fits and starts. That has then oftentimes angered elites among traditionally Sunni Arabs but also in Sunni countries. So in the context of the uprisings, Iran has involved itself in these environments militarily through proxy forces and the Quds force to back up regimes that oftentimes have little legitimacy but have legal legitimacy in the international community.

I think overall that's what is causing these and generating the uprisings and the extreme reaction on the part of ISIL which represents, at least partially, the Sunni society's response to that encroachment on Arab territories.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Schellenberger.

We're going to move over to Mr. Garneau for a couple of questions.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you.

I have two quick questions for Mr. Allos. It's very clear that al-Maliki failed to unify Iraq when he took over. We all know that story. We know about Haider al-Abadi's efforts with respect to Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds, but has he made any overtures that you're aware of to the Christian minorities in Iraq?

Mr. Rabea Allos: Yes.

Indeed, al-Maliki always had consultations with the Chaldean patriarch, so there was no problem. Christians were always marginalized, and they accepted that.

With al-Abadi definitely things are better. There is dialogue. The prime minister, the speaker of the house, and the president are all in dialogue with Christian religious leaders.

● (1030)

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you.

I would refer to Mr. Schellenberger's accurate description of the situation with respect to Iranian refugees in Camp Ashraf and Camp Liberty. It is a very difficult situation for them, largely because al-Maliki and his sort of control by Iran was not particularly sensitive or helpful with respect to that.

In fact, I've written to the Minister of Immigration and asked that we in Canada take in some of the refugees at Camp Liberty. Unfortunately, the government has said no. That brings me to my question to you, which is that you suggested in your initial testimony that it would be a good thing for Canada to accept some refugees directly from Iraq. Has your organization or the diaspora here in Canada approached the government on that matter, and if so, what kind of response did you get?

Mr. Rabea Allos: Yes, the community met with Minister Alexander regarding Christians and Yazidis, and they are open to suggestions, especially if it's not going to cost the taxpayers money. We'll be having further meetings with the staff at Immigration Canada.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Brown, go ahead.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

This is a question for each of you, gentlemen. Earlier I said that the situation seems so hopeless, and you've all talked about the length of this conflict. There seems to be no end in sight, and one of the things we see happening with humanitarian needs is that donor fatigue sets in. We may already be seeing some of that right now, with the World Food Programme announcing the other day that it is low on supplies. The real problem that it has identified is that countries that have pledged money have not actually paid; they are not paying what they have pledged, and that may be some of this donor fatigue that we see setting in.

If there is no end in sight, the problem is exacerbated with every month, every year that this goes on, and the humanitarian need is desperate. Canada has paid up to date. We are the third-largest donor to the World Food Programme, and we pay what we pledge. Our contributions are fully fulfilled. My question is, how do we incent other countries to continue with their contributions, if this seems endless?

Professor, you've talked about some of the issues that we need to see resolved. Do you think there is one linchpin issue that we need to focus on to help bring this to a resolution? What are your thoughts?

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Yes, the linchpin is security sector reform in Iraq. Without security sector reform in Iraq, we are going to be at it again in a couple of years even if ISIL is expelled from Iraq. You have that as a linchpin issue. Otherwise I agree with you. Canada has set an example, and I think it is one of the most generous countries and also, as you correctly pointed out, one of the countries that pay their dues after they promise something.

The humanitarian crisis, particularly in neighbouring countries, is of gigantic size and scale, and this is why my recommendation—and I was telling the Italians and the British this as well—is that whenever we discuss security, which we tend to do because it's an urgent matter, we also set aside some time and some resources to discuss humanitarian needs and development issues that should go in parallel.

Bombs and strife cost a lot of money, so we always have to keep in mind that there is a humanitarian catastrophe going on alongside. At the same time, I would hesitate to use the word “hopeless”. I think we have to be realists, and that is why we have to be very tough and hard-edged when dealing with the Iraqi government. We do not have to allow them to go back to what brought us to the situation and to this emergency intervention. Perhaps “hopeless” is too strong a word, even if the situation is extremely serious, and that's why we are where we are.

● (1035)

Ms. Lois Brown: What are your thoughts, gentlemen?

Mr. Rabea Allos: The government does have the money to spend on the internally displaced, and it should be pushed into spending more money and trying to spend this money through international organizations rather than through the Iraqi government, because certainly a lot of this money is going to the pockets of officials or their relatives.

Ms. Lois Brown: What are your thoughts, Mr. Tabler?

Mr. Andrew Tabler: I think that while security-centred reform is key and the linchpin in Iraq, the overall key to solving the ISIL threat concerns a real settlement in Syria. I think it's important to look at the fact that there are real settlements, and then there's window dressing. I would encourage you to not invest money and efforts in window-dressing types of summits or arrangements where we try to sort of cut the baby down the middle. I'm afraid that, in the case of Syria, it will take real concessions from each side, on the part of the opposition as well as on the part of the Syrian government. I think beyond that, if we set that as a goal, you will find that when people see a real settlement in sight they will invest in it.

But, again, it's another example of how wishing for problems to go away and further isolationism doesn't work. It doesn't make us safer and it doesn't alleviate human suffering, not only in the Middle East but overall in the world. Instead, we've made the world a much less safe place to live. I would encourage all of us, in all like-minded democracies, but also regional allies, to work towards a common and sustainable end to the Syrian conflict.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you.

Mr. Trost has a question.

The Chair: Yes. We'll see if we can maybe get one question after.

Mr. Dewar has a question.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Allos, I want to just talk a little bit more about the domestic situation. According to our commitment to the U.N. Security Council resolutions 2170 and 2178, we were called on as a nation-state to deal with the whole issue of incitement to extremism, to terrorism, and to counter it we should be doing that through educational, cultural, and religious institutions' engagement. We are obligated to do that as a responsible member of the United Nations and according to those two U.N. Security Council resolutions.

I'm interested to hear from you about the following. What do you see the government doing right now on that end? I know there are provisions being brought in on the security side and more powers are being given to police and to CSIS, but this is a different equation. This is about engagement with communities. You touched on it before. How do you see that being able to be done? What are some of your ideas? You talked about people being brought together.

I was at a workshop here at the University of Ottawa. It had police, public security officials, public servants, members of the Muslim community, and other leaders. They were talking about how to deal with de-radicalization. How do you deal with incitement? But, you know, frankly, it was done at the grassroots levels, which is great, but there wasn't the support and engagement from government.

I think this is something we need to be seized with. I'd just like to hear some of your ideas about bringing people together to deal with things here in Canada.

Mr. Rabea Allos: You're talking about the Canadian government?

Mr. Paul Dewar: Yes. The U.N. Security Council resolutions I just enumerated are calling on Canada to deal with our situation here in Canada with regards to radicalization and incitement, and you touched on it. I'd like your recommendations on how we can engage. That's part of our responsibility, and I'd just like to hear your ideas on that.

● (1040)

Mr. Rabea Allos: Well, certainly there should be meetings between different religious groups, or even non-religious groups, and education about different religions. Certainly Islam is not a religion of hate, but because of how perceptions are it's leading people to go in the direction of, “Well, if you believe I'm a terrorist, then I'll become a terrorist”.

So, yes, there should be more education.

Mr. Paul Dewar: And bringing people together, as you said....

If you have other ideas on that, including names and groups, please pass them on to our team here. That would be great. I think that's the other part of what we are obligated to deal with. Obviously there's the funding, but there's the education and the engagement here in Canada. All of these other issues, including geopolitical, are very important. Diplomatically, there's what we can do internationally, but, of course, we have our own obligations here at home. If you have other ideas on that, it would be great if you could pass them on.

Mr. Rabea Allos: Sure.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Brad, do you have a quick question?

Mr. Brad Trost (Saskatoon—Humboldt, CPC): Considering the time, rather than posing my question, I'm going to ask each of the gentlemen to do a one-minute summary, or 30-second summary, of your last bit of advice to the committee to sum up everything we've heard today.

Mr. Rabea Allos: We definitely need to continue the military option, at the same time as going through the diplomatic efforts to bring countries together. Certainly, if Saudi Arabia and Iran sat together around the table, there would be a lot of changes. There would be a new president in Lebanon, and maybe there would be an agreement on getting rid of Bashar al-Assad and getting somebody in as a compromise. Diplomatic efforts are definitely useful.

Mr. Matteo Legrenzi: Be very demanding when dealing with the Iraqi government. Demand security sector reform. Demand change, in exchange for your support and the fact that you saved the day. Also, be very skeptical of Iraqi politicians, but more generally of Middle Eastern politicians when they start blaming outside forces. More often than not, they are trying to cover for their own misdeeds and responsibilities.

Mr. Andrew Tabler: My summary, or my largest take-away, would be that I don't think you can deal with the ISIL threat without dealing with a settlement in Syria, and a viable settlement in Syria has to have at its end the exit of the Assad and Makhlouf families from Syria and the leadership of Syria.

How you get there, the process that's involved, what's involved to induce that, is the subject of the debate. The longer that those individuals stay, I think the longer that Syria will be partitioned. The longer it's partitioned, the more these ungoverned spaces will generate extremism and extremists who make the world a less safe place, not only for Syrians, Iraqis, people in the region, but also those of us in Europe, Canada, and the United States as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

To our witnesses today, thank you for your time and your insight. We appreciate that, as we continue to work through the study.

That's all we have for today, so I'm going to adjourn the meeting and we'll see you next week. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.